

UNDERTOW

Elizabeth Bear

A NERDs Release

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1

THE MORNING AFTER HE KILLED EUGENE SHAPIRO, ANDRÉ Deschênes woke early. Before his headset warble ended, he rolled from the bed and landed palms-down on the deck of his bedroom. He slept in loose white trousers; nudity implied vulnerability. The raw breeze through the long windows above his bed roughened his shoulders, scalp, and nape. A clap punctuated each push-up, and he followed the set with five sun salutations to warm up and release his muscles.

He dressed and skinned and was out the door in minutes.

His footfalls chased him through the leaden morning. Roaches and rats scattered before him: humanity's companions all the way to the stars. The air was thick with the promise of rain; André's skin steamed before he'd run five hundred meters. The tide was in, the streets riding high on the pilings, and though he ran through a commercial zone, his filters held. Just one pop-ad penetrated, and he squelched it with an eye-flick.

In André's neighborhood, the streets were wood slat, floating piers independent of the houses and shops moored to them. They echoed under his running shoes, a hollow *thump-thump-thump* still unadulterated by other sounds.

He might have been the only one awake in all of Novo Haven. If he lived on Bayside, he would have seen the fishing boats and tenders sliding gulfward with the first light of morning. But from here, only thin channels of bay were visible between the floating streets and under the bridges, and the dinghies and scooters and small boats were still moored by the various steps that led up to street level. He passed more shops than houses; above them on the flat-decked, seaworthy cruisers were second-floor apartments with lifts or spiral walk-ups, but the lower levels had shuttered windows suitable for opening to catch sunlight and the attention of passersby. Ladders and gangplanks ran down to the water, where small craft waited and taxi drivers read the news and drank their coffee.

André ran by greengrocers and tackle shops, a geomancer's, an interface outlet, two brothels, a fixit shop for headsets and other implants, a skin-and-fashion store, a corner clinic, a beautician's parlor, and a Chinese restaurant. The bakery on Seagrove wasn't open yet, but good smells emanated from the back, and the clang of pans on counters rattled through the screen door.

He almost tripped crossing up onto the sidewalk beside the 400 “barge”—actually, a twenty-meter cruiser ringed with boardwalks and lashed to pilings. The barge was lower in the water than code permitted, and loosely moored. The sidewalk dipped alarmingly when his weight hit it, but he skipped a step and kept running. More cooking smells now, the distant sound of engines, lights flicking off over doorways as the landward sky paled gold. Someone ran on ahead, a woman with golden skin and black hair clubbed at the nape of her neck, her small breasts bouncing in a crimson sport top. He magnified her, recognized her, and decided she was a good enough reason to run faster. But she turned to port, down Amaryllis, between the white-and-pastel apartment blocks, and his road lay straight on. He didn’t want to look too eager.

He wasn’t jogging now but running, hard out, breath whistling between his teeth in misty streamers. His heels hit staccato, the street rocking under his stride. He counted breaths, pulling his elbows back each time his arms pumped, feeling the pivot and snap of each foot as it landed, as it left the slats again.

Running was good. Mornings were good. The wet air scraped his throat, chilled his lungs as he sucked it in, shoved it out again. Running hard, running cold, running over the water as the sun warmed the roof peaks and the streets began to hum.

His route was a circle. Or a ragged ungeometric circuit, which brought him panting back down Seagrove just as the bakery’s armored shutters glided up, revealing the cheery blues and yellows of an interior bathed in full-spectrum light. Awnings, also automated, fanned out to shade the street. The light off the water would be brutal when the sun got past the rooflines. The fortune-teller next door wouldn’t open until after lunchtime, but his awnings rolled out as well. A public service.

André let his pace drop to a trot, a jog, a stumbling amble. Sweat, and perhaps some condensation, slid down his chilled face, stung his eyes, and scattered off his nose. He slapped his biceps and thighs to get some heat into the skin, which felt like wax fruit. He set his status as unavailable when he ran—he liked the morning clean—but only an idiot would completely drop connex. So it was uncomplicated to check the price of bread on his headset. Citywide, it was a bit lower than the Seagrove bakery broadcast, but this was fresh and here and it smelled good. He transferred credit as he was walking up; one of the bakers, wearing a tall white hat and a skin that made blue and gold sparkles in the depths of her irises, handed him a warm semipermeable bag over the window ledge. “Thanks, Jacinta,” he said. She winked at him, that eye flashing for an instant, brilliant gold.

André wasn’t wearing a cosmetic himself, so he contented himself with a grin. He wiped sweat on his bare arm, flicked the droplets over the channel, and watched the ripples as some lurking fish disappointed themselves on the mouthfuls.

Jacinta tapped a golden loaf steaming gently on a cutting board. It made a hollow sound. The scent rose sweetly. “Want a slice?”

It smelled of cinnamon and raisins. “Can’t eat until I wash,” he said. “But thank you.”

Back at his house—the 1100 barge of Redbridge—he walked through the security field, which recognized the hard code access in his headset and let him in without so much as a tingle. He dropped off the loaf of rye, showered, depilated his scalp, trimmed his beard, and dressed. The sharp suit of gold-shot scarlet was Earth silk with an autofit. He inspected his image as rebroadcast into the headset, activated his stock ticker, chat boxes, news scroll, and the standard informational detritus of his daily connex. His cousin Maryanne thought he was weird to leave it off in the morning—she probably reached for her connex the way her great-great-grandfather would have reached for his glasses—but the run with nobody in his head kept him centered. He thought of it as moving meditation, one brief chance to arrive at silence before swimming into the currents of the day.

He patted his house on the door to let it know he was leaving, stepped into his work shoes, picked up his walking stick, and went.

It was early yet, and André was his own boss. But there were messages to be answered, and he had rules about bringing work home.

It took him longer to walk in than he'd anticipated, and not because he strode through morning traffic now. Halfway down Fairview, when the shakes from exertion had finally settled out of his calves, an attention signal pinged at the corner of his field. His heart skipped painfully when he caught the ident.

He slowed, turned as if watching a bird dip-glide across the water. He crossed wavering slats and balanced by the rail, the red blooms of a genomod geranium brushing his ankle. The woman who walked toward him through the crowd wore saffron: flowing trousers and an ankle-length open tunic over a white, square-necked blouse. Gold and citrine sparkled along the hollow of her throat; her hair was as sleek and black as it had been when he saw her running, but now it fell forward, framing her cheekbones and chin.

"M~ Zhou," he said, as she hooked the right-side locks behind her ear. "How kind of you to see me in person."

"Let's walk," she answered, taking his elbow and turning him with her fingertips, so he fell into step alongside her. They walked in silence along the awning-shaded street until he cleared his throat and glanced at her sidelong.

"Are we drawing out the anticipation, mambo?"

"Oh, very funny." There were more geraniums, their red as bright as snapping banners. The shopkeepers along this stretch had interplanted the stainless-steel city beautification buckets with kleenexplant and paperwhites, and the sweet aromas mingled with the sharp herbal note of the geranium.

Which made André sneeze. He filtered them out.

"Actually, it was a serious question. You must have thought about my offer." Or she'd not have come to find him, even if she had noticed him giving chase that morning.

"I wonder why you think you want to conjure."

Not an unexpected question, but he gave it a show of consideration. "Why I think I want it? Or why I do want it?"

"That's a question I can't answer for you." Her fingers had gone from resting lightly on the bone of his elbow to threading through the crook. He permitted her to steer him.

The crowds thinned as they walked, but the second wave would emerge soon—those who did not choose to separate their home and work lives but who telepresenced, and who came out for their daily bread and fish and produce after the rush had faded. Or those who worked on other planets, and could do as well sitting in a café under a parasol, uplinked lag-free through a quantum connection, as they could in an overpriced office on Bayside, where you paid for the view and walked sixty barges to the nearest coffee shop because the rents were so high.

"Croissant?" Ziyi Zhou asked him, gesturing to an open-air café with a few lingering customers.

"Maryanne will kill me if I don't eat at the office," André said, excusing himself with a one-shouldered shrug. M~ Zhou was holding his right arm. He rubbed at his beard with the left hand. "But I'd love to buy

you a cup of coffee.”

She stepped back, but not before she squeezed his arm. “You’re good at that.”

“Dodging questions?”

A good try, but she gave him not even a quirk of smile back. “Establishing a claim on people.”

He shrugged again, acknowledgment this time, and spread his hands. He had to squint at M~ Zhou through the sunlight. Fat biting flies zoomed overhead, hunting in pairs; he swatted them away backhanded. Somewhere back there was a reptile brain that never quite trusted technology. She did smile this time. “Does that mean you’re ready to answer the question now, André?”

“I can’t imagine an answer that isn’t something you’ve already heard a thousand times, M~ Zhou. Should I tell you that it’s because I applied to Rim’s Exigency Corps for training as a coincidence engineer when I was twenty, and the god-botherers wouldn’t take me? That I never wanted to be anything else? That I grew up on the idea of the corps as the people who were going to save the universe? It’s all quite embarrassing when you try to put it into words.”

“So you’re a romantic?”

He crossed his arms and felt the sun on his shoulders. The biters came back around, but this time zoomed off in pursuit of someone wearing a blue-lavender sunblouse before they got within swatting range. “I have to be.”

Eyes wide, she looked up at him. “Would you hand a child a loaded gun, André?”

“Depending on the child—”

“—exactly. Depending on the child. Maybe one in a thousand, you could trust to do more good than harm with such a thing. So prove to me that you’re that one in a thousand.”

He hadn’t expected it to be easy. “A virtuous life by example isn’t enough?”

She snorted. “I know what you do. You have your own ways of influencing the future, M~ Deschênes.”

A retreat from the first name. Calculated, like everything else about her. “It’s a living. And that concerns you? Because I do adhere to certain ethical standards.”

The twist of her mouth told him everything he needed to know. There was no point in arguing situational ethics in a society in which skinning, data mining, and routine privacy invasions were a matter of course.

André dated an archinformist. Personally, he thought what he did was more ethical. He just *killed* people. Cricket took apart their lives, everything they might have backed up, relegated to hard memory, recorded on their headsets or in the data holds. Only wet memory was safe from her and her data-mining fellows, both those who worked for Rim and Core—the Rim and Core of the Earth-settled territories, not the rim and core of the galaxy, though to judge by popular entertainment broadcasts a lot of people didn’t know the difference—and those who went freelance.

And without people like her, without the absolute knowledge of the stuff of people’s lives, the kinds of manipulations conjures like Ziyi Zhou and licensed coincidence engineers performed would be impossible.

Never mind skinning your boss into an anteater, or secretly holocording the girl in the next cube so you

could take her home and do whatever you wanted to her avatar... Compared to what M~ Zhou did in running people's lives for them, determining their fates, André's professional modus operandi of a quick, un-telegraphed, painless death was as humane as it got.

For one thing, if his subjects ever so much as knew he was coming, he had erred badly. He didn't take cruelty jobs. And an encounter with him was the best most of his subjects could have hoped for.

If he came looking for somebody, they'd earned the visit.

It was a more honest trade than conjure, he thought bitterly. How dare Zhou hold that over him?

But there was no way to say that, not when he was asking her to teach him. Because he knew what the next question would be, then—a reiteration. *So if you think it's wrong, why do you want to do it?*

And he knew the answer, too. Not just passion, though the passion was there, and he would have sold himself to Core to get it and taken their damned destiny lock, let himself be chained to their service forever. But something else, the thing he was scared of losing. And yes, he was aware of the conflict implicit in that as well, though he wouldn't call it—quite—hypocrisy.

Maybe *bargaining*.

What André wanted was control. And self-defense, of course, but to pretend that was all of it would be self-deception. He gave her the second half.

"I want to be able to take care of myself," he said. "I'll run up on people who have the mojo working for them. Who've paid somebody like you or Jean Gris or one of the others"—one of the lessers, because every other conjure in Novo Haven, hell, every other conjure on Greene's World, was lesser than Ziyi Zhou or Jean Kroc, who they called Jean Gris—"or who've sold themselves to Rim for the protection. And I need a little mojo of my own."

"And it's that simple for you?"

He shrugged. Omitting wasn't *really* lying.

It was enough to make her nod a little. But the razor lines beside her eyes didn't soften, and it wasn't just a squint into the sun. "Fine," she said. "But I *am* in a precarious position." As an unlicensed conjure, she meant. It wasn't illegal to know how to do it. But it was illegal to try, or to own the necessary equipment. "And you do work for Rim, and for Charter Trade."

"I'm not going to sell you to Jefferson Greene, Ziyi."

She turned so that her shoulder was to him, her back to the sun. Their shadows stretched ahead on the decking as she started forward. He hurried two steps and caught her. "That's not why I'm concerned. As I said: maybe one in a thousand children can handle the responsibility that comes with that gun."

"I already carry one of those."

"Was that a threat, André?"

As if that would get him anywhere. "It was a plea for lenience. As you very well know. Are you trying to see if you can pick a fight with me?"

The arch of her eyebrows confirmed it. "My situation is complicated by another issue. Of those thousand children, maybe five of them can actually *operate* this gun with professional skill."

“Everybody gets lucky once in a while.”

“You can teach most people to carry a tune, but one in a thousand is born to be a singer.”

He stopped. She walked three steps more before she did likewise. She didn’t turn back to him. “So it’s no, then?”

I’m sorry, André, he prayed for. Maybe if you could prove to me I can trust you—

But what he got was a flat shake of her head, the glossy blunt-cut ends of her hair whisking over golden-yellow-clad shoulders. “You’re not a child I can hand a gun, André. I hope...I hope this won’t prejudice our relationship.”

“If you mean,” he said, “am I likely to respond in a manner you might regret? M~ Zhou, I don’t bring my work home.”

She glanced over her shoulder and gave him a tight little smile and a nod. “Good then, that’s settled. Come talk to me if you need some work done. Or send Cricket.”

“I will,” he answered, and watched as she walked on, until the crowd swallowed her. When she passed out of sight he turned and knotted his hands on the rail, leaning over the channel. Fish flocked to his shadow, hopeful of crumbs, wary of an opportunistic seabird that swung around to see if any would pass too high. “Shit,” he said, and kicked the upright with the instep of his shoe.

A passing businessman chuckled under his breath and rolled a sympathetic eye. André caught it and rolled one back, and they shared a rueful grin for a moment before the businessman was past him.

Women.

What are you gonna do?

But women might be the answer, too. He composed a message to Cricket, thought about it, and added a paragraph on either end. Her connex was down; either she was sleeping, blocking, or busy. So he sent it head-mail rather than instant message.

She’d get it the next time she checked in. One of the interesting things about Cricket was that Cricket knew *everyone*.

In the meantime, another one of his messages was from a man named Timothy Closs. And that one might mean a paycheck, if everything played out right.

Coincidence made Timothy Closs tired.

And it was only due to an awkward coincidence that there was more than a minimal loss of life when the barge exploded. It blew up between twelve and thirteen, the darkest time of the morning, when neither diurnal humans nor crepuscular ranids tended to be awake. The recruitment barge should have been empty except for a night watchman, who was scheduled to be on deck when it exploded—and if he had been where he was supposed to be, he would have lived.

But the evening crew had stayed behind for some impromptu overtime. The sort where “working late” was a euphemism that even the most naive spouse would be unlikely to believe, given a good whiff of the miscreant’s breath. So there were four men aboard, in the control cabin.

The rear of the barge would have been empty, too, had not one of the native affairs coordinators, insomniac and behind a deadline, also been working ridiculously late. Uneuphemistically, in her case.

She'd been in the interview room, open to the water and astern of almost everything—a sealed bathyspheric bubble accessible only via an airlock or the warm waters of Novo Haven Bay. But what exactly she was doing there three hours after midnight was a question that Closs knew would probably never be answered.

Cold, freak chance: there wouldn't be enough recovered of Lisa Anne Angley for a decent burial. Let alone any possibility of recovering her hard memory. The Bose-Einstein condensate processor and solid-state core of her headset were so much particulate in the sea air Closs breathed.

His sunrise came on like war. Recovery teams were already moving over the wreckage, illuminated under the glare of sodium-vapor lights. The gray dawn couldn't compete.

Closs watched from the deck of a Charter Trade cruiser a half-kilometer off, shoulders squared in a smart-fabric wind-cheater. The day should heat up later, but for now the morning was cold, and suppressant foam dotting the water had quenched the floating fires.

Technically speaking, Closs didn't have to be here. He curled his gloved hands on the rail, steel conducting heat from his palms. Technically speaking, he'd probably get a better view of the proceedings on the screen wall of his office.

But technicalities weren't going to boost shattered morale the way having an officer on scene would. An officer of the corporation, rather than a real officer, these days, but Closs still had enough sense to stay the hell out of the incident commander's way. And it didn't hurt to show up and look interested and confident. It was good when the team was comfortable with the boss, knew how to respond around him, knew that the chain of command was strong. It saved on time and precision lost to panicked errors when one wandered down from the ivory tower and startled those who weren't accustomed to one's majestic propinquity.

His headset plinked, the reserved code for his staff archinformist, Maurice Sadowski.

"Hello, Maurice." There was visual. He must be calling from a desk.

"Hello, Major." Maurice was fortyish, square-jawed, his hair ponytailed at the nape of the neck. He wore a lightcoil spiraled through the rim of his left ear, but he'd deactivated it in observance of the tragedy. It shone dull bronze. He picked at it with a thumbnail, frowning. "Nobody's claimed responsibility."

"Well, the forensic team says the night watch was fucking around belowdecks, so anybody could have sailed up and tossed a grenade. But that isn't what happened."

"The bomb was placed?"

Closs leaned his elbows on the rail and steepled his fingers. Maurice's translucent image floated before him, projected into his brain because that was a less complex feat than projecting it onto his retinas. "The blast originated in the engine compartment," Closs said. "There wasn't any bomb."

"Mechanical failure?"

"Anything's possible," Closs said. "The barge was serviced three weeks ago."

Maurice flinched. "Freak accident," he said. "A freak accident that somebody engineered."

“Yeah,” Closs said. “I think we’ve got an unlicensed conjure on our hands.”

It wasn’t earth, the stuff Cricket Earl Murphy spaded through, that gritted under her fingernails and left damp brown patches on the knees of her trousers. It wasn’t earth that she scratched clawed fingers into, raked up moist and crumbling, black as the void between stars and redolent of rotting. It wasn’t earth; Earth was on the other side of a long irrevocable relativistic slide, her old life receding like a missed train station.

It wasn’t *earth*. But people used the word anyway.

Cricket found it—alien was an ironic word, when she was already on another planet—but alien to work so with her hands, unskinned and unconnected, only sensing the texture of the soil with her fingertips. At home, she gardened, but she did it with all her skins and augments intact. She could zoom in to examine the fine grains of sand among the loam, check chemical composition, gather data effortlessly.

Here, in Lucienne’s garden, she did not use *connex*. She felt, and smelled, and cocked her head to listen to the sound the grains made when she rubbed them together. A different kind of parsing, almost medieval.

She was getting the hang of it. But she still couldn’t quite get used to it.

It was almost pointless to compost such soil as this, but she didn’t let that stop her, folding the crumbled dark mixture into earth that was no lighter, aerating the soil, laying it down in soft beds, ready for the hungry roots. She never would have done this in her old life, deep in the chaotic, elegant Core. Where houseplants were tended by hired gardeners or service bots, and were lacy froths of greenery or slick broad-leaved, jade-colored exotics, orchids hung with flowers that looked like they would bruise in a strong breath—things that were toxic to gnawing children and unwary pets.

Not tomatoes, leeks, ramps, radishes. Not maize, red and white and golden, single kernels pushed down in their mounds with a thumb, the hole closed and scattered round with bean and squash seeds. Not marigolds, just as effective against the native pests of Greene’s World as they were against those of Earth, and which Cricket was planting now, seating each one in its carefully dug hole amid the vegetables, a scatter of compost under the roots. She pressed each one into place with the side of her thumbs and smiled. Not much in the way of tomatoes, but the early peas were almost ready, their billowing pink and white flowers faded. She should pick some now, while they were sweet.

As if reading her mind—which might, in fairness, have been possible if both of them hadn’t had their headsets and *connex* shut down—Lucienne came out of the minifab with a bucket in her hand. It was Lucienne’s garden, though not Lucienne’s house. Or, more precisely, Lucienne stayed there. But the house belonged to her lover, Jean.

The garden, however, he stayed out of, except for purposes of rambling through—and, when they were ripe, picking the occasional tomato. It was Lucienne’s, and Lucienne shared it with Cricket.

And that was pretty good.

Lucienne crouched beside Cricket and held out a damp rag. “Is that the last of the marigolds?”

Cricket, wiping her hands, nodded. “It should be all in.”

“Good.” Lucienne Spivak rattled the bucket as she rose to her feet. “Let’s take some back out again.”

Lucienne was a tall, curvy sort of woman, the skin of her brown thighs slightly dimpled below the ragged hems of her white shorts. She wore real cloth, old-fashioned, which was a side effect of living with Jean as well. He liked to talk about mature technologies, the redundancy and robustness of biological systems over technological ones. *A human being is more than just a biomechanical machine.*

Cricket was never exactly sure if she believed him, or if all the world really was predetermined, and consciousness some cruel joke of the wide ironic universe. Jean had to disagree: he was a conjure man, and changing the future was his livelihood. But Cricket knew a fair number of scientists who would swear that even the measurable statistical effects of coincidence engineering meant nothing about free will, because the act of the engineering and its outcomes had already been determined.

Of course, as far as Cricket was concerned, it didn't make any real difference. You were still stuck not knowing one way or the other until it happened, and even if it didn't matter what you did, when the anxiety hit, it sure felt like it.

She picked up the watering can and watered the last marigold, then stood, pushing herself off her knees flat-handed. Lucienne caught her under the elbow and gave her a boost. Lucienne's thick, dark-brown braid fell over her shoulder, banging Cricket on the ear. Lucienne's first name was French and her last name was Ukrainian, but she herself looked Indian or Pakistani. And Cricket still had to keep reminding herself that none of that mattered on the Rim, where there were no nationalities.

Or rather, there were. There were the *important* nationalities. Like, Rim company man, and alien, and colonial, and Coreworlder, and criminal. By which the Rim meant people like Lucienne. Revolutionaries, Greens, fair-trade activists, native-rights agitators.

But not like Cricket. No matter what Cricket had done in her other life.

Though if Lucienne kept asking, you never knew. She might become a criminal again. Of a better sort, this time.

They moved along the row of peas in stooped, companionable silence. Pods pattered into the bucket, first a thin layer and then handfuls. Some plants still held sprays of blossom among the nearly ripe legumes and their curling tendrils. Cricket snapped one off and tucked it into her thin creepery hair; Lucienne, laughing silently, copied. The flowers were baby-pink, breath-white. They smelled so sweet that Cricket kept looking around for the lilies.

"Did you know your boyfriend sent a message to Jean?" Bluntly, without games or preamble. That was Lucienne.

Cricket, on the other hand, was a liar. But maybe not to Lucienne. Well, not often. "André's not my boyfriend."

"So you knew, in other words."

She nodded. She slipped her hand among the leaves, found a spray of round, firm pods. They cracked off the stems when she twisted them. The surfaces were not quite as smooth as they looked, and stuck to her fingers slightly when she shook them off into the pail. "You're not granting me any great revelations."

"Do you think—"

Cricket shook her head. "He told me, actually. And I—"

Lucienne pressed both fists into the small of her back, the bucket swinging against her hip. She arched, stretched, stooped again. "He wanted you to put in a word for him, did he?"

Cricket shook her head. “I wouldn’t trust him. He’s not like you. Not an idealist.”

“I trust you.”

“And I sleep with him, so he must be okay?” When Lucienne looked up, Cricket was smiling at her, worrying the string out of a pea pod with her thumbnail. “You realize that doesn’t follow.”

“No,” Lucienne said. “Anyway, whatever you think of André, I wish *you’d* come with us. At least to meet them.”

Us meant Lucienne and Jean. Them...

Them was a temptation. Cricket dropped the pod in the pail and reached for another one. “The froggies.”

Lucienne glanced over her shoulder, as if somebody could possibly be listening. “Tonight. Stay to dinner; come out after.” She shook the bucket. “Damned if we don’t have enough peas.”

Some men stop believing in love as they grow older. Some simply stop expecting it to find them.

Jean Kroc had never succumbed to the first failing, though the second had seemed likely. Whether he had any use for the emotion himself had remained an open question, one complicated because the image of happy domesticity did not fit the role of conjure he portrayed. Which was an odd thing; if people came to you for happiness, wouldn’t they expect you to be able to provide happiness for yourself?

Which had always been the sorcerer’s secret. Knowledge might be power. But power was a long walk from joy.

But today, there was Lucienne standing beside him, her elbow brushing his elbow, her long almost-black hair braided thick as his wrist down her back, with her high cheekbones and her almond eyes and the beauty mark in the corner of her mouth, looking like Durga come to life, without the tiger. And so, as Jean helped Lucienne shuck peas in the kitchen, and Lucienne’s slight, riverine friend Cricket boiled the salted water, the settled domesticity of the scene amused him.

It might have been four hundred years before, some randomly selected afternoon in the first century B.G. The kitchen was gas and electric, no smart appliances, no adaptive fab. He lived off the grid, Jean Kroc did. Lucienne teased that if he could sink a well, or if the river water were halfway safe, he’d haul buckets rather than palm a tap.

It was a pleasant kind of teasing, though; keeping the house unconnexed served her as well as him. The lives lived within it were safe from registry in any data hold, which was a necessary thing for anybody who wanted to keep a secret. Cricket’s research skills were proof enough of that. Jean had seen her generate a complete list of a Rim associate manager’s sex partners, accurate—by Cricket’s estimate—to 95 percent, simply by hacking her security monitor. Which had still been registered to one of sixty-four thousand factory presets.

Elapsed time, thirty-five seconds.

However, it also meant that when a hum of motors was followed by the crunch of footsteps up the clamshell path—Greene’s World bivalves, not real Earth clams, but people, Jean included, were sloppy about terminology—he couldn’t snap on a smart perimeter with a headset command and have six methods of disposal at his fingertips. Black security was illegal, which wouldn’t stop anybody who

thought he needed it.

Which was why everything Jean would have killed to protect, other than himself and Lucienne, was fifteen miles away.

He slicked a thumbnail up the inside of the pod he still held, let the peas drop into the bowl and roll down the little pyramid there while their green musk rose, then cast the husk aside. It turned over in midair, sideslipping, and landed in the stained white sink. Jean wiped his hands on a towel and thumbed a keypad hung on his belt.

He didn't use connex, but that didn't mean he didn't have screens. The big one on the wall by the window lit up, showing a speedboat moored at the end of his rickety parawood dock. The boat was a four-seater, ivory and rust in Rim Company livery.

"Corps?" Lucienne asked softly, cracking open another pod with her nails.

The piping below the gunwales was jade-colored, for the Greene's World Charter Trade Corporation. Not the Exigency Corps. Salt stains curling along the boat's bone-colored flanks gave the incongruous appearance of medieval embroidery. A woman in a Rimmer sunshade, her clipped hair blue, sat in the back, bent over with one finger pressed to her ear and the expression of somebody in heavy connex. Two men were tromping up the white path to the door. "Local," Jean answered, and watched Lucienne's shoulders pull back.

Cricket gave a quick twist of her neck to stare at him sideways, lids wide enough that white rings stood around her water-brown irises. "You sure?"

He took the slotted spoon from her hand. "You have some reason to be scared of the Corps? Turn the stove off; I don't think this will take too long."

She did what he said, silently, and went to sit on the creaking wicker sofa while he and Lucienne went to the door. He timed it just right; the Rimmer had started to knock when he pulled the door open.

Jean granted the medium-brown, medium-height man who leaned back so suddenly a certain amount of credit. He didn't fall over and he recovered himself fast. "Jean Kroc?"

"I am he."

The Rimmer glanced over Jean's shoulder. His own backup stood at the bottom of the steps, off to the port, covering both his partner and the door. "And is this M~ Spivak?"

"M~ Spivak can speak for herself," Lucienne said. She didn't step forward out of the shadows, however.

The Rimmer cleared his throat. "I'm David Kountché," he said. "My identification—"

Which was connex, of course, and Officer Kountché colored under his café-au-lait complexion when he realized the reason for Jean's slight, incurious smile. He dug into his hip bag and came up with a warrant card, holoplastic, chipped at one edge, with his retinal print and image indelibly recorded on the surface. He was, Jean reassessed, a Dayvid with a y.

"If you'd like to come in, you have to take your shoes off," Jean said, handing back the warrant card.

"I'm sorry?"

“No shoes in the house,” Lucienne said. She pushed past Jean and came out under the awning. Kountché stepped back to give her room, without seeming to realize that he’d handed her control of the situation. Lucienne continued, “And unless you have a warrant, I’ll have to ask you both to power down. Jean has a religious objection to connex in his home. Do you want me to come out instead?”

“We didn’t say it was you we needed to speak to, ma’am,” the Rimmer said. Jean could not fault him on politeness, anyway. Which wasn’t as rare a trait as you might expect, in cops.

“No, but you talked around me, so I guessed. Coming in or staying out? And who might your partner be?”

Officer Kountché cleared his throat. And, gamely, sat down on the plascrete steps and touched open the tabs on his shoes. “Officer Garnet Spencer, ma’am,” he said, and Officer Spencer tapped his sunshade just below the speckled band. Lucienne was too much of a lady to show it publicly, but Jean Kroc echoed her concealed wince. Somebody’s mother had watched too many romances.

“Delighted to meet you, Officer Spencer.” He looked a bit like a boiled fruit: his eyebrows made pale swipes in the redness of his face. Lucienne pointed to his feet. “There’s tea inside, or I can bring you a lemonade on the porch.”

After trading one quick look—backed, no doubt, by connex—Officer Kountché finished pulling his shoes off and powered down. Officer Spencer opted for the hospitality of the front stoop, and Jean brought him a lemonade while Lucienne led the other one inside. When Jean returned to the living room—the kitchen was more an alcove off the side than a separate space—Cricket had taken herself back out to the garden and Officer Kountché was perched uncomfortably on the edge of a wicker slouch chair, maintaining a stiff spine as if in defiance of the urgings of the household goods. Lucienne had turned the burner back on under Cricket’s teakettle, and was measuring leaves into a pot. “Whatever questions you wanted to ask me,” she said, “you can ask in front of Jean.”

The officer looked uncomfortable, but folded his hands over his knee. “Where were you last night, M~ Spivak?”

“Please. Call me Lucienne.”

“You don’t stand on ceremony?”

“I don’t stand on much,” she answered. “Occasionally, my principles. Sugar, Officer?”

“Sugar, please. And answer the question. Please.”

Lucienne frowned, as if measuring spoonfuls of white crystals into the cup was an unwonted effort. “I was here.”

“You can confirm?”

She shrugged. “No connex,” she said. “I live here. I wasn’t anywhere else.”

Officer Kountché glanced at Jean, who leaned, arms folded, beside the door. “I’ll testify to that,” Jean answered.

“M~ Kroc,” the officer asked, “what’s your means of support?”

“I’m a prospector,” Jean answered. “And I consult.”

“No work in the, ah, service industry?”

Jean just smiled. “Not what I would call it, no. Does that have any bearing on your investigation of my partner?”

“Now, M~ Kroc,” Kountché said, apparently having recovered himself, “I’m sure I never said your partner was under investigation.”

The smile Lucienne gave Kountché was almost as plastic as the one she got back. “Jean,” she said, “there’s nothing here you need to defend me from.”

He unfolded his arms and said nothing. She turned back to face the counter and poured the tea. She served him and offered a cup to Jean, who waved it away with the back of his hand, then poured for herself. A delaying action, and a few moments later she ensconced herself across from him, her mug cradled between her hands. “So,” the officer said, “you can’t prove where you were last night?”

Whatever floated in the depths of her tea must have been extraordinarily interesting. She dipped a finger into the steaming surface and bit the resulting droplet from the tip. “Can you prove I was somewhere else?”

“What’s your relationship with the ELF?”

“The Extee Lib Foundation? I give them money. I volunteer in the front office. It’s a perfectly legal and registered charity. Officer.”

“Blowing up a native worker recruitment station is a charitable function?”

“Is *that* what exploded last night?” Lucienne leaned forward, between her knees, to set her cup down on the plascrete not far from the edge of the braided rug. “You think I had something to do with that?”

“I’m not suggesting any such thing.” He sipped his tea. If he was a hunting dog, Jean thought, his ears would be pricked up. “*Do* you know anything about it?”

“No connex, remember?”

He shook his head, as if it was a little hard for him to understand the implications. No instant news, no instant messages. No instantaneous communication with people on other planets, halfway across the galaxy.

No constant hum of commercials in the back of your brain. No hacked perceptions, showing you a woman in a red dress and heels when she was wearing a pantsuit and thongs, and weighed fifteen pounds worth of muscle less than the image projected into your brain.

No connex. Alone with the silence inside your own brain.

Not too long ago, of course, it would have been alien to Lucienne, too. But she’d adapted, as Jean had expected she would. If nothing else, it gave you time to think.

“You’ll answer questions under a lie sensor, if necessary?”

Lucienne smiled. “If you subpoena my cooperation. I know my rights, Officer.”

The answering tip of his head was tight. “Are you certain you don’t wish to call your solicitor now?”

“Why should I?” she said. “I’ve nothing to hide.”

JEAN LIKED THAT CRICKET STAYED ON AFTER THE RIMMERS departed, all three together. The one who'd waited on the stoop had left his untouched lemonade on the corner of the plascrete, all the ice melted and condensation rolling down the sides.

"As if you'd poison a Rimmer," Lucienne said disdainfully, while Cricket was bringing the remains of dinner out to her beloved compost pile. Lucienne dumped the glass in the sink and scrubbed it out by hand. She racked it and dried her hands on a towel, while Jean pressed his palms to her shoulders to feel her muscles slide. She leaned on the touch, letting him support her.

"He bugged the chair," Jean murmured against the black hawser of her braid. "Want to give him an earful after your friend leaves?"

She tossed the towel across the edge of the sink. "As if you haven't already disabled it."

He couldn't shrug and rub her shoulders at the same time, so he settled for a kiss on the nape of her neck. Still brown, this skin, but paler, and vulnerable-seeming, nonetheless. "He can't prove a thing. Breathe out."

She obeyed, and breathed in, too, then repeated the process more slowly, with concentrated care. "If he could, he'd have us both in custody. It might be time to step back for a bit. We're not outraged doomsayers, and I refuse to be herded. Either by Rimmer visits, or by Closs's threats to assay settled wetlands for mining potential, and hang the treaty. We're not doing the froggies any good if we wind up inmates at a seaweed farm."

"We're not doing ourselves any good either." He stepped back and let his hands fall away. "There's always legal challenges."

"If we could afford better lawyers."

He nibbled his thumb, turning away from the window, through which the setting sun glared, flashing off spectacles that always drew a double-take when he was introduced to someone new. "I'll see what I can do. About Cricket—"

"Yes. We can trust her."

He licked his lips, put his shadow between them so he could see her expression when she turned. The line between her eyebrows was deeper, but the curl of her lips was wry.

"She doesn't want to be a part of our revolution, Luce," he said.

"But where she goes, Deschênes follows."

He didn't have a ready answer, so Lucienne continued, shading her eyes so *she* could look straight at *him*. "I'll take her to see the ranids tonight. If that doesn't shift her, nothing will."

André walked home two hours later than he usually did. The traffic in the streets had fallen off; his meeting had stretched through the afternoon rush. A face-to-face meeting. One of the reasons André kept office hours—kept an office at all—was that his business wasn't always best handled via connex.

Cricket still hadn't answered his call about Jean Kroc, which was for the best. He'd have more work for her if she did call. Cricket charged high, even as archinformists went, but she was worth every demark. And if she didn't call, André would just have to get a head start on the information himself. Because his meeting had been with Timothy Closs, a Rim Company VP who reported directly to Jefferson Greene, the titular head of the Greene's World Charter Trade Corporation.

And Charter Trade had contacted André because it was looking for a speedy resolution.

André wasn't a nice man, and he didn't do a nice job. But he also understood that it wasn't that different from jobs that had been necessary, spurned, and not very nice since the first web-footed amphibian crawled from the primal ooze and set up shop to sell dirt to other amphibians from farther downriver. It was a living, and he didn't play politics, and he didn't execute grudges. He stuck to what passed for the ethical rules of his profession, and Charter Trade left him alone except for when it needed him.

And on Colonial Charter steadings like Greene's World, the Rimmers were the law—and had been for the last 250 years, since A.G. 75 or so, though Greene's World itself was not that old. And the only court of appeals was the Earth-centered, teeming worlds of the Core. Which relied on trade from the ever-expanding halo of the Rim to keep it fed and housed and enjoying an increasing standard of living. A lot of people came to the Rim because they couldn't live in the Core anymore, for one reason or another.

Frontiers had always been a sort of social pressure valve.

Really, in the end, André just saved Charter Trade the money it would have spent documenting a kangaroo trial. And as for the family of the accused, he saved them some embarrassment.

The sort of people he needed to talk to tonight didn't do business over connex either. They also weren't the sort to hang out in pool halls, Italian restaurants, or drinking establishments, adding a little stereotypical color to the place. But Nouel Huc did have an affection for a particular raucous dinner theater on Seagrove—West Seagrove, a much more upscale neighborhood than André's. Not that that would be a problem, since André was dressed for the office.

He strolled past tall, white-faced, balconied cruisers that smiled around their storm shutters. The air was cooling as the red sun sank, the breeze lifting the day's last sweat from his neck. The barges here were more solidly lashed, partially because people took more trouble with it and partially because Bayside was the windward edge of Novo Haven, and caught the storms blowing in off the gulf, most of which were not nearly bad enough to scatter the city for. But they could pitch and rub the barges, and the worst damage didn't come from the wind, under those circumstances, but from the hulls crushing the sidewalks. Bumpers and braces could only do so much.

The awnings were rolled in for afternoon, letting the last light of day reach the blue and green and goldenrod doors, filter in the parlor windows. If André hadn't known where he was going, he could have picked out the Zheleznyj Tigr from the residences on either side. It was on the 8100 barge, and the velvet ropes leading to the door set it apart, as did the attendant standing by. She was shapely and very pale, her white-blond hair clubbed at the nape of her neck, and she wore a red velvet tailcoat and a tall black hat. She smiled at André as she opened the door, plated heels clicking cheerfully. He answered her crisp bow with a playful one of his own, just to see her pale skin blush.

She must spend a fortune on sunblock.

Inside, candles and wall sconces flickered, dusting dark wood and more red velvet with erratic light. Somebody was playing a neono, not loudly enough to be heard in the street. Not yet. André cocked his head at the music and glanced slowly around. Empty booths, a few occupied, the glossy tabletops mostly innocent yet of glasses.

Nouel Huc sat alone. That was by no means uncommon, but neither was it de rigueur. He was a broad Asian-looking man whose frown lines made him seem brooding, and a little cruel, though he was neither of those things. Women, André imagined, found the contrast irresistible.

It couldn't have been Nouel's *looks*.

André made some noise coming up, though Nouel certainly expected him; he'd IMed a query before he left his office, and gotten the nod to come down. Nouel was tangled up with a woman who lived on Yap, and sometimes when he seemed to be alone, he was actually quite distracted.

But this time, Nouel pushed the chair opposite out with his foot; André dropped into it lightly and reached for the order pad. "What's the play tonight?"

"*Zaire*," Nouel said. "Voltaire. Will you stay for it?"

"I could be convinced," André answered, pulling up reviews, a synopsis, and clips on his headset. "Do you know the special?"

Nouel made a broad gesture with a heavily ringed hand. Jewels caught the candlelight, their flash and sparkle enhanced by Nouel's skins. André knew at least two rings were external hard memory, easily exchanged or discarded, while one housed a cutting laser. "I haven't ordered."

"Oh." André downloaded the specials, IMed them to Nouel via a direct-read. "There's shiro," he said, as if Nouel would not have noticed it. A local-world, deep-sea, heavy-bodied whitefish. Most of it was exported to the Core to feed the sushi market as a welcome replacement for Earth's own extinct stocks of albacore and escolar.

Nouel smacked his lips. "A bottle of wine?"

"I am at your disposal," André answered, and pushed the order pad to Nouel. Nouel must have livelinked it, because André didn't see him touch a key. André was buying, of course. It was part of the honorarium one paid Nouel in exchange for his information.

"Oh, I don't think I'll dispose of you just yet." He tipped his thumb to the stage. "Not until I hear your opinion of the play. They run a repertory here, you know. It's rare to get something genuinely new."

André did know, but it would have been rude to mention it. He nodded, instead, and thumbed through the drug list. Expensive alcohol, opiates, tailored drugs. Nothing unexpected. He settled on a brandy and also ordered a gin and ice for Nouel, as his was rattling in the glass.

Nouel nodded thanks, and their drinks arrived a moment later. Nothing had yet replaced the live waiter; expert systems did not maintain an adequate standard of customer service, and people liked to be smiled at. He stirred his ice with the glass rod and said, "Was this just a social call, André?"

"If it were, would I be plying you with alcohol?"

Nouel laughed, head down and shoulders back, almost spilling his drink. He wasn't an archinformist, but he employed them. Nouel was a broker. And sometimes he could find out things that weren't in a data hold. "Ask. Before the fish comes; I hate to talk when I could be eating."

"Lucienne Spivak," André said.

A long whistle like the call of trains since time immemorial rose over the tinkling neon. You got the Bayside view here, and with it the sound of lighters landing day and night, ferrying cargo and—more

rarely—personnel up to the orbital transfer station. You didn't build a matter transfer station on a habitable planet.

Just in case.

Nouel stopped with his drink tipped to his lips. He looked at it thoughtfully, took a sip anyway, and set it down precisely in its own ring of condensation. "What's it worth to you?"

"Three hundred," André replied, a flat inflexible offer.

"Make them pay you hazard," Nouel said. "If you haven't shaken hands on it already. How fast do you need it?"

Closs wanted the job done as fast as safely possible. He had told André he had intelligence that Spivak was going to receive damaging information from a source inside Rim, and that he needed her removed before she could pass it on.

"Fastest. Who is she?" André waved his brandy snifter under his nose, wafting the aroma from the glass. "Other than the presumed head of GreenWorld, now that Tavish is dead."

"She stays out in the bayou."

"She's a frog-kisser. It's not unheard of."

"No," Nouel said, as the cold hors d'oeuvre arrived. "The issue is who she stays with." With the pricker-tipped tongs, Nouel selected a slick sea-fruit and tossed it into his mouth. It burst with an audible pop. "An old swamp-crawling conjure man."

"No. *No!*" André laughed in disbelief, rocking his head from side to side. Fate was gaming with him.

"Yes. Better make sure nobody can connect it to you, if it comes off." Nouel's eyes twinkled—literally, a programmed effect of his skin. "I wouldn't want Jean Gris knowing I was the man who killed his piece of tail."

It wasn't that Cricket had never been in the delta before. Because of course she had. She'd been on hover-boats and a transport; she'd been upriver as far as Romeo. She'd even taken a swamp hike in hip waders with a horticulturist and gotten a six-hour crash course in the native wildflowers of Greene's World. The part she had found most charming was the discovery that all sorts of names she was familiar with from Earth plants had been recycled shamelessly, for flowers that often bore only a passing resemblance to any Terran plant. She'd seen swamp iris—which on Greene's World was a deep green-streaked bronze—and moonflower, and orioleplant (named after a bird, not even a vegetable), and dozens of other native ornamentals. And the invasive garden species, from Earth and Babel and wherever else people had gone and found things that were pretty. Importing live seed was supposed to be illegal. But unlike chordate animals, plants survived matter transfer fine, and it wasn't as if anybody enforced the regulations.

So she'd done all that, got the mud between her toes, felt halfway grounded on her new planet. New being a decade and a half now.

But she'd never been in the bayou at night, with the three lumpy moons and the sharply spherical silver disk of the transport station swinging by overhead and the reeds casting razory shadows across the silvered water. The smallest moon, sulfur-stained Flash, actually moved fast enough for its transit across

the larger white-gold moon called Arthur to be noticeable to the unaided eye. Com kept running stories that Rim planned to bump it out a few thousand kilometers because it might be sliding down the sky fast enough to be a threat one of these years.

Lucienne urged her over spongy ground carpeted in flat dense green, a high-intensity minilight shone low, to illuminate only the path before their feet. “They’re not fond of bright lights in darkness,” she whispered. “Their eyes don’t adjust as fast as ours.”

Cricket matched Lucienne’s tone. “Are we taking a boat?”

“No, it’s just up along the bank.” And then Lucienne giggled. “Why are we whispering?”

“So as not to disturb the ranids?”

“They can’t hear you.”

Cricket stumbled. Lucienne, behind her, caught her elbow and held her up. “Can’t hear me? They’re not *deaf*.”

“No—” Lucienne’s gesture set the light in her hands to wavering wildly. “They respond to a different set of frequencies, and their hearing in air is not that great. They’d just hear, I dunno, rumbling and squeaks. Like we just hear them croaking.”

“So how will they know to meet us? How will we talk to them?”

“You’ll see,” Lucienne said, patting a capacious cargo pocket on her thigh. “Patience.”

Cricket was ready to swallow her tongue. Ranids shouldn’t be that exciting. She’d seen them working on the drill platforms in the distance, seen them—occasionally—scudding effortlessly through the crystalline bay. She’d watched documentaries, of course. And the popular dramas sometimes had ranids in them: real ones or—more often—holograms.

That wasn’t the same as talking to a real alien while crouched in a swamp by moonlight.

“Hold still,” Lucienne said, and Cricket paused midstep. “You can put your foot down.”

The trace of a laugh in Lucienne’s voice made Cricket smile, too. Wet earth molded to her foot as her weight came down on it. She could feel the cool moisture rising from the mud even through her flexible sole. The sawtooth-edged leaves of the reeds that weren’t all that much like real reeds whispered in the darkness, leaving Cricket with the urge to whisper back. Living up to her name, she thought, and her smile broadened until it pulled at her cheeks.

Lucienne turned off the light.

Cricket managed not to yelp, but she couldn’t hold back a flinch. The bayou had already been huge and tangled where it stretched beyond the reach of the flashlight: slumbering softly, but infinitely old and sharp-witted. Now, before Cricket’s eyes adjusted, the sounds and scents seemed to rush at her with the darkness. She breathed deep, fixing the black-earth scent of vegetable rot at the bottom of her lungs, so she smelled it again, warmer, as her breath came back.

Insects sawed and droned, and creatures large enough to support vocal cords made more complex noises. Something crashed, and something screamed; she didn’t know if it was a mating fight or the sound of something becoming another something’s dinner. She tried to force her eyes to adapt faster.

The moonlight was shifting. One set of shadows, the faintest, seemed to twist about her as she watched, as if someone meant to wind her legs with ribbons. That was Flash, and it would cross the sky again two and a half times before sunrise. Arthur took a more stately route, as befitted the farthest satellite, and cast steady steel-blue shadows. Subtractive mixing—still counterintuitive to Cricket after thirty-four years in which the light from the sky had only been one color at a time—turned the intersecting shadows black.

The third moon, Alice, was a grayish wraithlike shape with low albedo, smaller, closer, and faster than Arthur but larger and slower than Flash. It cast no appreciable light unless it was alone in the sky, and even then, only enough to guess at the motion of a hand. If the person waving it was light-skinned.

If the Greene's World tide charts hadn't been in databases, they would have run to volumes.

"What are we waiting for?" Cricket finally whispered.

"Not waiting." Lucienne touched her shoulder, and Cricket noticed herself shivering. The moist still air was also cool. "Looking. There, off to port."

Cricket turned her head and squinted. A patch of moonlight—no. Brighter than moonlight. And a greeny-yellow that neither Arthur nor Flash reflected. Bioluminescence? "Algae?"

"Froggies," Lucienne said. "They're expecting us. Come on."

A narrow path led through the reeds, invisible from the green riverbank. Cricket reached out and swiped across the glowing patch as they walked past it, flattened reeds crunching softly underfoot. Water seeped between the aligned stems, but they kept the mud beneath from greasing her way down the bank.

Her fingertip glowed citrine-yellow when she turned her hand over. "They use marking paint?"

"Something like that." Lucienne had taken the lead, for which Cricket was just as grateful, in the dark. She clutched reeds to steady herself, leaving luminescent smears behind. "Stop here."

Cricket had already halted. She could see the moonlit channel gleaming beyond Lucienne, its surface like oiled black opal. Cricket watched while Lucienne flipped her braid behind one broad shoulder and crouched easily in the mud. Whatever had been in her pocket was in her right hand now; it looked like a wand with green and yellow lights glowing on the handle.

She slid it into the water and thumbed a control.

Cricket neither heard nor felt a thing, but the lights rippled encouragingly, and Lucienne seemed satisfied as she pulled the wand up and whipped an arc of droplets off the tip.

"And now?"

"We wait. Some patient researcher you are." Lucienne reached back and patted her on the ankle. Cricket sighed and squatted down, resting her elbows on her knees, trying to trap some warmth between her belly and her thighs. "Oh. When they come—don't make direct eye contact. And don't touch them. It breaks their mucous coating."

Cricket was prepared for a long, cold wait, but her expectation was mercifully disappointed. The water rippled and bulged, and one-two-three domed arrow-shaped heads emerged, arrayed in an uneven wedge. They bobbed, as if their owners floated free in the water, though Cricket couldn't imagine it was very deep. But they slid to the bank smoothly, and she stood up and moved back as Lucienne scooted aside to give them room.

Cricket heard herself breathing, loud as if she stood in an echo chamber. Only one of the ranids emerged from the water—a greeny-black shape with a pale mottled belly. Its arms were long, almost as long as its spindly legs, and it had spidery, webbed, opposable digits on all four limbs. It wasn't quite as tall as Cricket, standing, which wasn't very tall at all. It hunched forward enough, head stretching out on a neck that would collapse into the body for swimming, so that she saw pale mottles that would be butter-or cream-colored in sunlight. "We have to give them names," Lucienne said over her shoulder. "Their names for themselves are a little beyond us. Cricket, this is Caetei. Caetei, this is Cricket." When Lucienne addressed the froggie directly, she overpronounced, as if speaking to a child or a lip-reader.

The ranid wore a sort of web belt, farther up its midsection than a human waist would be, above the great angular hip bones that canted it forward in such an awkward and unbalanced fashion. It flexed its legs, not quite sinking down into a high-kneed crouch, and supported itself on one hand while it unclipped a perfectly normal—if waterproofed—child's slate from a carabiner. It settled further, a tapered cone between the high flexed knees, and began to type.

"And do they have names for us?" Cricket asked, coming forward. She pressed her shoulder against Lucienne's rounded biceps, soaking up radiant warmth.

"If they do, they never tell us." Lucienne accepted the slate from Caetei and read it quickly, angling the face so Cricket could see the backlit screen.—*Plsd. U R cmng 2 hlp us?*

Inelegant, but efficient. Cricket glanced at Lucienne. Lucienne shrugged. "You can type on the slate, connex to the slate and IM, or speak directly. Caetei reads lips. Not all ranids do."

Cricket handed the slate back, the tips of the ranid's spatulate fingers brushing the side of her hand. There must be claws retracted in the cool slippery flesh, because something scratched her like a burr. "Pleased to meet you, too," she answered, a great swelling of disbelief making her wish she could shake her head and pace in circles until it sank in what she was doing here. "Lucienne thought I should come and talk to you. To help make up my mind."

The ranid's head settled back against its shoulders. It bobbed slightly and typed again. While it worked, Lucienne patted Cricket on the elbow. "You're doing fine."

The slate came back. —*Wld U C wht Rim ds 2 my sibs?*

"It's not pretty," Lucienne cautioned.

Cricket nodded. "I will see."

Caetei splashed the water with one foot. The other two bobbing ranid heads emerged from the water, and neither of these two wore web belts or carried Rim equipment. One wore the seashell and seawrack vest and girdle affected by the unacculturated ranids. It was decorative, woven of tropical colors and light-catching stones, and also served to display the prowess of the ranid that wore it. Not only did the vests create drag, impeding the owner, but the best vests belonged to far-swimmers, who had traveled great distances along the surface currents, and visited many islands and become exoparents on many shores. A sensible custom, one that encouraged both the reproduction of the strongest and the wide spread of biological diversity.

This particular far-swimmer also wore a Charter Trade harpoon gun. Which was *not* something any native was supposed to have. *Tetra*, Caetei typed, and the ranid head-bobbed. Lucienne bowed, a human equivalent, and Cricket copied her. This, she guessed, would be the bodyguard.

And nothing like a tame froggie at all. Caetei had a distinct, moist, amphibian aroma. *Tetra*—or its

harness—smelled of tide pools and heaped seaweed and broken shells.

When Tetra turned to help the third ranid from the water, though, Cricket gasped. She hadn't been able to see, when it swam partially submerged, but this froggie was disfigured. It was obviously blind in one eye, a great white scar carved down the side of its face and across the shoulder, its left arm ending below the shoulder in a knobby lump. It listed as it struggled up the bank, so Cricket suspected spinal or brain damage.

"This is Parrot. It survived an industrial accident," Lucienne said, because Caetei had stopped typing. "And Rim sometimes provides medical care to site workers—it's one of the things they trade for coolie labor"—the distaste in her voice when she said *coolie* was acid enough to sting—"but of course if you can't work they don't treat you."

"God," Cricket said, or shaped, anyway. She wasn't sure she got any breath through the word.

Not that that mattered to the ranids. Caetei reached out and brushed her bare leg, with just fingertip pads, and looked up quizzically. She glanced down. "Yes," Cricket said. "Thank you. Please tell it—" *Tell it I'm sorry.*

But the dismissive flicking gesture of Caetei's hand needed no translation. Like scattering water on the ocean. The mutilated ranid would not understand.

"Thank you." Lucienne to the rescue. She swept her hand to her mouth to direct Caetei's attention. "If you don't need more, Caetei, thank you and Tetra and Parrot. Thank you very much."

Caetei patted Cricket's calf once more quickly, and the three ranids slipped back into the brackish channel. For a moment, Cricket saw the lights of Caetei's slate dimmed by the muddy channel, and then they were gone, along with the ranids.

"Medical care?" Cricket asked, when the wonder had blown off her enough to allow her to talk. "They work for what any Core or Rim citizen gets as a birthright?"

"It's one of the things they earn. They're not citizens."

"It's exploitation."

"That is," Lucienne said gently, "what I have been telling you. You're not...shocked?"

"No." She wished she was. She wished she had the innocence left to be shocked. "But I am outraged."

"Good." Lucienne paused, still looking out over the water. Flash already almost touched the top of the reeds in the west. "I meant you to be."

Cricket let the silence handle that one. "I still don't know if I have the guts to get involved. What else do they—what else does Charter Trade barter to the ranids?"

"They protect their sacred sites, for one thing. There are places in the deep bayou and salt marsh that the ranids hold holy. And, maybe the biggest thing..." She shrugged. "Stories."

"*Stories?*" Cricket heard herself, and lowered her voice. "Like, once upon a time?"

"It's their whole culture. They talk. When they get out in the deep ocean, *halfway around the world* they can talk. Don't underestimate what new information is worth to them."

Cricket twisted her hands together. She was getting a little annoyed with feeling abashed. "I'm sorry,"

she said. “I don’t mean to sound like an idiot.”

“Not an idiot,” Lucienne said. She flicked her flashlight on and shone it up the reedy path. Cricket, taking a hint, scrambled up. “Not even ignorant, really. But nobody talks about this stuff.”

“Because we don’t want to know?”

“Something like that,” Lucienne said. “Come on. I’ll run you home.”

“I can get there myself. Just drop me at the ferry stop—”

“Don’t worry about it.” As they emerged from the reeds atop the grassy bank, the night was cool and still. Exactly as they had left it, except the angle of the light had changed. “I was going out anyway. I have to meet somebody around midnight.”

Raindrops pattered on the surface, the sound echoing softly through the sheltered backwater where Gourami slept and kept se treasures. Se lived in a humen-built cottage that bobbed amid rows of sixteens of similar bubbles, all on automatic moorings so that they were held more or less taut no matter how the tide changed.

Gourami rested on one of the broad comfortable shelves that projected from the walls just below water level, spading a protein-enriched algae broth from a shallow bowl and watching larger-than-life images flicker on the wall. The splashing wavelets were warm; the heat in se sleeping bench was on. Humen toys were very pleasant.

Se was watching a humen drama—they had drama, just like plays except they made them permanent so one could *watch* again and again, not just *tell* them—and the squiggles across the bottom of the image meant their words. So se was practicing, in addition to being entertained. Which was good. The humen liked it if one did more than one thing at a time, though Gourami thought they would be wiser to care if one did it well.

But that was humen.

They built good houses, anyway.

And someone was scratching by the door of Gourami’s. Se set the half-empty bowl on a higher shelf, where water would not slop into it (imagine trying to keep water out of food! Imagine eating food served warm!) and slid through the opening in the ring-shaped shelf, dropping toward the bottom of the house and the underwater door. There was a hatch to the roof as well, for emergencies and sunbathing, reached by an ascending spiral of shelves, and some houses had a second underwater exit. But those were houses for families—endoparents with broods, or exo-groups, or sometimes both at the same time where there was a lasting attachment.

Gourami’s place was only one bubble. As se swam under the encircling shelf of the primary living space, the flickering light of the drama provided enough glow to see by. Se’d reverse it when se came back up, if guilt won over irritation. It wasn’t very good. But it was a story, and se winced at self’s irresponsibility in letting it run itself out unregarded.

Still. Still. Se could always reverse it. It wasn’t sacrilege, not like missing part of a play, which was ephemeral and would only continue to exist as long as there was somebody to remember it, somebody who could tell it if the need arose.

The gate was shot; se hadn't planned on going out until morning and the last thing se needed was a pod of snakewhites wandering in an unbarred door in the middle of the night. Se churred, the swelling surface of se throat vibrating into the water. Beyond the gate, someone's pale belly reflected the moving light. The other churred back.

Caetei was a relative, one of Gourami's endosibs. They were kin by water rather than gametes, but some said that was the strongest bond.

Caetei also worked for Rim.

Gourami slipped the gate and let se kick inside. —*I wouldn't expect you to still be awake.*

Caetei shot upward with a powerful flexion of legs. Se voice echoed oddly for a moment as se hauled self from full submersion to a comfortably damp perch on the ledge. —*I knew you would be.*

Gourami was a night-swimmer, a noon-sleeper by preference. As everybody in three rows knew, from the flicker of stories on se walls late into the night. Se heaved onto the ledge and stood to stretch, palms sticky flat against the arched roof of the house for balance. Bubble-shaped was not just sturdy and pleasant; it was safest in a storm. —*I was watching a story.* But of course, Caetei was already transfixed by the flicker. Se understood humen very well, better maybe than Gourami. Se hunched forward, half-crouched, and tilted side to side as if to improve perception of the huge humen figures imbedded in Gourami's house-wall.

—*Will you restart?*

—*I watched this one before,* Gourami lied. Too much exposure to humen, not to care about a drama. It's just a story, se wanted to say. It is recorded. It will remember itself, like the stories the Other Ones took with them, when they left. But se didn't, and was glad when se noticed the set of Caetei's shoulders, which suggested something along the lines of: Oh. But I haven't.

Se didn't actually make the noises, though, so Gourami could pretend se had been looking away. Se did not want to watch the bad movie again.

Se did not even particularly want to watch the ending.

But se did, and when it flicked dark and the walls took up a mellow sun-colored glow to compensate for the lost illumination of the movie, se shifted se hips on the ledge. A few spans closer to Caetei was enough to press on se attention. Caetei blinked wide high-set eyes and shuddered, shaking out of the memorizy trance. —*You can have the code,* Gourami said. —*I won't watch it again.*

Caetei ducked in thanks and acknowledgment; Gourami made a sweeping, paddling gesture with se handfingers. Away from the mouth, not toward. —*Nothing to thank me for.*

Se sank down in the warm water and let it flow up between the ridges of se hips. Se legs stretched long, toefingers dangling over the edge of the ledge. Not a position to take in open water, when toefingers looked like food to many swimmers.

Comfortable, though.

—*You were just coming to visit? Would you care for some soup?* There was plenty of broth, and Gourami could thicken it with seaweed for a meal. But Caetei's posture did not suggest hunger, and se answered with the same paddling motion Gourami had used.

—*I need to ask you to take an action.* Caetei hesitated, delicately. Gourami warbled quiet

encouragement twice before se would continue. —*The thing the humen have green-band sibs drilling for on the shelf.*

The thing that wasn't petroleum. Which Gourami knew because Gourami had been liaison between the persons assigned to the drill and the humen assay team. And the assay team had tended to talk freely in front of persons, as some humen did. As if Gourami couldn't lip-read perfectly well.

Gourami did not know what was *tanglestone*, or *omelite* either. Se did not understand humen excitement over *forking* and *incomplete forking*. But se understood that the humen were not drilling for oil. No matter what they told the persons at work, and the humen inspectors who came to the drill.

—*It was a mistake to talk about it.* Because it was a *secret*, se had realized too late. And secrets were the opposite of stories. Se could lose se position from talking, se own comfortable existence, and se contribution to bandweal. —*I can't tell you any more.*

—*I know a human who can help. If we bring it evidence stories. There might be other ways to protect the greatparents than begging Rim.*

There might be. Gourami folded in on self, wrapping arms around flexed legs, and put se face between fleshy thighs. Se was moist and warm and comfortable, and shuddered anyway, as if attempting to shiver loose a parasite. Too much risk. Too much risk to the greatparents, to bandweal. To self.

The status quo was not so terrible. And se did not see it being better, for persons or for the greatparents of thousand-year memory, to start a revolution. Caetei never said so much, would not. But Gourami had no doubts as to what se endosib intended as an outcome.

—*I won't risk the greatparents,* se said, lurching upright and leaning forward. Se caught Caetei's eye and held it, forcing a lock to be certain Caetei understood. *Will not. What the humen could do to us—*

The whirring, melodious croak died at the back of se throat, se throatpouch still expanded. Se looked down, accidentally releasing Caetei.

Because they could. Gourami watched their stories, both the history and the inventions. The magnitude of the destruction that humen could wreak was inconceivable, if they grew wrathful. —*No.* Gourami said. —*No, I will not talk to your humen. I have greatparents to protect. I have eggings to think of. I cannot contribute to a war.* Se whirring had risen to operatic levels, echoing under the domed roof of se house until it boomed like a mating call.

Se fixed Caetei an acidic glance and modulated se voice, as Caetei ducked to avoid being gazelocked again. Gourami continued, —*And you should not either. You memorizy, I see you. If you think of being a greatparent, you must put others first.*

Caetei knew that. Of course, and Caetei rose up on shaky legs, wincing apologetically. —*I will show myself out.*

—*I am not angry.* But Gourami was, upset at least, worried, and they both could smell it in the water, see it in the flush that surrounded paling mottles. —*Please come back when you want to talk about something else.*

There. That was better.

—*I will come back,* Caetei answered, and slipped into the ring pool.

Gourami waited until the gate thumped before turning back to se dinner. The broth had long gone cold.

OVER THE YEARS, ANDRÉ HAD COME TO ACCEPT THAT HIS luck was often ridiculous, but he hadn't expected a shot at filling the contract his first night out. He folded his forearms over the handlebars of his wet-dry scoot and let it bob, lights dark, on the moonlit water of the bay. The floor pushed his feet as it yawed. He hid behind the faring so his head wouldn't silhouette on the horizon. The craft was low-profile; without the brightness of the sky or of Novo Haven's lights behind him, André was nothing more than a blacker patch on the water.

About that luck, he thought, watching Lucienne Spivak and her guest come chattering down the floating dock. Ridiculous wasn't the half of it. Epic, maybe. Operatic. *Farcical*. Because even by moonlight, with his lowlight adapt kicked up, he recognized the woman walking alongside Spivak, leaning into her so that their shoulders brushed, ducking down as they shook their heads over some joke funny enough that André could hear their laughter across the water.

"You know," he murmured under his breath, "you couldn't make this shit up."

He wasn't going to kill anybody in front of his girlfriend. Some things were beyond the call of duty, and it would be difficult to make it look like an accident if Spivak suddenly went down clutching her throat. *And* he wasn't in a hurry. Impatient men often didn't do well in André's line of work. *Luck will only get you so far*. Even ridiculous luck—

With his lowlight, he could make out the hunched shape of a minifab at the top of the dock, a white shell path leading up to it. The residence itself was in a sheltered inlet that a high tide would turn into an island, not quite up the bayou—as Nouel had suggested—but on a channel and away from the open bay. A paramangrove swamp cut sight lines to the city, and the approach path of descending lighters lay directly over the house, which explained why this wasn't more popular property. That, and the inconvenience of being an hour and a half by scoot or boat from the city.

He'd wait for Cricket to leave, and then he'd slip close enough to get an overview of the location. It would be better if he could catch Spivak away from home, but it didn't hurt to know the turf. He'd have to be careful, though; Jean Kroc's house was a homestead, no plans on record, and he had no idea what sort of security devices the conjure man might use. Anything from tiger pits to tracking lasers were possible, and it would be embarrassing to take a load of buckshot in the fundament.

André folded his arms and waited, listening to the women laugh. The breeze across the water was cool, carrying a taint of the heady sweetness from the parasitic flowers that swathed the paramangrove limbs. The scent carried over miles, and right now it told André that the wind was offshore. Which was also helpful to him; even if Kroc had a sniffer or a smart guard dog, it wouldn't pick up André's scent.

Yep. Luck was wonderful.

Pity he couldn't talk any conjure on Greene's World into helping him train it.

He wondered if he should have turned down this job. Closs would just have found somebody else, of course. Somebody who might botch it, or somebody who might be the kind of sadistic bastard who got his kinks out in his work.

He shifted on the hard seat of the scooter, pretending resignation as if he could convince himself. No matter how much of a hurry Closs was in, it wasn't as if André had to kill anybody *tonight*.

Except it didn't look like Cricket was leaving alone. She climbed into the passenger chair of the waiting flashboat and Spivak followed, settling in the pilot's seat. If she was just running Cricket down to the ferry, about fifteen minutes, then—

—André might not need the research after all. More luck, that he hadn't mentioned it to Cricket.

It could have put a strain on the relationship.

The engine of the flashboat was faster and louder than the caterpillar drive on the scoot. André waited until his prey was in motion before powering up. His scoot was dark gray, and the topcoat had a gloss-or-matte option that got a lot of work on night jobs. With the lowlight, he didn't need the running lights.

He concentrated very hard, thinking of Spivak dropping Cricket off at the ferry landing just the other side of the paramangrove swamp and turning back for home, maybe a little careless and tired. He couldn't take a blacked-out scoot into the city; if he didn't get run down by a barge, he'd get pulled over by traffic enforcement—and Cricket might recognize him or the vehicle under conditions of more light. The ideal, of course, would be for her to drop off Cricket, turn around, head home, and run into engine trouble. Unfortunately, André didn't think his untrained mojo was enough to pull off that set of coincidences, but he held the thought anyway, sharp and fine, visualizing in detail.

Such things happened, after all. More often than anyone admitted. His own childhood was a kind of anecdotal proof.

But Spivak guided the flashboat toward the lights of Novo Haven. The universe wasn't listening. Or somebody else's free will was getting in the way again. Just plain inconvenient.

She opened quite a gap as she headed inward—his craft wasn't as speedy—but André wasn't worried. It shouldn't matter, as long as he could spot her running lights and the silhouette of her boat across open water.

Traffic was light at first, and there were no street—or channel—lights on the outskirts, other than the occasional door or dock lamp. But the traffic regs ensured that Spivak couldn't just flash off and leave his slower vehicle behind. André flicked on his running lights to be legal, made up some of the distance, and slotted his scoot in behind a water taxi two vehicles back from Spivak and Cricket.

He didn't even need to follow that closely. It was obvious pretty quickly that they were going to Cricket's new flat. André hadn't been there yet, but he had the address, and it was a neighborhood he knew.

He stuck close anyway, though, the tactile rubber of the scoot's handlebars molding his palms, the engine softly vibrating his calves. He pulled a hooded sweater on one arm at a time—keeping his eye on traffic—and slipped on eye protection. Too dark for dark glass in the goggles, but they changed the line of his face a little. He skinned the beard off, which wouldn't help if neither woman was running connex, but he knew Cricket at least usually kept her skins live. She hypertexted like a mad thing in conversation, her agile brain tending to shoot off in six unrelated directions at once.

The scoot was a quiet little craft, and André was glad of that as he ducked it out of the traffic stream one bridge shy of Cricket's flat and diagonally across the channel. They unloaded quickly—a small favor from fate—and Cricket gave Spivak a one-armed hug as she climbed past her before turning away. André crushed a pang of conscience. He'd be there to console her.

It might even bring them closer together. Cricket had this unnerving tendency to flit just out of reach, as if

she were covered in something slick and transparent. You could brush against her surface, but there was never any way to get a grip.

A minute later, Spivak finished fussing with her safety belts and pulled away from the landing. Headed in the opposite direction, not back across the side channel where André lay in wait. He twisted the throttle and sent the scoot forward, pulling into traffic smoothly to avoid attracting attention.

Now his heart thumped his breastbone. The crackle of tension spidered up his back to grab across his shoulder blades, and his stomach seemed to sway in his gut like a ballast bag of wet sand. His skin crawled taut across his thighs and groin; nausea chased bitterness up the back of his throat.

This was it.

The luck was running now.

It was ninety minutes before he got his shot. Spivak stayed in the city, visited a tavern André didn't follow her into—it was on a decommissioned ferry, moored along the east side of Broadbrook, and there was no way off it that wasn't immediately obvious—and returned to her flashboat after less than forty-five minutes. It might have been the meet, but his job wasn't to stop the meet, or identify the other party. He didn't do that sort of thing.

Afterward, she headed west, out of the city on Bayside. Not back the way they had come, but this was a shorter way and she could always cut across the shipping lanes for a nearly direct route back to Kroc's house—a shortcut that would be ideal for André's purposes. Not only did lighters kick up a hell of a splash when they touched down—a splash that could turn over a small craft—but big ships sometimes didn't notice little boats, and accidents could happen.

André didn't like to smile over his work; it seemed disrespectful. But it was hard to keep this one down: maybe prayer was good for something.

He should have stuck to his demand to be paid a bonus for a twenty-four-hour closure.

The only potential problem was the top speed of his scoot. If Spivak raced home, there was no way he could keep up. But if she was cutting the lanes, she'd want to proceed cautiously, with one eye on the sky. That would be better.

And it seemed to be her plan. André hung back almost a half-kilometer, trailing Spivak until they were well clear of Novo Haven. The submerged lights of the shipping lanes glowed beneath the surface of the bay, but there was no real danger of being caught against them; they were meant to be seen from above. Only one lighter splashed down during the transect, and that one well off to the south and gently enough that by the time the wake reached André, he cut across it diagonally and noticed only what the skip and lurch did in his already nervous belly. The night was calm, still warmer than he'd expected, and the breeze from landward had faded off, leaving a few late-traveling sailboats motoring along the placid surface with their white sails hanging slack. Spivak, charting a stately progress, seemed inclined to enjoy the night. André had no problem with letting her do it. It was a point of honor with him that his targets never even knew they were in danger. Necessity did not have to be cruel.

Around the middle of the landing field, he goosed it. The caterpillar drive wasn't fast, but it was fast enough if Spivak didn't hear him coming, and quiet enough that she shouldn't. He set the autocruise, looped his hard memory, and—keeping one eye on the sky and the other on his quarry—began to assemble his weapon.

In most cases, André killed with a long-barreled sniping weapon, a combination rifle brand-named Locutor A.G. 351, for the year the design had been introduced. It adapted to either caseless standard ammunition—jacketed projectiles fired by a chemical accelerant—or crystalline slivers of hemorrhagine fired by compressed air, which dissolved in the victim's blood, causing symptoms of a cerebral aneurysm, then broke down into innocuous organic compounds within the day.

That was what he would be using tonight. He preferred a bullet; it killed instantly if you did it right, whereas the hemorrhagine left the victim sometimes as long as 120 seconds to feel fear. And that was ugly and cruel.

The other issue with the damned things was that they didn't fly far, and a fairly light cross-breeze could deflect them. He'd have to be within a hundred meters, and he wouldn't get more than a couple of shots. People tended to notice when someone pointed a rifle at them and fired poisoned needles at the back of their heads.

He'd put one needle into her back, wait for her to go down, approach with caution, and download her hard memory for Closs—as instructed, just to be sure. Then he'd capsize her boat, lose the body someplace where it shouldn't be recovered for at least a day (long enough for the hemorrhagine to break down, and for her hard memory to wipe), and pretend, in the morning, to be shocked when he heard the news.

The scoot purred forward. André extended the telescope rest and slid the weapon-mount onto the peg. He squinted through the sight, focusing down through the scope because only an idiot would connex this—though idiots did—and took a sighting.

Lucienne Spivak was sitting upright in the pilot's chair, her braid whipping behind her, her shoulders square and facing him. Easy. The only way he could miss was a divine intervention.

He measured his breathing, matched it to the regular rise and fall of the swells, tugged his glove off with his teeth, slid his finger under the trigger guard. He waited for the moment, the moment when his breath would pause naturally just as the scoot topped one of the gentle waves.

The moment came. He squeezed the trigger. A jet of cool grease-scented air stroked his cheek.

There was no sound.

The sun wasn't up yet when someone hammered on Cricket's door frame. No doorbell, no chime of connex and the name of the importunate visitor, just the thumping of fist on paramangrove paneling.

"Oh, fuck," Cricket murmured, twisting her legs into the cool air. She slept nude; she dragged the robe she kept on the bedpost over chilled skin and stumbled barefoot across a morphing rug that this morning was off-white and shaggily looped. Her toes curled as she stepped onto the decking, as if she could somehow protect the tender instep of her foot from the crawling chill. "Fuck, who is it?"

"Kroc," came the voice from the other side of the door, which answered the question of why he was knocking. No connex to ring her chimes. His voice shivered, high and sharp, almost shrill. "Is Lucienne with you?"

"Shit," Cricket said, and palmed the lock plate faster than she should have. "She left me around one hundred and one. She was going to get a drink and go home."

"She didn't make it," Kroc said, unnecessarily, because sometimes it was better making a noise. He

ducked under her arm into the flat, and she locked up behind him. “Check your messages. If she sent anything—”

It would have been to Cricket, because Jean was not connected. She tightened her robe and scrubbed her eyes on the sleeve. “One second.”

She dropped her connex at night, except for the flat security and a couple of emergency codes. If it had been really important, Lucienne would have spared the couple of extra keystrokes and sent to one of those.

But there were messages waiting. The one from André, which she hadn’t answered. One or two from connex acquaintances, people she knew from online groups. And one from Lucienne.

She looked at Jean, so he would know. His face paled under his stubble, but he didn’t speak.

Cricket opened the message.

And would have fallen if Jean had not caught her.

It was a sense-dump, night water and darkness, the smell of lubricant and the texture of the flashboat’s controls in her hands, all subsumed by a hypodermic stab to the left of her spine, the building pressure of a migraine like the handle of a knife pressed to her eye. She gasped but couldn’t make her diaphragm work. Jean’s hands on her shoulders guided her back, cushioning her until she slumped against a chair. The robe was everywhere, he must be getting an eyeful, but he caught her under the chin and made her look into his eyes. “You need EMS.”

“No,” Cricket said, a shrill spasming whine. She couldn’t lift her hand to push at him, so she thumped the heel on the deck for emphasis. She felt him jump. “No doctor. Just...a minute.”

Dying. Cricket—no, Lucienne was dying. Lucienne knew she was dying, and she knew why. And there was no time to explain.

So she showed.

The file was encoded, and Cricket’s breath came back into her with a rush as the flood of numbers washed away the swelling pain in her head. Lucienne had swamped her connex, a massive core-dump—

Corrupt. Corrupt. Corrupt.

“Shit!” The word of the day, apparently. Cricket scrambled to save, to back up, to dump what Lucienne had sent her into a protected hold. Cricket was an archinformist. She had better security protocols than most governments. And she knew how to sling data, and how to repair it—

She went after it, the bones in Jean’s wrists creaking as she clenched her hands. But the file was incomplete. And a nonholographic transmission, so what she had was a chunk of data, but not the sort of chunk that could give you a fuzzy picture of the whole. This was a linear string. Though Cricket was pretty sure she could find the key, because Lucienne would have wanted her—or Jean—to crack the code, she only had part of it.

And now was not the time for trying to patch out a crack on what she had. Not when Jean was leaning over her, moving his hands inside her slackening grip to tug her dressing gown shut over her breasts, breathing so shallowly that listening to him made *her* lungs hurt.

She let her hands loosen. He touched her shoulder and sat back. “Jean,” she said. She opened her eyes.

His, water-colored behind his rimless glasses, looked back.

He sighed, short and sharp. “No.”

She put a hand down and picked herself off the floor. She’d bruised her shoulders on the chair. When she extended her hand to pull Jean off his knees, the stretch of muscle made her wince. “I—”

“It’s not your fault.” Abruptly, preemptive.

“It had to be André.”

“It’s still not your fault.” He straightened, fist pressed into his side like a runner with a stitch. “His responsibility. Did she...send you anything else?”

“Part of a file.” She swallowed. “It was coded. The connex cut off.”

“Shit.” With exactly the same inflection she’d said it, too. Her smile hurt more than frowning had. He opened his mouth, looked at her, shut it.

She couldn’t stand the look on his face, the wary softness of it. Jean Gris should never look so unguarded. “You’re not even going to recite the stupid parable about the snake at me, are you?”

He snorted, a pained laugh that didn’t open his mouth. “No.” And then a pause. “He’s got the knack, doesn’t he?”

“Could he have got past what you hung on Lucienne if he didn’t?”

Untrained, unassisted. Jean shook his head. Cricket’s heart twisted in her chest.

Nobody’d ever loved her like that. “Do you think you can—”...*save him...fix him*. She didn’t even know the word she wanted.

Jean shrugged. Not a dismissal. A *maybe*. Even now. “I’ve known men as bad, turned out better.” Jean’s brand of revenge didn’t run to murder. “Once you send me that file, I’ll let you out of it. I know you didn’t want to be involved.”

“In what you and Lucienne were doing?”

He nodded. Even here, it didn’t pay to be too specific.

“Actually,” Cricket said, balling her hands in the pockets of her robe, “I was kind of changing my mind.”

Sitting at the kitchen table, they drank a great deal of tea. Cricket hunched over her mug, sipping distractedly, while Jean filled and refilled it. “So tell me about André,” he said, when her fingers were no longer clenched so tightly on the cup that they whitened at the edges.

Her eyes were red, the lid-edges slick inside the lashes when she looked up. “What do you need?”

“Why does he want to conjure so bad?” She opened her mouth a little too fast, and Jean held up his hand. “Not the facile answer, please. You’re an archinformist”—she laughed—“don’t tell me you didn’t pull his records back to first grade before you got involved with him.”

The corner of her mouth quirked. Touché. “He’d never tell you. He’s got a sister he can’t stand. Left

home in his teens, after his older brother got killed in a gang fight and he didn't pass evaluation for Exigency Corps training."

"So he wanted to be a god-botherer. He's got the talent—"

"His mother was a conjure." She pushed the cup away with her fingertips. Jean felt it scrape through the table and lifted his hands. "His sister is, too. He doesn't talk about them. I can only speculate..."

"So? Speculate."

She snatched the teacup and drained it. "I think he blames his mom for... He had a brother. A year older. Honoré. A tough boy, ran with a bad crowd. And whether their mom could actually conjure or not, she couldn't keep Honoré home."

"Or André from running with him." Jean lifted the pot. She held her hand over her cup.

"Or keep Honoré alive," Cricket said. "André got pretty badly beaten up around the same time. I think he blames his mother and sister for, you know." She waved at the ceiling.

"Not keeping Honoré alive?"

"Sure. So he tried to get into the Corps, and they wouldn't take him because of his family background. And he wants nothing to do with Zoë—she's his sister. She's a conjure, too."

"Any good?"

Cricket shrugged. "Are any of them? I mean, other than you?"

"There's a few," Jean allowed. He cleared his throat. "So André grew up a killer instead."

Changing her mind, Cricket reached for the teapot after all. "So it would seem."

The morning was hotter, humid, and bright. André was intent enough on his interface that he jumped when Maryanne bumped the door open with her hip, though he didn't look up until she set a tin tray on the steel edge of his desk. The napkin-covered outline of an antique revolver lay beside the coffeepot, the china cup, and a doughnut on the gold-rimmed plate.

Wordlessly, stiff-backed, Maryanne turned on a pointed shoe and left him staring at the thing. He reached out and brushed the napkin aside, then checked the load. One bullet.

Maryanne let the door snap shut behind her audibly. She had to give it an extra little push to get that click, and André read the message in it. Maryanne was his cousin, as well as his employee. Normally, she kept her opinions to herself, and her work for him met both their needs. He got to give something back to his family, and in return got help he could trust.

But Maryanne lived with André's older sister, Zoë, a charlatan conjurer like their mother, and—

There were family differences. Leave it at that.

He set the revolver aside. There was a real paper envelope underneath, his name in actual handwriting, actual ink. *M~ A. Deschênes*.

Shit, he thought. And also, *at last*.

This was more usually a graduation test, as he understood it. A message as plain as the gun: you are playing in the big leagues now. He spun the cylinder, closing his eyes while he listened to it whirl, picturing the chamber with the single cartridge dropping to the bottom, away from the hammer, pausing there as the cylinder ratcheted to a halt.

If Kroc knew about Spivak, the weapon was bait. The fix was in, this was no test, and accepting the challenge would mean his death. If Kroc didn't know—if Cricket had spoken to him about André—then this was André's chance. He might be able to affect the spin of the cylinder. He might just—get lucky.

Unlike the cat in the box, he did *not* know if he was dead.

The gun might be archaic, but the antitampering lock was not. The diamond-tipped drill *zinged* into metal as the cylinder stopped. The weapon shuddered as the bolt slipped home, a delicate warble alerting him to the activation of the transmitter. Kroc would know if he cheated.

The question being asked had a yes or no answer. Did he want to conjure enough to die for it?

André slid the room-temperature barrel into his mouth, tasting gun oil, sleek and unpleasantly aromatic. He pictured *misfire*. He pictured a misaligned chamber, a hammer bent enough to miss contacting the primer. A revolver was a primitive machine, an effective machine. Not much could go wrong.

He was dead or he wasn't. A closed box. *About time*, he thought, and opened his eyes for one long look at the screen across from his desk, the one that showed the endless blue expanse of bay, the contrail of another lighter towing its string-of-pearls cargo pods toward the spaceport after splashdown. Up and down, up and down, never getting anywhere.

The wake hit; his office rose and dropped, the stylus rolling across his interface stopped by the lip on the desk.

His finger convulsed.

It was the best damned coffee André had ever tasted.

He gulped the first cup in three painful, searing swallows, then poured another and soaked broken bites of doughnut. It was a ritual, a discipline, and he didn't pick up the envelope until he'd tossed back the crumb-laden dregs and poured himself a third cup, oily and black. By then, his hands were shaking too badly to drink and *machismo* was satisfied, so he set it aside and picked up the envelope in its stead.

Hand-addressed, as he'd noticed. The writing was smooth and controlled, not jerky the way most people's was when they were forced to use archaic tools. He knew before he opened it that the note inside, like the envelope, would be real paper, dead trees and cloth fiber, rather than epaper. There would be no data trail.

André read over the address and the invitation and drank his third cup of coffee while memorizing both. Wet memory, not hard.

No etrails.

The fourth cup of coffee was the last one in the pot. It steamed thickly into the humid air while André tapped the last few droplets free and then unscrewed the element from the bottom of the pot. It wasn't hot enough to glow when he laid the insulated cap down on the tray, but it was hot enough to blacken paper, and—when he bent forward and blew softly on the thin ember—to set it brilliantly aflame.

The invitation burned the envelope, and both scorched André's fingertips before he dropped them in the recycler and poured half the last cup of coffee on top. What remained was bitter, and there were grounds in it. André could afford the real, imported bean. Not a stunning expense—coffee went through a transmitter just fine—but supplies were limited and that made it a not insignificant one.

He savored those last swallows. Then he stood, and set the cup aside on the painted tin tray, and summoned his weapons and his coat. He walked past Maryanne on his way out; she caught his wrist so he turned and met her gaze. She shook her head so her earrings rattled on her earpiece, lips pressed tight, conservative bleached dreadlocks caught back in a bun.

"Thank God," she said, and squeezed tight enough to leave nail cuts in his flesh before he pulled back. The half-moon marks blanched, then reddened on pale gold skin inside his wrist—so much lighter than his scarred knuckles, than the back of his arm.

"Nothing to do with God," he answered, and patted her on the shoulder, feeling her bones shift as she shrugged, before he moved away.

"I'm glad you survived Kroc's invitation, André. And by the way, I quit." She smoothed her hair, and then invoked the unholy, the name of André's sister. "I have to live with Zoë."

André parked his scoot in front of Jean Kroc's minifab and paused at the bottom of the floating dock, looking around. He wasn't surprised to see Cricket sitting spread-kneed on the second step, shucking peas into a bucket set between her sandals. She looked up when he crunched up the seashell-and-broken-plascrete path.

She never changed. Her eyes were still the brown of weak tea or swamp water, and you could see the flecks in them when you got close enough, like loam or bits of leaf. She was skinny and not too tall, blue veins visible under the skin of her throat. Her fine black hair rat-tailed in the humid heat.

She stood up, bucket swinging, colander full of peas set aside on the steps. "Jean's waiting for you."

"You know," André said, before he pocketed his shades, wiped the sweat off his temples, and stole a kiss, "you can buy those."

"Taste better if you grow them yourself," she answered, and grabbed a fistful of beard to kiss him back. Her shoulders were tense under the light-colored blouse, though, and her back hunched as if she fought the urge to cringe.

He didn't withdraw until she'd smoothed one hand across his bald scarred scalp. "Oh, I have time to do that search for you tomorrow if you still need it."

"No," he said, shifting his weight. "I took care of it myself."

A tight smile and a small nod. "Power down, André. No devices inside."

He blinked. "All I've got is a headset. You know—"

"Power *down*." She bent over enough to pick up the colander and balanced it inside the bucket, and André didn't brush against those promising haunches. This time. "Nothing that happens in Jean's house enters a data hold."

She swung the bucket into his hand. He took it reflexively, then watched her ass sway up the steps. She

paused with her hand on the door, eyebrows raised as she glanced over her shoulder. He sighed and rolled his eyes skyward, where a sticky haze did nothing to cut the heat, and toggled his headset off.

The world went flat. Isotherms, stock ticker, weather report, chat group, reality skins dropped off his display, leaving his head and his vision curiously empty. Even in the mornings, when he ran, he wasn't this naked.

As if it were a security blanket, he kept the sense augment on. Not even Jean could complain about that. "You want my hardware, baby?"

"No," said Cricket. "Jean Gris isn't worried about your guns."

The body was tangled in the cables, halfway down.

And every time Gourami let the nictitating membranes flicker across se eyes, se remembered. So Gourami tapped the slate on the bar beside se cup to summon another glass of poison, and drew webbed fingery feet up in the rung of the humen-type stool where they wouldn't get stepped on, balancing awkwardly with knees drawn up to either side of se shoulders.

Gourami was the only person in the tavern. Not that persons were forbidden to enter humen taverns, but generally they kept to themselves, slept wet, stayed low. The contractors didn't like it if the persons caused trouble. And a lot of humen didn't care to take the time to understand, to parse a slate or study hand gestures.

But the people's bars weren't open yet; everybody was still on shift. And Gourami had badly, badly needed a drink.

Because the body had been tangled in the cables, halfway down, and none of the humen on the tender had been particularly concerned. They'd given Gourami the rest of the day off when se'd brought it up—all limp dangling and waterlogged mammal flesh. But what se'd seen cutting across the green water toward the anchor platform wasn't a humen hearse or ambulance, but a black-windowed limousine—

The bartender slid a clean glass of cold green tea across the bar and retrieved the dirty one. It wasn't as poisonous to people's physiology as alcohol, but had enough of a sting to make one woozy—a pleasant recreational toxin rather than a life-threatening one.

The humen had brought all sorts of interesting things.

Including disrespect for their dead.

Gourami nursed the tea, cupping the humen-shaped drinking vessel between spidery handfingers, the webs tucked together so they wouldn't cling to the glass. Se rolled the fluid around se mouth, pushing it back and forth through the same fluted cartilaginous plates used for straining water weed and insects from the marshes, if one did not have soup.

It made gums and tongue and palate numb.

Se swallowed and became aware of a shadow darkening the sun-warmth that dappled se back. Gourami disentangled handfingers from the glass and turned, nictitating for a better view. A human stood there, tall and male, by the ringlets of fur on his face. He dropped his hand on Gourami's shoulder, the dry mammal warmth chafing through se protective mucous gloss.

Gourami pulled back automatically.

—*Stand up*, the human mouthed. *Stand up, frog*.

Lips moved, breath brushed across Gourami's face. Se heard nothing but squeaks and rumbles, and could not have duplicated them to save se life. The frequency of humen voices was all wrong. But se could lipread much humen speech from se job as liaison. And humen body language, too, after a fashion.

Se was in grave trouble.

Gourami could have run; could have fought, exploded off the bar stool and barreled through the big human that stood making exaggerated lip movements and calling se "Froggie." The humen who weren't contractors always said they couldn't tell one person from another.

Except the human was making eye contact, was making physical contact, and while Gourami knew that humen did that to intimidate, between the tea and the endorphins released by the kinesthetic signals, se was too relaxed to initiate violent movement.

—*Stand up!* The human shaped again, and then made some other short noises and tossed his head, shaking shaggy mud-brown fur out in every direction. Then he reached for Gourami's slate, grabbing with frustration.

But Gourami did not wish to relinquish it, and so, with the eye and hand contact broken, stood.

The human stepped back a pace, fumbling at his belt. But then Gourami wobbled—standing at full extension required balance, and after...several...helpings of poison, se had little left—and sank back.

Se toefingers curled on the hard dry floor, contracting automatically to protect the delicate webs, but still seeking purchase. The bar rose on the swell of a taxiing lighter. Gourami could have run, again, but still fumbled with the slate, hoping to explain or to obtain an explanation of the human's odd behavior, when the human managed to slip the shocker from his belt and touch it to the base of Gourami's skull, above the retracted neck, behind the ear membrane.

Nobody intervened. It was a humen bar.

4

IF CRICKET HAD A MAN, IT WOULD BE ANDRÉ DESCHÊNES. But she didn't. And after last night, she was doubly glad. She hadn't wanted a man before and she didn't want one now. They had both been happier with the sort of halfway state in which—*things*—stood, the one where nobody owned either one of them.

And now there was Lucienne.

She knew what he'd say if she asked him. It was business, and he didn't talk about business.

She wondered if she would ever forgive him. Even if Jean was right. She wondered if she would ever *want* to forgive. So she let her fingertips brush his palm when she relieved him of the bucket, and smiled back when he smiled, white teeth flashing in the dim, damp entrylock of the minifab, and felt mostly like she'd swallowed ice. There was more plascrete underfoot, badly poured so her sandals scuffed on the ripples, and the bolts holding the structure's shell to the slab around the margin protruded enough to tear careless toenails off. No smart matter here, no computronium, nothing electronic at all.

André blinked heavily in the darkness, his eyes adjusting without the help from his headset. Cricket nibbled her lip to stop the frown, even if he probably wouldn't have seen it, and walked past him to the inner door. She knew her way around in the dark.

The main room of the minifab had a galley kitchen in the back corner, just where your line of sight would land as you came in the lock. The walls had a curious texture under the paint that hid the extruded surface. Somebody—Jean Kroc, as far as Cricket knew—had papered over them in layers, tearing the sheets into ragged bits, so the edges left abstract patterns under saturated blues and greens and oranges and yellows. The colors were bold but not glaring, and the overall effect was sunny, reinforced by braided rag rugs softening the plum-colored plascrete floor.

In addition to the warm decor, the room was full of light. Jean had torched curved windows in the minifab shell and fixed clear poly over them expediently, by cutting the sheets larger than the windows and running a torch around the edges so the bubbled scars made a weld. With Cricket's help, Lucienne had sunk hooks and hung curtains across the scorched bits; it looked pretty good.

"Shoes," Cricket said, once there was enough light for André to see his feet. She toed out of her sandals and kicked them back into the entry. After a moment, André copied her, though she noticed him craning his neck as if searching for signs of either Jean or a flicker stage-set of a conjure man's workshop.

He caught her looking, and tipped his head. "I was expecting—"

"—stuffed alligators," Cricket agreed. "Lucienne gave them all to Planetary Relief. Have a seat, André. I'll get the tea."

"Where's Kroc?" He did as she said, though, and settled his long body into a blue-cushioned basket chair that creaked under his weight. When he leaned forward to lock his hand around his wrist, hugging his knees, his red brocade fogjacket strained over muscular shoulders. He'd shut down the autofit, too.

She kissed the top of his head as she went past, a calculated reward for following orders, and made sure she held the muddy bottom of the bucket clear of both the upholstery and his clothes. "He'll be inside in a minute," she said, as she dropped the bucket in the sink. "He knows you're here."

The plumbing was old-fashioned, too. She had to turn a knob to pull water from the pipes. She slid a copper kettle under the stream and started the gas fire while it filled. Water droplets sizzled when she set the kettle on the burner.

She stretched on tiptoe over the stove to pull down pottery cups—teal and rose, cheerful and antiquated as everything else in the 'fab—and let them clink on the tile counter. The silence that followed lasted until the water boiled, and then André cleared his throat again.

"Did you put a word in for me, Cricket?"

She turned off the stove and came back to him, balancing two cups in hands damp from washing the dirt and pea-pod strings from under her nails. She slid André one cup and plumped down on a cushion on the floor, elevating her own mug until she was settled so it wouldn't spill. "Who else would have done it?"

"Good." He sipped the tea. "Glad I can count on you."

Cricket smiled around the rim of her cup. She had loved how André could never quite meet her eyes when she glanced up at him through her lashes. It made her feel powerful. Now it made her feel lied to. "You should come by more often," she said. "You haven't seen where I sleep now."

"I thought you might be with Kroc, too."

“I haven’t got a man,” she said. And might have said more, but she heard slapping footsteps beyond the door beside the galley and twisted where she sat to catch Jean Kroc’s eye as he entered. He was barefoot, his rinsed toes leaving damp pad-prints on the plascrete. He dried his hands on his shorts and smiled. He was a rosy, sallow, middle-aged man whose round spectacles sat unevenly on crooked ears, half-concealing slight epicanthic folds that gave his eyes an Earthasian cast. Cricket knew one of his grandmothers had been Korean, and that was probably also where he got the high forehead that shone with sweat on either side of a widow’s peak. A short grizzled beard softened his gaunt cheeks and the worn line of his jaw, but that wasn’t why they called him *Jean Gray*.

He half-nodded to Cricket and André, then fetched another mug down from over the stove. Jean Kroc wasn’t as tall or as broad as André, but he didn’t have to stand on tiptoe to reach as Cricket did. “You lived,” he said with his back to Cricket and André both. “Good, that’s good.”

“I lived,” André answered. He finished his tea in three gulps; it was still hot enough that steam came out with his breath when he continued. “So, Jean Gris. Who is it that you would like for me to kill?”

Gourami woke dry and aching. The surface she lay on was spongy without being soft, a kind of foam mat like the ones the humen used under their offspring’s climbing apparatus. The adults mostly seemed landbound, but the offspring were as light and agile as mossgliders, without the vestigial wings—

Gourami curled handfingers over eyes and squinched them tight, trying to chase out random thoughts for something a little more presently useful. She neck hurt, fizzing pain like a chemical burn, and she remembered the shocker and the hand on the shoulder. She flinched, and then gingerly slid fingers around the back of her skull in order to check the burn.

The flesh felt crusted and cracked, two finger-pad-size sores that were moist in the middle but dry at the edges. She dabbed skin mucous over the wounds and the pain eased at once, leaving only lingering tenderness and a ringing in her skull like the vibrations from an outboard motor.

She sat upright, blinking in the darkness. If her eyes had been going to adapt, they would have by now, which meant there was very little light. And her slate was missing, along with the web-rig, rigging kit, and passcode stick.

No way to call for help.

She rolled belly-down, pressing soft-tacky skin to the mat, and laid jaw to floor. Bone conduction might tell more—like whether the structure in which she was trapped was a floating one or rested on land.

She held a breath, and listened.

Waves. Waves slapping against the hull, and the thrum of engines attenuated by water. And voices, people voices, which could be carrying ten or a dozen humen miles. They spoke of commonplaces: work and eggings, food and education. Gourami’s handfingers twitched toward them spastically.

She pushed up, unmolding from the mat. The mat was bad; it was not helpful. She could not send signals ringing through the water by tapping on the decking, for example, even if she had something with which to tap.

The wounds itched. She resealed them and set about exploring the prison in a crouch, sweeping long arms through the darkness, feeling for obstacles. She touched nothing. Gourami clicked tongue against palate to generate saliva, and dragged each webbed hand across the tongue in turn. Sticky saliva adhered to the

webs, mingling in strings with the mucous; se chafed the palms and fingerpads together, licking dry eyes in concentration. The chemical reaction was fast and a moment later se palms began to glow with blue-green bioluminescence.

Se lifted glowing hands in the darkness. As long as se didn't look at them directly, the light was enough for dark-adapted eyes to see.

The prison was small. There was a metal door in one wall, and the bulkheads were all metal, too. Gourami couldn't make out the color by biolum, and anyway the humen would see it differently. Their eyesight was shifted into the infrared; they could see as colors wavelengths that Gourami perceived only as heat.

Metal. The walls were metal. Which meant that the flooring under the padding was probably metal, too.

Well, that was something, then.

Se plumped down on the padded floor with knees lifted on either side of se head, smoothed more mucous—glowing now—over the wounds, extended claws from toefingers, and dug hard into the tough membrane of the mat, peeling it back.

Jefferson Greene sat back and amused himself by contemplating the humors and nature of his second-in-command. Timothy Closs did not think of himself a nice man, or even a particularly good one, but if pressed he would call himself honest. He believed in hard work, deserved rewards, and a refined form of Social Darwinism, though he didn't actually identify it as such.

He was currently furious almost beyond the capacity for rational thought, and Jefferson could tell because he was sitting quietly, all of his usual intent energy focused on the backs of his hands as if he could bore through skin and bones and the desktop interface and the decking below, and sink the whole damned office cruiser into Novo Haven Bay.

He could have been checking his tickers, instant messages, voicemail. But Jefferson knew he wasn't, because his eyes were perfectly still, his lips compressed, his fingers motionless—not shivering with nearly imperceptible commands.

Jefferson sat still for five minutes, thirty-two seconds, timed on his head's-up, and listened to Closs think. He managed not to sigh when Closs lifted his head, but the truth was that he'd been close to resorting to a pharmaceutical drip.

The expression on Closs's face provided no relief, just a clarifying rush of adrenaline. Jefferson sank his nails into the arms of his chair. "This is bad."

Closs nodded with sarcastic slowness and got up out of his chair. He was a smallish man, fit in middle age, still military in his bearing though his hair was ash gray at the temples. "We're going to have to kill it," he said.

Jefferson shuddered. He'd been hoping for a softer solution, or at least a calming euphemism. "Major"—Closs was still *the Major*, though he hadn't seen military service in twenty standard years his body-time. Which came out to 150 or so nonrelativistic since he'd become attached to the Colonial Rim Company, Greene's World, and associated territories—"there's got to be another way."

Jefferson wasn't the Greene that Greene's World was named after, but rather the grandson of the famous explorer. Those were big shoes to fill: by Novo Haven standards, the biggest. He forced himself to meet

Closs's gaze when Closs turned to stare at him.

"Your position here rests on keeping the stream of omelite coming. No tanglestone, no Slide. No Slide, no connex. No Rim, no Core, no nothing, except a scatter of planets hundreds of years of travel time apart. Nobody's going to let the Roman Empire fall, Jefferson, because you didn't have the balls to do what you have to do. Make no mistake, this is your balls-up. If you'd just let the frog *go*, there would have been nothing to explain except a drowning. Now that you've *grabbed* the poor creature, what did you expect us to do with it?"

Closs paced back and forth in front of the curved windows overlooking the bay, the spaceport, and the sparse ranks of drill platforms marching out to sea beyond. Jefferson relaxed slightly: a pacing Closs was a Closs with a plan. "Not only have you given it a better story to tell and a reason to tell it," Closs continued, "but if it can ever prove it was detained, you've validated its word. I already have ranid terrorism to contend with, reformers and Greens picketing my drill platforms, omelite and petroleum quotas to meet—"

"It's a fucking ranid," Jefferson replied, fiddling his ring, not bothering to rise. Omelite was a proprietary secret; as far as most of the galaxy was concerned, there were no natural sources of entangled pairs. The primary mission of the Greene's World Charter Trade Company was classified. "It doesn't even know the *word* tanglestone, much less what it's mining. And it brought up the body. There hasn't been time for the hard memory to dump yet, and Security will download whatever's in there."

"Which at best will prove her a criminal."

"And at worst will prove somebody killed her, and maybe uncork the thing you wanted her dealt with to cork in the first place. Can we talk about how close we are to a native uprising right this second, Tim?"

Closs lifted an eyebrow at him, and for a moment Jefferson thought he'd won the round. None of his employees gave him half the trouble Closs did. But then, Closs wasn't exactly an employee, though he controlled a smaller percentage of the Greene's World Rim Charter Trade Company than Jefferson did. Jefferson cleared his throat. "I thought we could question it, find out how much it knew."

"More now than it did this morning, that's for damned sure."

Jefferson took a breath. Losing his temper with Closs wouldn't get him anything either, except Closs's scorn. "Who the hell is it going to talk to? The local media?"

Which was Rim-owned. Like Security. And easier, in general, to control. There were idealists in Security. Far more of them, ironically, than in Com. A good thing there was no chance of it getting in touch with Earth; the press *there* liked to bring down governments.

Closs shook his head. He put his back to the glass and folded his hands. "It'll have to be killed."

Jefferson clambered from his chair, finally, to face Closs on his feet. "I hope you don't think—"

"Don't worry," Closs answered, turning back to his desk, giving Jefferson his shoulder with an air of finality that both relieved and infuriated. "I wouldn't ask. You figure out what we're going to do about getting whatever was in Spivak's hard memory away from Security, would you?"

"I know who to assign," Jefferson said, thinking of Dayvid Kountché. Who was both ambitious and discreet.

“You mistake me, André.” Jean Kroc leaned against the counter with a mug cupped in his right hand and the still-hot kettle by his left. Half-moons of dirt darkened his fingernails, and he bowed his face over the steam, breathing deeply with closed eyes. “More tea?”

André got up and brought his cup to Kroc. The tea-making involved Kroc dumping the old teabag in the sink, fishing a new one from the box, and adding it to the cup in advance of water—which he reheated to boiling before he poured. It was like watching a medieval alchemist at work.

“You don’t want someone killed?” André asked. Just to be clear, because sometimes people didn’t want to come right out and say it. “Then what did you want me for?”

Kroc returned the pottery cup to him and gestured him back to the padded wicker chair. “I heard you were lucky,” Kroc said, picking up his own mug again. “You proved it today. I also heard you wanted to learn the mojo, sing gris gris. You want to be a conjure man, André Deschênes? Bend the world to your will?”

“You make it sound like magic,” André answered.

Kroc’s eyes were a flat pale color under his gray-laced brows. His spectacles caught the light in level reflections when he turned his face toward the window, but then he’d look back at André directly and André would almost feel his gaze, like a pin scratched over his skin. It was peculiarly intense, focusing; he wondered if there was something in the tea, something his wetware couldn’t have caught because he’d powered down.

There were easier ways to kill him. Though, who knew what a conjure man thought an initiation was supposed to look like?

If that was what this was.

André set his mug on the glass-topped wicker table.

“It’s not magic.” Kroc spoke suddenly, breaking the stretched silence, dismissing the comment with a flip of his hand. “It’s not luck either, though luck helps prove you can be taught. What it is”—he grinned, showing tea-stained teeth, and tapped the side of his nose with a finger—“is a useful manipulation of the observer effect. So you can change the world if you just think at it right.”

Kroc drank his tea; André folded his hands in his lap. Cricket crossed the ’fab silently and settled onto the wicker lounge, drawing her bare feet up under her ass and curling into the corner like a cat.

“That’s why some people are so spectacularly *unlucky*, too, isn’t it?” Kroc asked, glancing sideways to fix his gaze on her.

“Hmm?” She raised her eyes dreamily. André recognized the role. No one ever saw the real Cricket Earl Murphy. Nobody even knew her real name. “Oh, right, Jean. Yes, I’d say you’re right.” She didn’t smile, studying André over her tea.

André smiled. “So you can teach what I want to learn. How do I earn the teaching, M~ Kroc, if you don’t want me for my skills?”

“I didn’t say that.” Kroc moved now, finally, crossing the rugs to sit on the floor beside Cricket’s lounge. He folded his legs and settled straight down. “I’d like to put you on retainer, as it were.”

André had already set his cup down, so he had nothing to divest himself of when he stood. “I don’t take open contracts,” he said. “I know what I’m doing when I’m going in. That’s not negotiable.”

But Kroc didn't hasten to his feet or hurry to smooth things over. He emptied his hands and laced his fingers together. "M~ Deschênes," Jean Kroc said, tipping his head back to look André in the face, "did you know that the model of wet-dry scoot you use has a small, but deadly, history of explosion following a hydrogen leak? No? Three instances, I think, on the five worlds where they're in service. Freak accidents happen."

André's fingertips grew cold. "You're *not* claiming responsibility for those."

"André—" Cricket said. She bit her lip, though, and gestured to Kroc, who appeared to be waiting politely for her comment. He shrugged and continued.

"Of course not. Nor would I be responsible, you see, if there were a similar freak accident here in Novo Haven. But the point I'm making is that I certainly don't need your assistance to *kill* people. If I wanted to engage in such a problematic undertaking."

"So what do you want?" André didn't sit, but he didn't step away from the chair either.

"Information."

"I don't talk about my clients."

"That's all right," Jean Kroc said. "I don't care about your clients. But I care about the Colonial Rim Company—are they hiring out their wet work now?—and I know you have ways of finding things out."

Cricket leaned forward, her lower lip still pinched between her teeth. She was staring at André, willing him toward some decision, some course of action, but she didn't speak.

André looked from her water-brown eyes to Kroc's flat blue-gray ones. He sat down in the wicker chair, and let it creak under his weight. He could refuse to answer—as good as an admission that he'd worked for Rim, and a violation of confidentiality in itself—but there was a threat in what Kroc was saying. *He can't know about Spivak. If he knew about Spivak, I'd be dead.*

Wouldn't he?

God-botherers were licensed and controlled for good reason. Unchecked coincidence could break *planets* apart—and had nearly done so on Patience.

He had other sources of information. But—

"I can't make these promises."

"I will never ask you to do what you find...unethical," Jean said. "A handshake contract. You can walk away any time."

André picked up the tea again, blew across it, drank. Something to steady his hands. An elaborate game of cat and mouse? He swallowed the fluid: sweet, warm, full-bodied.

How badly did he want this?

Cricket was looking at him, a little smile curving the corners of her mouth. She was not the sort of woman who would lay down an ultimatum. She was not the sort of woman who said, "Either you change or I go." She was the sort of woman who watched until she didn't like what she saw anymore, and *then* she went. No games, not with somebody like her. No manipulation.

"Teach me," André said.

Kroc smiled. “I hope you don’t have anywhere to be for the next few hours.”

Gourami in se captivity could not see the swift failure of the equatorial twilight. But se felt it in the shift of the air, the humidity, the coolness from the ventilation ducts—and knew the wait would now not be long. It must not be long; se was drying, laid long on the floor, lungs heaving with the effort of respiring when the skin was too parched to exchange gases.

Se closed se eyes to concentrate on the work of staying alive, thinking, *they will be coming*. As night fell, clouds would coalesce over the mining platforms, in air saturated by steam from the seawater used to cool the drills. They would spread, water first precipitating from the atmosphere into visible vapor and then precipitating in truth, falling in fat warm blobs to the accompaniment of crackling thunder. It was good, a good omen; Gourami did not think that the humen’s wet eyes—sonar, especially—would work well with ripples of sound-interference everywhere.

The rescuers came at sunset. Gourami did not hear them, did not know they had arrived until there was a hiss and sizzle in the darkness, the reek of scorching insulation. Se nictitated when the light spilled through the opening crack, but it still took moments to adapt. Se blinked, dazzled, and pressed hand-pads to eyes until pupils could contract.

After a moment, the pressure of light eased and se could no longer see hand bones. Se pushed up to stand, licking eyes over nictitating membranes. In the doorway stood a hand of people, all four of them naked of identifying patches, wearing only belts of canvas strapping from which to hang their tools. They carried no slates, no locators; nothing that might be used to identify them. Gourami could not tell if they were coolies or savages, even, to use the humen terms. But the light behind wasn’t bright enough to silhouette, and when the smallest person turned sideways Gourami could see skin dyed an even, artificial green to hide the mottles.

The smallest person made the scrape and click of Gourami’s own-name, with a question-trill. The smallest person was Caetei.

—*Here*, Gourami answered, staggering forward. Se did not add the croak-trill-scrape of the smallest person’s own-name. The aliens might recognize se real name if they listened through their devices.

Caetei wrapped handfingers around Gourami’s wrist and pulled se forward. Se had been dry too long; se felt dizzy, cracked, and se mucous was pasty. But the grasp gave se strength, and se answered Caetei’s unspoken command. Triggered by the touch, endorphins helped. Gourami was docile, and Caetei’s desire was that se follow.

Se would follow until se flippers wore to nubs.

There were humen here and there in the corridors, on the deck, each one trussed and glaring. Gourami waddled past, moving only because Caetei pulled se and se must do what touch commanded. The unmottled green backs were curiously anonymous. Unless their owners spoke, Gourami could not identify them—though the long one might be Tetra, egg-mate of one of Gourami’s exoparents, related by blood rather than by water.

That one cross-wired a final door lock, and the little party came out in starlight on a battered-looking barge that was quite at odds with the gleaming modern interior. There were more persons here, two hands of them, and while Gourami leaned on Caetei, the rangy person passed the tool se had used to cross-wire the door into se toefingers and used its waterproofed handle to pound on the deck.

From other hatchways, persons scrambled, some of them hopping on all fours in their haste. Some were pear-shaped, their pouches full of seawater and nutrition for eggings still too small and presentient to swim free. Three hands, five—Gourami, dizzy, could not count them as Caetei dragged se toward the railing. Some of the persons dragged bound humen, lowered dinghies over the sides of the barge. They all moved with great haste, efficiently, in teams.

Se could not clamber over; se feet would not lift high enough to hook the bottom railing. But Caetei insisted, leaning in to make eye contact, and from that demand Gourami drew the strength to climb.

Still, if it had not been for Caetei's hands curled under Gourami's armpits, lifting, se would have ended slumped, halfway over the rail. Caetei wrapped bony fingers around Gourami's ankles. Se crouched and heaved, lifting with the powerful muscles of thigh and haunch. Gourami slithered overboard, bruising pelvis and knees on the rail. And then se was falling, uncontrolled, tumbling, and then the warm water smacked se hard along the left side, bruising webs between reaching toefingers, stinging the outflung arm. A pop as a handfinger dislocated, pain that coiled se arm like jelly-colony sting. Se shocked alert, wet now, warm in the shallow water of the bay. Se gasped, wetting throat and sinuses, skin prickling as toxins and foreign matter adhered to drying mucous washed away. The burn-wound seared, dazzled, numbed.

Se was wet again.

Se breathed deep, oxygenating, feeling mottles flush and go violet. The itching tightness eased. Mucous flowed freely, rehydrated, and Gourami croaked in relieved pleasure as Caetei and the disguised others began to splash into the bay. —*Hurry*, Caetei thrummed into the water. —*We must be away when the barge sinks*.

Se words caressed Gourami's flanks. —*Sinks?*

—*Hippolytae mined it with a boring charge. It will sink; we must be clear. Can you swim?*

Gourami's damaged handfinger delivered a nauseous spike of pain when se tried to paddle, and so se tucked arms to chest and kicked experimentally. Se glided forward, water sluicing along a streamlined form. The course was unpredictable, with only one hand to steer with, but speed was not impaired.

—*I can swim*, Gourami answered. —*Caetei*—

—*Then swim*, the other interrupted. —*Talk when we're away from the bomb*.

—*But what about the humen on the barge?* Se'd seen some lowered into the rubber boats. But had they all gotten off? Would the boats withstand a nearby explosion? They drowned in water, humen. Faster, much faster, than Gourami would drown in either water or dry air. They could not skin-breathe; they had not even rudimentary gills.

Se made a small sound of protest. Caetei did not answer, though se must have felt the noise. Gourami kicked, feeling green bodies stirring the water alongside, and held peace.

For now.

Later, there would be words. Words with a human Gourami thought se could trust. Because if the humen slew their own and gave no respect to the passing, then that was ill. But if they hurt or killed persons, and persons hurt or killed humen—

—then that was war.

Red light slicked Jean Kroc's windows before those inside felt the shock or heard the explosion. André was moving before he had time to hope it was ridiculous, cold tea scattering from the mug he kicked over, his foot just missing the remains of supper on his plate. He clotheslined Cricket as she lurched to her feet. She folded around his arm and he twisted, pressing her into his chest. He fell underneath her, rolled to cover her with his body, tucking her face against his throat. She shoved his chest with both hands. "Oaf!"

André pressed her down.

Kroc rose from his chair. Wiry, a little bowlegged, most of his weight rested on the outside edges of his feet. "It's not close enough," he said; the floor lurched up and thumped André in the knees and elbows on the fourth syllable. Cricket grunted against his chest. He lifted his chest and hips; she wriggled free, palm on his shoulder, elbow pressing his upper arm, and eeled away.

The atmospheric shock wave hit a moment later, the poly groaning as André's ears popped, the sound a thud like a crushed drum. Cricket had one knee down, one palm flat. She squeaked like something stepped-on and clapped her hands to the sides of her head. André knelt, staring at Kroc. "It could have been a nuke."

"My eyes haven't melted." Kroc slipped his hands under Cricket's armpits and pulled her to her feet, then scrubbed palms and fingers on his shorts. He walked to the window, padding over rag rug and plascrete. The red glare of the explosion had faded, but firelight limned Kroc's cheek and temple as he pressed his face to the window.

"Lighter crash?"

"Looks like a barge exploded on the bay," Kroc said. "It's burning to the water." He put his back to it. "Hell of a thing. You know, there was just one the other night. Getting to be a habit."

André pushed to a crouch. His back protested. He'd skinned a knee. "Cricket, you all right?"

Her lip curled, but whatever she'd been about to say, she thought better of it and looked down. "Thanks," she said. "Although if it had been a nuke, it wouldn't have helped."

André shrugged around his grin. "You don't think I'm radiation-proof?" He turned to Kroc, caught a glimpse of the tiny, burning shape a mile or so out on the water. "Shit—"

A thumping sound was rescue craft, their lights playing over the water. There couldn't have been much warning. André expected fruitless sweeps, perhaps doll-small figures sliding in harness to pluck bodies from the water. But as he watched they dropped rescue harnesses, hauled up kicking women or men.

It was strange, seeing it all through a chunk of clear plastic, barely augmented, unskinned. It was flat, without hyperlinks. He couldn't zoom. He couldn't access histories or burn context.

Just what was out there, reality primitive as an oil painting. Even with the augments, he hadn't seen the world this way since his teens. Since he got out of his mom's house and started making some real money.

And this was how Kroc lived all the time?

André wet his lips with his tongue. He didn't know quite what he'd say, but he thought he'd find out when it got out of his mouth.

Whatever it was going to be, he never heard it; there was a thumping at the door and he startled. Kroc brushed past him, one hand steadying André's shoulder, and strode to the door. "I'm not feeding

anybody else,” Cricket called over the noise of the kettle boiling.

The entry was dark. André couldn't see what security measures Kroc took, but it was a minute before he opened the door. When he did, he jerked it abruptly. What André saw past him was not human, with its teardrop-shaped body, thick indistinguishable neck smoothing to sloped shoulders, and thick-thighed, crooked legs. The ravid steadied itself on the doorframe, the other knobby forelimb akimbo and firelight lending unnaturally green skin a mucilaginous shine. It crouched between its knees, eyes tilted up at Kroc, and darted hand-gestures this way and that. It wore only a woven belt, no slate and no pass-tags. Not an employee of Rim, then. A wild froggie, a savage. André tensed, though he couldn't make out a weapon.

Kroc stepped back. “André,” he said without turning his head, “go home.”

André glanced over his shoulder at Cricket. She did not look up from her fussing by the cooker. “By water, now?”

The scooter had a shallow draft, and there wouldn't be that broad of a cordon around the fire. He wanted an excuse to stay and see what happened next.

“I'll call you,” Kroc said. “Please, go now.” He raised his voice. “Cricket, you, too.”

She came out drying her hands. She sat down on the floor without a word and started pulling on her shoes.

André offered her a lift, and she took it. Took him home with her, too, and what with one thing and another, it was an hour and a half before he remembered to power up and connex, and morning before he checked his messages.

Gourami hunkered, wet, amid waterplant and reed in the brackish water where the delta ran into the bay. Se croaked low in frustration—an anonymous noise in the dark—and dipped under again so only bulging eyes and comma-shaped nostrils would show. Se mottles were not dyed into green anonymity, as the commandos' had been, but even humen technology would not single se out so hidden.

In the dark nearby, other persons moved, thrummed through swelled throats, quiet reassuring conversation. Gourami filtered water, swallowed plankton and waterweed. As it too often did in the bay now, the food had an acrid tang. Se ate farmed on the job and at home—

Se could not go home. Se had no home. No position now. Reinvention or death.

Because the body had been tangled in the cables, halfway down. And when Gourami had tugged it free, had brought it up, none of the humen had cared. Had honored the dead. Se knew its name; it had been a friend of some of the other persons. And the mate of this one they came to talk to now, because the humen mated like animals, with their pair-bonds and their closed little families.

Se thought somebody should have sung for it. Even if it was an animal. And even if, though se had not yet worked out the logic behind it, it was the dead animal's fault that Gourami could not go home.

There were footsteps through the marsh. Some humen, booted, and a person's, too. Ripples in the water stroked Gourami's skin. The person at se left hand sang low, and a song answered. Tetra had returned. With the human Gourami had heard, and the rest said, could be trusted. The mate of the human who had become the body in the cables.

The rest. The rest were revolutionaries. The persons who had come to rescue se were rebels. They had

destroyed the human ship. And Caetei was one of them.

Gourami sank into calming mud and water, nostrils sealing as se submerged. The human needed a light to walk in the dark. It bobbed, reed-cut, reflecting splinters off the water. Gourami let a thin stream of silver slip from se nostrils. Handfingers brushed a still-sore shoulder; se leaned into Caetei's touch, allowed Caetei to lead. The light clicked off as they came forward, as if the human knew it would hurt a person's dark-adapted eyes.

Se slipped up the bank beside Caetei. Tetra's palms luminesced faintly, enough to guide them. The human stank in the dark, of poison—which the humen drank as if they breathed it—and of fire-charred humen food and chemicals. It—he, it was a he, by the flat chest and the bristles on its face—did not reach out for Gourami, who folded se hurt hand to chest and waited.

Instead, he hunkered on his heels in the dark, a humen approximation of a person's rest-pose, and extended the back of one arm. Something glimmered there. Gourami crouched, too, knees higher than the half-seated human's head, and bent to see what he offered.

A slate. There was a slate on his wrist, and it made words when he made those burbling humen noises.

—*I am Jean*, the machine wrote. —*Tetra says they call you Gourami. Can you tell me what you've seen?*

Gourami was not a very good storyteller. But a not-very-good storyteller by a person's standards was an exceptional one, as humen went. And se was an experienced liaison.

With a ripping sound, se tugged the gripping fabric loose and pulled the waterproof slate from the human's arm. With the tips of se handfingers, ignoring the hurt in the one, se keyed: —*the body was tangled in the cables, halfway down.*

5

CLOSS'S VIEW OF THE EXPLOSION WAS BETTER THAN HE would have preferred. His office had real windows, shatterproof laminate rated to blast level seven with a reality-skin interleaf that he habitually shut down. Closs wasn't a Naturalist; he wore a headset and augments like any sensible man. But he found no wisdom in relying too heavily on technological crutches.

Better to get the benefit when you needed it, and deal with reality the rest of the time. Not useful to forget that others were skinning their reality tunnels, that their perceptions were modified to suit their preferences.

Even if it would have been soothing, once in a while, to skin Jefferson Greene with a pink-and-black-spotted pig. *Oink.*

So he watched the real fire burn, across the water, while windowpanes alongside his primary view overlaid close-up, replay, feeds from the rescue choppers and the divers' masks. The barge's own connex had not dropped when the explosion hit, which told Closs—and his Rim security agents, who would not be sleeping tonight—that any feed they'd gotten off the ship itself was useless, a patch-loop.

They'd been hacked.

Closs dragged his fingertips down the image of the burning vessel. "Connect," he said, command-pitch. "Rim Corporation, Paris head office, code one four seven H."

It would be just after ten in the morning in Paris. He'd been waiting until *she* would be there, leisurely breakfast seen to, a second cup of coffee cooling on her desk. It did not do to hurry the vice president.

She was stirring cream into a china cup when her image resolved. Her hair fell across her forehead, razor-cut, brushing the architectural precision of one dark eyebrow. When she looked up, setting her chased silver spoon down on the saucer with a delicate click, he was caught by the flecks of darker color in her eyes. She was fashionably thin, the line of her jaw sharp as the detail on a porcelain horse, the tendons in her throat vanishing under the ivory silk collar of her suit. "M~ Morrow..." Closs began.

"Major," she replied. "I've seen the feed. I hope you're not calling to justify yourself to me."

"I'm afraid the error is beyond justification."

She lifted her cup and sipped, steam caressing her cheek. She took her time about it, which was more a statement of her willingness to waste Closs's time than of any unconcern about the cost of the call. The Slide was cheap—instantaneous transmission of matter or data over any distance.

Matter, or data. As long as it wasn't alive. Transportation of *personnel* between worlds was complex and costly, and travelers must contend with relativistic effects. But transportation of *goods* only required a matter transfer. This was the same technology at its base as the specialty of the Exigency Corps: probability manipulation. But a much safer manifestation, at that, without the risk of unforeseen coincidental fallout.

Unfortunately, this process could not be used on living creatures. You could certainly put a person in one side of a matter transmitter, but you did not get a living person back out the other end. Any organism complex enough—conscious enough—to have a concept of *I* could not Slide alive.

This was because—Closs did not entirely understand the science—the Slide was a quantum device, relying on the uncertainty principle to work. But a self-aware cargo counted as an observer.

In Schrödinger's famous thought-experiment, the *cat* knows whether it's alive or it is dead.

M~ Morrow swallowed twice, her larynx making shadows under the pale skin of her throat. "This won't affect your delivery schedule?"

"For petroleum?"

She set her cup down, dabbed her lip, and shrugged. "Greene's World is not the only source of base materials for manufacturing. It's the omelite I'm concerned with."

Closs considered his answer. Tanglestone's existence and its sole source were closely held. And unlike the Slide, whose inexpensive operation it made possible, it was *not* cheap. Just cheaper than *manufacturing* entangled pairs. Whether it was a natural substance, or some relic of a prior advanced civilization, no one had determined. Teams of Corpsmen were at work on it, but unless somebody higher than Closs had sealed the results, the god-botherers had nothing.

"You understand, Vice President, that we are still having issues with native uprisings and with human abolitionists who think we're interfering with the ranid culture. Such as it is."

She waited, stroking the gold-painted thumb rest atop the handle of her cup.

Closs folded his hands behind his back. "We also have labor unions that are unhappy with the use of ranids in any job that could be handled by human divers."

M~ Morrow nodded. “I appreciate the challenges, Major. However—”

“The quota,” he said, “will be met.”

She let her fretting hand slide to the desk. “I need you to exceed it.”

“Vice President?”

Her head turned slightly, as if she lifted her eyes to a wall screen or a skin. Her fingers moved across the desktop; Closs recognized the gesture as a pass through a virtual three-dimensional interface. “What I am about to tell you, Major, is not to leave your office.”

“What about Greene?”

“No one,” she said. A fine arrogant dodge of the chain of command, ignoring the fact that Greene was the CEO of Charter Trade, the titular head of Rim on-planet. She slid her cup aside and leaned forward on her elbows. “Major, what do you know about artificial intelligence and the Slide?”

He closed his teeth on a snide comment and counted three. Backward. “Practically?”

“Theoretically.”

“Theoretically,” he said, “an intelligence that was neither organic nor self-aware might be Slid. But it’s practically irrelevant because—”

“—strong A.I. is still fifteen years in the future, just as it has been for the last three hundred years.” She wet her lips, a gesture of nervousness he had not seen her make before. Her fingertips blanched as she steepled her hands.

“But?”

“But we may have run up against somebody who *has* found it. Or something that looks a hell of a lot like it. Unless they’re running their ships by remote control, which is ofcourse possible. And whatever they are, they’re aggressive, Timothy.”

He could have asked, *What did we lose?* He could have asked, *Where did they hit us? How far from Earth? How close to the Core?* But it wasn’t his need to know, anymore. It wasn’t his war to fight. And of course it didn’t matter where they were now, or how far from Earth, if they could Slide.

“If they’re not...conscious,” he said, quietly, “then they can’t conjure, can they?”

Her nose wrinkled at the crude term for probability manipulation, but she nodded. “Omelite,” she said. And then answered a question he would not have chosen to ask, her little pat on the head to keep him well behaved. “They attacked shipping near Greene’s World, Timothy. Once is not much of a sample, but I think it’s you they’re gunning for.”

He swallowed. “I’ll get you everything I can.”

André’s executary had tagged the message from Timothy Closs as highest priority, but he didn’t answer it immediately. Instead he cleaned his teeth and used Cricket’s elutrior. She was out of bed when he emerged, the covers shaking themselves tidy as she unsnarled her hair. The static wand first made it writhe, then stand straight out, crackling. Another tap and a touch to the control and strands drifted over her shoulders, briefly silken. It would cord into locks again by lunchtime, he thought, fondly.

He stored the image of her fixing her hair in hard memory, so he could take the file out and replay it later, and kissed her on the head. “Tonight, where are you?”

“Working,” she answered. She touched her headset access port—a nervous gesture, the controls were all neuroelectrochemical—and smiled with one corner of her mouth. André’s reactivated skin put a warmth in her complexion. Pretty girl. “I’ve seven hours of data mining to get through, more if I’m not lucky enough to hit the information in the usual lodes.”

“Blink me,” he said, and showed himself out.

On the gently pitching deck, he leaned against the rail and watched a pump glide up and down atop a distant mining platform. His skins adapted to the glare off the water, the weave of his fogjacket opening to catch the breeze as sun warmed his shoulders. He paled the jacket’s color to ivory and watched ripples break against the barge’s hull.

He preferred his messages transcribed; he could read more quickly and with greater retention than he could listen.

M~ Deschênes:

Please contact me regarding a possible extension of our previous contract, if you are interested. Something of an unusual case. It might prove a challenge.

—Closs

André cleared the message and used a subroutine to overwrite the sectors, a precaution he never skimmed on. Especially for innocuous messages. He knew how Cricket earned her bread, and she knew what he did as well and they had a tacit agreement not to ask. But not all the synthesists, archinformists, or net miners on the Rim were his lovers. And though he trusted Cricket Earl Murphy as much as he trusted anyone, only a fool baited temptation.

Any business Closs had to offer wasn’t the sort of thing best discussed on a broadcast channel. Especially when André wasn’t certain he’d be able to avoid a conflict of interest. He inspected his scoot, wincing in self-consciousness when he located not so much as a loose wire, and dropped into the saddle. He could have walked; Cricket’s float hooked up to a sidewalk, and there was a bridge across the canal that would lead him downtown, through the maze of barges and waterways that made up the floating city of Novo Haven. But he’d have to come back for his scoot then.

Meanwhile, the major would be expecting him.

Later, sitting on Jean Gris’s crude wicker couch, Cricket Earl Murphy reviewed her few remaining articles of faith. For example, she believed that if one must keep secrets, it was best if they happened to be incredible. Melodrama was good, especially when it involved spies, forgotten royalty, or the downfall of governments. Outrageous scandals were more survivable than petty ones; a truly lurid tale could only improve one’s reputation, unless it involved allegations of rape (squalid), insider trading (pathetic), or cannibalism (still beyond the pale).

Petty moral failures led to disgrace only because they had no scope. It was too easy for the opprobrious to condemn their own small criminal hypocrisies when they recognized them in another. An adultery, a

financial manipulation, the poisoning of a spouse: anybody could compass such crimes. And because they could imagine them, they could defend against them.

A truly outrageous crime provoked disbelief—*such things only happen in melodramas*—and then, after, awe.

If you must steal, swipe a planet.

As a consequence of this philosophy, Cricket very rarely lied. Her secrets, while plentiful, were the sort that people did not inquire after. She was safe—safe here, especially, here on the Rim, on Greene's World, a corner of the settled galaxy that could not be less interesting to the Core, to anybody with money, to the woman she had been.

The Core never thought about the Rim if it could help it, except to set pulp holodrama there. As far as civilization was concerned, the Rim had nothing to offer except wilderness, Iron Age aliens—the ones that had advanced that far—and a romantic but generally nasty and unsafe frontier. And, of course, the bounty of limitless natural resources to exploit and fortunes to be made. With the added benefit that any personal problems one left behind on Earth would very probably be dead by the time one landed on Greene's World, Xanadu, or Yap.

And she kept telling herself that, right up to the moment Jean Gris steepled his gnawed fingertips and said, "It'd be the biggest scandal since Moon Morrow resigned."

Cricket's shoulders tautened. She kept her eyes wide and innocent, and did not even allow the name to echo in her mind. Superstitiously, as if Jean were the wizard the ignorant painted him. As if he could read her thoughts.

She wondered, even should she say it outright, if he would ever believe her. "Moon who?"

The crease deepened over his broken nose, shadows rough along his bristled jaw. His eyes caught the light as his head tilted. "Morrow. She was the Earth Unified government's minister of colonization during the first Downham administration. She resigned under a cloud about fifteen Standard ago. Took the fall for an antimatter test station failure at Patience. Do you recall *that*?"

Of course she did. The destroyed space station, the devastated biosphere of the planet below, the frozen corpses floating in orbit—where there *was* anything to recover. The disaster had been caused by a failed Exigency Corps engineering operation. Morrow, it came out later, had pushed the god-botherers to augment the chance of success for the experimental power station beyond any margin of safety.

There was still debate as to whether the plant's design was flawed, or whether the Corps interference caused a localized probability storm.

Twenty thousand, two hundred and thirteen dead. Unsurprisingly, almost no surviving wounded.

Oh, yes. Cricket recalled.

She could close her eyes and see the corona of wreckage around the devastated station. She could close her eyes, and imagine she felt the thirty seconds of hard vacuum that was all you got to feel before you died. Eyeballs freezing, capillaries bursting. Thirty seconds was a long, long time.

"Oh, *her*. I'd forgotten her name."

Jean watched her carefully, long enough to make her worry, and then licked his lips and said, "Went to work for Core, I think, after the jail sentence, and hasn't been heard from since. She dropped out of

sight completely.”

“And you think she has something to do with Lucienne’s being killed?” Sidetrack, play dumb. Look confused. “Was it something the ranid said?”

Not too confused, however. More’s the pity; Jean knew she wasn’t stupid.

The ranid that had found Lucienne’s body was hunkered comfortably in the reedy mud upriver, according to Jean, and Cricket had no reason not to believe him. It was a more comfortable topic than Moon Morrow.

“No,” Jean said. “I think if she’s not still working for Core, she’s relativistic under an assumed name, and our grandchildren will hear from her when time and scandal have forgotten her. Or she’s melting into an unmarked grave.” Jean let his fingers slide together, interlock. “It’s seventeen years body-time from Earth. At least a hundred, nonrelativistic—” he looked up, blinked his watery eyes. “But you know that, don’t you?” Cricket had never quite lost her North American accent. “Or you could be seeing how much line you can feed me before you set the hook, chérie.”

She smiled.

He caught her fingers sideways and gave them a squeeze. “What did you learn?”

“I’m still looking for the key to what Lucienne managed to mail me. I’ll find that—” She rubbed at the corners of her eyes with the other hand, feeling incredibly tired. “I wish we knew who she was meeting. I wish we had the rest of the file—”

“Do we know what Rim did with the body?”

“If they didn’t resink it?”

Jean gave her the raised eyebrow. She took her hand back, stood up, wishing she wasn’t at Jean’s house so she could check status on the half-dozen searches, bots, and ferrets she had running that didn’t require her constant attention—and the compiler trying to resolve the fragment of Lucienne’s deathbed message into something parseable. She wanted to walk away from Kroc, so she went to make tea, wondering if the tomatoes had ripened enough overnight to give her an excuse to walk out to the truck garden and pick some. Better than growing them in tubs on her deck, that was for sure. She liked the dirt under her fingernails.

He said, “No, they wouldn’t have made sure it got snagged in the cables if they didn’t want it found.”

“But did they want it found so soon?”

“What do you mean?”

Right. Jean didn’t know a damned thing about wetware, hard memory, or any of it. “Her hard memory would decay in something like twenty to thirty hours. Any data in her head would be irretrievable at that point. We know she was sending me something—”

“The other half might still be queued.”

“It probably is,” Cricket said, glancing at him. “We can’t obtain her body before we lose that data to bit-rot.”

Jean pressed the side of his hand to his mouth. From the way the muscle in his jaw worked, he was

chewing the flesh near his thumb. “What if they downloaded her?”

Cricket shrugged, sliding the pot onto the stove. Cold water slopped over the enamel surface and wet her hand. “Whatever they killed her to keep her from bringing back to you might be in the file. Which would be in a Charter Trade data hold. Blasted Rimmers.”

Jean’s nose had been broken once and he’d never gotten it fixed. His breath whistled on the outflow. “You still think it was André, Cricket?”

If she bit her cheek hard enough, she could keep her eyes from stinging. “The common factor linking all of my unhappy romances is me.”

“Is that an answer?”

“It’s what you get. I don’t ask those things. I think it must have been—”

“I don’t have to use him.”

The water steamed, not yet bubbling. She threw tea bags into mugs. “Use him,” she said. “I knew it was on fire when I lay down on it.”

“Why?”

“Why did I know he was on fire?”

“No,” Jean said, very patiently. Silently he’d come up behind her; she saw his reflection in the cooktop before he laid his hand on her arm. “Why did you pick him?”

The water boiled. She wrapped the handle in a terry rag and lifted the kettle off the heat. “Because,” she said, roughly, “he could beat up my dad.”

“Excuse me?”

“Bad men,” Cricket said. “Bad men, the badder the better. And they don’t come badder than André Deschênes. He’s so bad he can be sweet as ice cream every second, and nobody forgets for any one of those seconds that he’s the baddest man in the room. That’s what I like. Men who could beat up my dad. They make me feel safe.” She lifted her chin and set the kettle down. “I know it’s crazy. It’s why I don’t let any of them get too close. Because I know what they are.”

She shook her head, shook Jean’s hand off, and—turning—warded him back with a cup of hot tea. “Anyway, that doesn’t matter. I think...I think they wanted it to look like an accident. Or like she ran afoul of a ranid sect. Some of the savages still kill humans in the marsh, you know.”

“Some humans.”

She didn’t need to turn around to know he was smiling. Jean Kroc—whatever his real name was, and she didn’t ask that either—went into the marsh with impunity. Lucienne had, too. “Discredit the labor rights movement,” she continued, as if he had not interrupted. “Maybe something more complicated, but that’ll do for a surface motive.”

“If they wanted the body found, why grab the person that found it?”

She shrugged. “Somebody made a mistake? The frog saw something it shouldn’t have? The body was supposed to be found by a human and not a ranid? It was found too soon? Could be a lot of reasons.” The water hissed. She poured. “If there’s information out there, I’ll find it.”

If the information was connex anywhere. But that went without saying.

She had learned a lot about net mining in fifteen years. She was good at it, knew roots and routes to old caches and layered backups and coredumps and virtual lockers from two hundred years ago. She had old ciphers and she had archives and she had backdoors into current data holds, too.

The more old information one could find in the warrens of connex, the more uncharted paths one knew from point A to point Q, the more *new* information one could get to that one wasn't supposed to know about. And sometimes the old records were useful in themselves. For historical reasons, or—in a relativistic galaxy—sometimes for more present ones.

Cricket had never actually had to blackmail anyone. Not since she became an archinformist, anyway.

“You always do,” Jean said, bringing the tea that Cricket thought was still too hot to drink to his mouth. It was why he needed her. He might conjure, and she would bet he had the illegal coincidence engines to do it with. But he wouldn't swallow wire, or live with it in his head.

She tapped fingers on the edge of her mug. “Do you think they'll let a ranid person testify in a Core court?”

“Well, they would if they were a tech species. Of course, if they were a tech species, we wouldn't be here, would we?”

Cricket hated him for a moment, hated the falseness of his pale, open gaze. “Like they'd let it make a difference.”

“They?”

“Core,” she said. And then qualified, “Charter Trade. They'd find a way around the law, even if the ranids had spaceflight, if there were something on Greene's World that they wanted.” There was; she knew it, and she suspected Jean did, too. “They don't care where the luxuries come from, or who suffers to pay the way.”

Jean looked down. She wondered if she had shamed him. “Find out, won't we? I need you to step up your efforts regarding Closs and his cronies.”

There were a half-dozen stupid questions she could have asked, most of them the kind of contentless noises people made to reassure themselves that communication was taking place. If Jean didn't think, or at least hope, that Closs was involved in something dirty enough to bring him down, he wouldn't have asked her to keep looking. And Cricket knew the sorts of things that people who should know better got up to.

She drank off her tea. She'd been right; it was hot enough to break sweat across her forehead, and she mopped her face with her sleeve after she put the mug in the sink. “I'll ask André to come see you when I blink him tonight. I'm going to go look at the vegetables.”

Jean laid a hand inside her elbow as she stepped past him. “What are you doing on a lump of mud like this, Cricket?”

“Instead of gnawing imported bonbons in the Core? Connex doesn't take time, Jean. I can live anywhere. It's cheaper to do it here.” Practically guileless, she smiled into his eyes.

“And here I was hoping that maybe you killed a man.”

She winked and drew her arm away. “Nothing so romantic, I’m afraid.”

André’s clients usually came to him, though for Rim he made exceptions. He still didn’t like to be seen entering their barge, however, so he skinned in the bathroom of a coffee shop (after he ordered a mug he would not drink) and walked into reception resembling himself only casually. Of course he flagged as altered in anyone’s headset, but cosmetic skins were more common than not.

Reception chipped him, verified that he was expected, and locked on a wristlet to guide him up. He didn’t need it—he knew where Timothy Closs worked—but Security would have its little games and this would get him past most of them.

Its plaintive beeping led him on.

Closs got up from the desk to greet him. One thing about Timothy; the ceremonies he stood on were all politeness. He extended his right hand, gave André’s larger but not much darker one a clasp, and handed him a drink without asking. “Good job last night, André.”

André took the seat Closs gestured him into and set the stubby glass on the arm. “Thank you, Major. I hope there’s not a problem.” He would prefer not to talk about old business under any circumstances. Like a leaf upon the water: let the current slide it by.

“Not with your work,” Closs replied, returning to his chair. Perched on the edge of it, he gave the impression of someone still in motion. A compact brown man in a navy and white suit, he seemed—to André—*condensed*. “No, it’s another problem entirely. One of the board made an unfortunate decision, and it’s left us a loose end.”

“This all sounds very euphemistic.”

“To put it mildly.” Speaking quickly, Closs outlined the problem: the scheduling conflict that had led to a rapid liaison discovering the body ahead of time, the site team’s errors in recovery, Jefferson Greene’s overreaction.

“He’s given it something to talk about,” André said, understanding.

Closs knuckled his eye and nodded. “It gets worse. The witness was liberated last night.”

“The explosion.”

“Unfortunately. We think it’s been taken by a rapid anticolonialist faction. You can appreciate the implications.”

“If they can get anyone to listen to them.”

“Connex is free,” Closs said. “There are humans on this planet who would be all too happy to foster a scandal, if it affected Rim. The savages aren’t the only Greens in the galaxy. Or the only enemies of Rim.”

“True enough.” But André’s hand gesture said, *What do you want me to do about it?*

Closs put his hands on the desk. “We want you to cover the contract, André. At something more than your ordinary fee.”

Jean Kroc poled his skiff upriver.

He could have used his motors, sure, and the caterpillars weren't even too noisy. But the birds could hear them, and the ranids, and it never hurt to show a little courtesy. Besides, there were enough powered craft on Greene's to affect the natives' long-distance communications. Like Earth's cetaceans, the ranids took advantage of the sound-conducting properties of water to hold conversations with friends and relatives they might never have swum side by side with. The advent of mechanized transportation had been unkind to their culture, their art, their discourse, and their science.

And in any case, there was something to be said for slipping over the brown water in the heat of afternoon, his shirt rubbing sweat from his shoulders as he threaded the channels of the delta. Four-winged insects so like an Earth darning-needle that they bore the same common name slipped over the water, leaving chains of ripples like the paths of skipped stones. With a quicksilver twist one rocketed upward, the drone of straining wings rising in pitch. It clutched something that twisted in muscular panic; Jean winced, but it was just a fish or a tadpole—too small for an eggling, and anyway no endoparent would let an infant out of its pouch. Fat drops of water scattered, and the darning-needle settled on the flat prow of Jean's skiff to sever its dinner's spine with a scissoring bite.

He could not *actually* hear the crunching.

Green reeds rose up around him, reflected smoothly in flat water. Their heads nodded, heavy with pollen in feather-duster flowers. A red flannel rag off to port marked his channel. It was an odd-numbered rag and the knot was at the top; he turned away from it.

Even Jean Kroc needed a little aide-mémoire to find his way around the bayou.

The yellow sun rode behind haze, swarms of no-see-ums zooming among the tassels. Greene's World was better than Earth that way; about half of the local biting insectoid life had no use for mammal blood. The leeches, however, weren't so particular. And the ragweed equivalents could have choked an elephant.

The air felt primitive. The rich scent of fermenting vegetation bubbled from beneath the water, and Jean's salt stung his cracked lip and his eyes, dried itchy among his stubble. Even to the profusion of alien flowers—mauve and white silverling with its feet wet and its belled heads shaded beneath taller plants, parasitic cutthroat weed threading from reed to reed, its waxy paraorchids dripping treacle-sweet beads of sap with which to trap small unwary creatures—the New Nile Delta could have been Earth in the Upper Cretaceous. Jean could imagine a *Dryptosaurus* slipping along the shallow waterways, barely ruffling a leaf in passing—eyeing him like the also-extinct tiger from between concealing reeds.

His hands sweated inside his fingerless gloves as he dragged the pole from the sucking mud of the channel bed and swung it forward. The strain caught him first along the biceps and across the shoulders, and as he leaned into the push, he felt it in his chest, triceps, latissimus dorsi, hamstrings, calves. He tugged the pole again, let the momentum of the skiff draw it from the bottom, swung it up. The name of the game was control. He glanced over his shoulder, as if a dinosaur might in fact be considering him for its supper, and almost missed the blue rag with the knot tied downward that marked the next turn.

He poled toward this one, moving farther from the New Nile's dredged main channel and closer to the paramangroves that made a thunderhead darkness off to the east when he got a glimpse at them up a channel that headed in that direction.

The sun stood another hand higher and he was picking up ranid chatter on the underwater microphones when he slid the skiff underneath a moldy thermocamouflage netting strung between paramangroves. He moored the skiff against the aerial roots of the nearest tree, drove the pole in deep to wedge it, and tied

that off as well. The tender water-brown skin of the roots was polished shiny where he stepped; he frowned when he noticed. Time to move the mooring.

Or maybe he should bring André here, and move afterward. Once a site was contaminated there was no point in rushing to burn another if the first could still be used in the short term. And he was more concerned with satellite imaging than with some bayou boy or mud-puppy skipper tripping over his facility. There were ways to ensure that that would remain unlikely.

The paramangroves grew knotted together, branches interlaced like the fan vaults of a cathedral, roots like the tentacles of angry octopods. Jean Kroc skipped along them all but silently, rubber soles tacky enough that his feet did not skid from the algae-hung bark. Animals zipped about his head. The Greene's World "birds" were awfully birdy, as such things went, though they tended to beaks fenced in whiskery feathers. The air under the paramangroves was a soup of insects; easier to sweep them up en masse than grab just one or two.

The door in the trunk was hard to see. Jean found the nub that fit just between his thumb and forefinger and pressed his palm through the holographic bark. Not even a fog; just an image. But you had to know where to touch, and in the dim green light beneath the leaves like broad-palmed hands, huddled into the gap between umbrella branches and spreading roots, on one big tree of a million, it was unlikely that it would be stumbled upon. And Jean could make it more unlikely as he chose.

The plate beneath was warm and smooth. It recognized Jean's palm and depressed slightly, soundlessly into the trunk. The door eased open—popped up and slid aside—and Jean Kroc stepped within, entering the lair of a mad scientist.

The room was somewhat smaller than the diameter of the great tree, carved from deadwood only. One worn swivel chair commanded the scuffed floor, the upholstery patched with tape. Around it, granting just enough room for his knees, was a series of pitted panels topped by an eclectic assortment of display and interface hardware—holographic projectors, screen monitors, an old 3-D hand-interface that looked like the ears of a theremin and operated on more or less the same principles. There were also three keyboards and a holoface; none of them matched.

In addition to the marks of hand-welding evident where sheet steel had been bent and fixed together, the slots through which readouts protruded were more often taped to fit than cut. The chamber was barely big enough for two if one was standing. Or willing to perch on the commode, tucked into a cutout niche, because the chamber did not have corners. The control panels followed the arc of the hollowed-out paramangrove, the tree's weakened structure reinforced by the plascrete sealant bonding the external wall.

He'd moved his home plenty in the last thirty years: apartments, minifabs, a clamshell hut on stilts in the bayou for a while. *This* was eternal. This was what he couldn't afford to rebuild, and so he hid it well, changed his routes, came here erratically, and rarely showed the way to anyone. Cricket didn't know how to find this place, though she had to suspect it existed. The bayou and the mangrove stand themselves were protection, as they shifted and rechanneled and never twice looked the same.

Lucienne knew it, though, and how to find it. Somebody had to, in case something happened to Jean.

Jean gave it a moment to power up, using stored solar from concealed panels and fuel cells buried far enough underwater that they shouldn't emit to space. A planet was a big place for complete sat-coverage on a colonial corporation's budget.

It all seemed to be humming. He dusted the moss stains from his hands and closed the door, sealing himself into the blue-lit coolness of the most illegal thing on Greene's World.

Vengeance wasn't his metier. But he was here to make some black magic happen.

A little red flannel bag, that weren't nothing.

6

“HOW DO YOU GO ABOUT FINDING ONE NAKED AMPHIBIAN on a whole muddy goddamn world?” André shook his head like a dog shaking off water. “It's not as if I can go around DNA-typing every frog I meet. And the insurgents use disguises, don't they? If I were your ranid, Tim, frankly I'd dig in deep in the swamp and go seven kinds of native. You don't need me; you need a good old boy from back in the delta.”

“We can make sure you find the ranid,” Closs answered. He wasn't pacing. Instead, he stood before his wide windows, hands folded, watching the light glint off the water. The bay lay pellucid beyond the polarized display glass, water limpid enough that André could make out shells and stones on the pale sand bottom. The water might run down the New Nile muddy and rich, but most of its sediment dropped out in the broad wandering delta, and what flowed into the sea was almost polished.

Beyond the zone of riverine admixture, where the brackish water clouded, in good weather the bay was clear as quartz. The sleek pewter outline of a long-necked animal glided past, sunning itself just below the surface. André caught a glimpse of its creamy belly and snaggle teeth as it banked down and away, curving in sudden pursuit. A nessie. They usually haunted deeper water and avoided industry, as shy as they were toothy, but this one looked young. And there were bigger predators in the deeps.

“If you can find the ranid, then I don't see why you'd be willing to pay my fee.”

“You misapprehend me.” Closs turned around, beckoned André with two curving fingers. André stood, leaving behind his untouched glass. When he was an arm's length away, Closs continued. “We can make sure you find it, though. The capabilities of Rim—”

“You're talking about running a manip.”

Closs didn't answer.

“A manip. On me.” A probability manipulation might bring him right down on the missing coolie's doorstep. And it also meant staff, and Rim personnel, and processor time, and *paperwork*.

Met with continuing silence, André tried again. “I don't want that kind of a data trail—”

Closs shook his head. “There won't be one.”

Still. André had a bad feeling about this. Too far outside of his usual line of work. Too many ways to get killed, chasing ghosts through the bayou. “I can't take it.”

Closs stepped forward and caught his forearm. André paused. The grip was not restraining or sharp; a request rather than a grab. “Do me one favor.”

André did not answer. But he also did not pull away.

Closs let him go, first giving his forearm a quick friendly squeeze. “Wait until tomorrow to refuse. Sleep on it.”

“I don’t need the money, Tim.”

Closs smiled, showing whitened teeth. “I know you don’t. But the thing is, I need the help.”

A hell of an offer. Jefferson Greene’s first mate—and, everybody knew, the brains of the Greene’s World Rim operation—acknowledging a personal debt. That was the sort of thing careers rose and fell on. And nobody was more aware than André that he wasn’t going to stay young forever.

On the other hand, very few people were more aware than André that once he let Rim plant its hooks, he would not be working for himself anymore. Operating under the occasional contract was one thing. Assisting them in conjuring his future—allowing himself to be entangled—well.

André wasn’t a superstitious man. But if he wanted to learn from Jean Gris, it would be an unwise thing to let Rim rule his fate. And the whole prospect reminded him uncomfortably of his mother’s tactics. Not that Zoë Deschênes could have backed up any threat of ruining his luck.

But Charter Trade could.

“I’ll think about it,” André said. He stuffed his hands in his jacket pockets. “Don’t worry. I can show myself out.”

Out in the sun again, he gasped sharply. He dropped his elbows on the railing and put his head down, let the light bake his scalp and neck muscles. The sun picked darker scars out in heat until he shielded his skull with his palms. His blinked-up sunshield helped ameliorate the glare off the water. One more breath, then he shuddered and drew himself up, shoulders square.

He’d wanted to learn. He’d placed a loaded pistol on his tongue and pulled the trigger. That was a commitment.

But instant death was easy. Killing people—painlessly, efficiently—was what he did. *Who* should not matter.

He couldn’t take this contract. Because he needed Jean Gris’s goodwill, and he wasn’t going to get that by assassinating rapid revolutionaries and allowing Rim to run a manip on him. Not when he was already mixed up in learning how to conjure.

It didn’t take much imagination to guess that coincidence might proliferate, should one cultivate a conjure man. He who touches pitch besmirches himself.

All he could do was hope Rim would be understanding about finding someone else to take the contract. And that they wouldn’t botch it, or, if they did, that the trail of testimony never led back to one André Deschênes.

He pursed his lips as if to whistle. Perhaps that could be his first real experiment in conjuring.

Another blow to the image of the hedge-wise conjuror: Jean Kroc had never been a patient man. Actually, he was rather bad all around at conforming to stereotypes. So by evening, when his new apprentice arrived, he was worrying the hard semiflexible skin from a pulpy fruit the size of his finger joint, a pile of others white and waxy on a rectangular green-glazed plate by his left hand. The fruit’s skin was rough, reddish-brown, marked in dimpled hexagons. He picked it off with gnawed thumbnails, trying

to keep the pieces as large as possible. A matter of pride, or meticulousness, or just a cheap distraction.

He knew the newcomer was André by the purr of his wet/dry scoot. Jean'd left the front door propped; when André called through it, he didn't bother to get up, just yelled back. "Take off your shoes."

The thumping told him André obeyed. A moment later, bare feet padded from the entry. "Cricket said you wanted me."

Jean smiled, not showing what it cost him. He held up a peeled wax fruit so André could identify it, pinched between finger and thumb. A sticky trickle of nectar crawled across the pad of his hand. He flicked the berry into a long tumbling arc.

André snatched it from the air on its descent, leaning away from spattered juice. He inspected it quickly and popped it into his mouth, then spat the pit into his palm. "When you told me you wanted information, how did you know?"

"Know?" Jean slit another fruit with his nail. The pulp was too tender to squeeze out without pureeing, so he worried at the skin until it flaked. He sucked the juice off his thumb and the pulp off the seed, and laid the shiny dark brown nut on the table beside the bits of skin. "Am I assigned psychic powers?"

André came forward and dropped into the chair across the table. His pit joined Jean's with a subdued click. "Did you know that Rim was going to offer me a contract on a ranid?"

Jean, licking his fingers, smiled. "You said you wouldn't tell me about contracts."

"I'm not taking this one," André answered. "The thing is, Rim wants to run a probability manip to give me a fighting chance to find the coolie. It's affiliated with some froggie terrorist group—"

"Gourami."

"Excuse me?"

Jean pursed his lips, forced to admit that perhaps not *all* the stereotypes failed him. He was enjoying André's slack expression slightly more than was healthy or smart. Although he had to admire the man's gall—well, *admire* was the wrong word. And *respect* wasn't exactly right either. "The ranid's name is Gourami."

"You *know* it?"

"I talked to it last night." Jean ate another wax fruit, letting the pulp burst into fluid as he pressed it to the roof of his mouth with his tongue. The seed felt as slick as it appeared, and he squeezed it out between his lips. For a moment, he turned it on his fingertips, watching the light gloss it. He pretended he didn't notice the way André's shoulders jerked.

"Whoa. Well, I'm glad I said no."

"I'm not. Go back tomorrow. Tell him you'll take it on."

"You realize what you're asking me?"

"Yes," Jean answered, flicking him another fruit. "I'm asking you to lie to Timothy Closs. And buy me some time to operate."

"He'll want me to take the entanglement."

Jean wondered if André knew he was shaking his head like that, a slow oscillation.

“I can lock that off,” Jean said. “We’ll set up a countervalent field; the entanglement can spend itself on that.”

André’s attention snapped to him like a shivering compass needle to a magnet. “And I’m better off letting you entangle me?”

“Just a safeguard. Not an entanglement. But take the contract. For me.”

André swallowed. “What exactly are you planning, Jean Gris?”

Jean rolled his shoulders up and back. “I’ll handle the rest. Just keep Closs thinking the situation is under control.”

Jefferson wasn’t often the first one into the office, but he was usually among the last ones home. He got a lot of work done in the evening, when things were still and quiet—dark in winter and golden in the summertime. He’d trickle the news, talk to his kids in chat, drink a few cups of coffee or kasha or a martini or two, and plow through business decisions with a ruthless efficiency that got him home in time for supper, just.

Today should have been no different. The to-do list was actually a little shorter than usual; everyone was distracted by the bombings, and as he’d delegated that to Closs it was off his desk until Closs finished the investigation and handed it back. The first item, it looked like, was to return a call to the station. Not the Slide; no problem with that. Lighters came and went, raw materials flowing freely outbound and manufactured goods coming in. The call was from one of his gurus, the Greene’s World station chief of the Exigency Corps, Amanda Delarossa. Head god-botherer.

She must have set his code to autoanswer, which was gratifying. She had a chipmunk-cheek of sandwich and a bag of pop lifted to her mouth when her image shifted, and she swallowed hastily and cleared her hands. “Chairman,” she said, as soon as she could. “I didn’t think you’d call back until tomorrow, sir.”

“I like to be responsive,” he said. “You seem to think your issue requires immediate attention.”

“Immediate awareness,” she said. She drank again, quickly, as if her mouth were dry from swallowing before she was quite ready. “I’m not sure what we could actually do about it at this point. Realistically speaking.”

“Intriguing,” Jefferson said, because it’s what he had trained himself to say when he really meant *get to the fucking point*. “Tell me more.”

“Well...” she paused, set her drink aside, and twisted her fingers together, “we’ve got a massive spike in side effects, and we’re not quite sure what to make of it. But some of our best theorists are on it.”

“By side effects, you mean...”

“Probability pollution. Weird coincidences. Synchronicities. We track them, you know, and attempt to mitigate. But the problem is, you get a chaotic butterfly effect with even the smallest manipulation. So you patch it up, attempt to introduce a little more randomness into the system, and it breaks out somewhere else. Rains of toads. God knows what.”

“And we’re getting more of this?” He rubbed the edge of his desk and thought about Patience, which had

been a lovely Earthlike world before the Corps got done with it.

“Some of it, yeah. You have any old coins lying around?”

“Doesn’t everybody?” Collector’s pieces, talismans, bits of old Earth. Metal from the bones of the homeworld. They had no value as legal tender anymore, but people liked them.

“Next time you think of it, flip one a couple of times,” she said. “Anyway, Dr. Gupta thinks it’s linked to omelite mining, either due to waste tanglestone escaping into the atmosphere, or a reduction in the worldwide omelite load causing some sort of shift in Greene’s World’s...equilibrium, for lack of a better word. We’re working on it.”

“And if you can’t get it under control quickly?”

She shrugged, dipping her ear toward one shoulder, and bit her knuckle instead of her supper. “Well, it’s not like we can stop exporting tanglestone.”

Of course André argued. It didn’t matter; Kroc was always going to win. He had the superior bargaining position.

He also had the mojo. And something else that André would need to learn, before Jean would teach him too much. Jean Kroc had the moral unassailability of a god, as was necessary for the power he held.

It was always the way. In premodern societies, those who wielded power beyond oversight were bound by oaths and forms and divine wrath and sacrosanct relationships. In the modern day, there were oaths, and forms...and codes of ethics, to which professionals might more or less loosely adhere.

And divine wrath, of course. There *was* always that.

Jean Kroc’s God most certainly did play dice. And Jean was not the only one loading the toss.

Still, he was rather well satisfied with the way the game was going. If André *could* learn, there might even be a chance of—well, not winning. It wasn’t the sort of thing one *won*—but making some things a bit better in the short run. As a conjure man, his professional opinion was that that was often the best one could hope for.

At some point in human history, somebody had figured out that you could change the future by staring at it hard enough. The problem with the power of prayer was that it was never exactly quantifiable, though research was suggestive. And then there were the odder aspects of certain studies, where an average taken of ten thousand amateur best guesses turned out to be closer to the truth than any single expert’s considered and researched opinion.

In a really profound cosmic irony, it was the failure of A-life consciousness research that finally provided the key. They couldn’t make a self-aware computer, but they did find out what the *I* was good for.

The *I* was the evolutionary consequence of the observer effect, the power of luck, the denial of everything ten thousand generations of mothers passed down to ten thousand generations of daughters. Wishing hard enough *did* make a difference. Not a big difference. Not a profound difference. And not a difference every time.

But a few tenths of a percent, a difference almost indistinguishable from experimental error.

It was just that little bit of an edge that let one species thrive when another one perished. Black wings on a should-be-white moth, concealing it against a soot-blackened tree.

The practical application of quantum engineering made it replicable. The technological outgrowth of mojo satchels and washing the car to make it rain. A bit more than an *edge*, these days. Call it a necessity, rather.

People with both the knack for being lucky and the courage to do it right were not, in Jean's experience, common. And they were often opportunists, because their gifts made it possible for them to do very well by living on their wits.

A certain moral flexibility had needed to be shocked out of Jean as well, when he was young.

André Deschênes might do. And if he couldn't be salvaged, well, Jean couldn't exactly leave him wherever he fell. But he'd execute that problem when it became unavoidable.

In the meantime, he had a frog to catch.

After André left, Jean pulled his boots on again. The leftover wax fruit went into the cooler; the peelings into Lucienne's...into Cricket's compost bucket under the sink. If he felt up to it, he'd turn the pile over for her tonight, aerate the rot. It was what he was good for.

The boots sealed over his pantlegs, he made sure he had a light, slung his hip pack around his waist, and locked the door behind him. He'd have been three times through the swamp from sunset to sunset, but twenty years wasn't enough to make him a real creature of the bayou. There were men and women who'd grown up here, who could vanish among the reeds without a ripple, soft as a ranid slipping underwater. Jean knew a few: Old Mike, Sally Feathers. Both born when Greene's World was the sort of place you went to lose the records, both stubborn and self-reliant enough that their names were what they said they were, that they'd never nursed on the crystal teat of a reality skin.

Greene's World was *still* a new enough planet that folks mostly knew each other, and still a wild enough planet that they mostly stayed out of each other's way. Outside of Novo Haven, anyway, where the corporate boys played politics and pretended that instantaneous communication meant they had any idea what was going on in the Core, or any influence that was heard there.

A delusion, Jean admitted with a rueful shake of his head, he was prey to himself.

Reeds cracked where he stepped, the spongy ground oozing water. The sky over the bay was streaked in seashell colors—coral, salmon, dusky clouds like the indigo lip of a mussel shell—by the time he reached the distributary nearest to his minifab, the one where the ranids came to talk.

He crouched on the riverbank, folded his arms across his knees, and waited. When the evening star—technically, the planet Endymion—shimmered ice-white on the horizon and the last pearlescent light was draining down the darkening sky, a gleaming dart-shape broke the water. One ring of ripple heralded the ranid's arrival, so faint it smoothed before it reached the reeds.

Jean dabbed at the water. His ripples passed over where the ranid's had been, flowing in the opposite direction, and lapped its skin below the eyes. The eyes—great light-gathering half-orbs—blinked. One stem-fingered, four-digit hand reached above the surface, the fingertip pads slightly enlarged, sticky.

Jean reached slowly to lay his waterproof wrist slate in the ranid's grasp. It did not flinch, but rose from the water as if drawn to an anchor. The hand rotated as the eyes came level, both swiveling forward so binocular vision focused on the face of the slate. The other hand emerged from the water as the ranid

climbed the bank, crouching between angled knees, its pale ridged throat swelling.

Jean did not hear what it said, but he felt it, the low-frequency words shivering his nape hairs. The ranid was deft with the slate; more literate and practiced than Jean. He thought it might even be the one called “Gourami” by humans who could not replicate its given name.

He waited until it was looking at his mouth. If this was the liaison, it could lipread. “I’m Jean Kroc,” he said. “I think we met last night.”

The ranid bobbed one fingertip, pausing in what it was doing with the slate. —*Yes.*

It was Gourami, then. He fumbled in his hip pack. The ranid didn’t draw back, but waited, curious and impassive, while another star or two slipped out of the twilight. “I have something for you,” he said, careful to lift his chin and shape the words formally. He might just have mouthed them, but it seemed to help it lipread if he put the voice behind them.

Again the pulling gesture, one finger raking the words in.

“Mojo,” he answered. His hand closed on the box, protective cling-sheeting adhering to his skin. Plastics, of all things, were imported to Greene’s World. Petroleum was mined here but there was no significant manufacturing.

He pulled the box from the pack, extended his arm, and opened up his hand. Palm skyward, fingers cupped slightly, offering the plastic-wrapped object to Gourami.

It was not a gesture a ranid could make. Their arms did not rotate at the elbow.

Carefully, Gourami lifted the box from his palm. Still holding the slate, it untwisted the plastic and peeled it back, but stopped before lifting the lid of the box. Its head and shoulders canted back slightly. It wrote a word and turned the slate. —*Mojo?*

“Luck,” he answered. The ranids knew about luck, although Jean could never hope to duplicate their word for it. The sounds of their language echoed through an expanded throat that served as bellows, sounding board, and voice-box all in one, and were meant to be heard through bone conduction and the vibrations of water or air on skin and tympanic membrane, not by a mammal’s seashell external ear. They knew about all sorts of things; theirs was not a material culture, but in their physical abilities made up for it. They could communicate across half a world, read each other’s physical health with pulses of ultrasound. They could build fires, forge metal if it moved them, though the activity was even more risky than it might be for a human; a ranid could not afford to dry out too much, or too often. They built their blast furnaces on rocky beaches, and tended them during short dashes up from the waves.

—*Thank you,* Gourami said, and folded the plastic back into place. It did not care to commit, Jean understood.

“You’re welcome.” Jean leaned forward, strengthening the connection with the ranid, but careful not to make eye contact. He did not wish it to feel coerced. “I’m going to bring a man to you tomorrow. He’ll go with you upriver. Protect you.”

—*Safer in the swamp.*

“You’ll be in the swamp. He’ll stay in the swamp with you.”

—*Humens are easy to track.*

“It will be all right. He’s being paid to kill you, Gourami. If they think he is chasing you, nobody else will come after.”

The ranid’s fingers didn’t twitch on the slate. They didn’t have to. Its stolid froggy regard was enough. The ranid thought it would be safer in the swamp with the savages, trading in its web belt and company housing and advanced medical care and access to connex—all the benefits of Rim technology that the ranids worked for—in return for belts of shells and pearl-and-carnelian necklaces and stories murmured in reedy backwaters through jaws that need not move to make words.

Jean let his lips pull askew, aware the expression would mean nothing to the ranid. He hunkered lower, dropped his chin against his chest. “It’s not for you,” he said. “It’s for him.” He paused; the next was hard to say. “And for Lucienne.”

The argument with Caetei took longer than the one with Jean Kroc, despite the awkwardness of communicating with the human. But humen were manageable; all Gourami had to do was keep saying no. Whereas arguing with Caetei was like arguing with the tide. And there was the small matter of Gourami owing se self’s life.

—*They killed se mate*, Caetei finally said. Which was unfair because Gourami had brought back her body, and owed weal to the human’s band. Which meant, se guessed, in humen terms, her mate, her children, if she had any. Her siblings, though se wasn’t sure how much store humen set by siblings. Their reproductive system was so *invested*, it made everything about their biology and society peculiar, locked up, committed.

A humen mate...Gourami flexed fingers in the muddy channel bottom, where se and Caetei had retired to argue. It would be like having only one endosib, se thought.

What a terrible thing to lose.

Se came back up through the water and found the human sitting cross-legged on the reedy bank, reading something on a paper book he’d folded back on itself. Stories. Humen stories, Gourami thought, mouth watering.

Se lifted a hand from the water, catching the human’s eye. He looked up from the book quickly, and se thought he held his breath. At least the rushy rasping sound it made through his air passages halted. He dropped his hands into his lap.

—*Yes*, Gourami gestured.

And the human closed his eyes.

7

HUMEN WERE TERRIBLY STRANGE. THIS WAS NOT A REVELATION.

Not just strange because they came in all sorts of pigments, but very few patterns—unless one counted the rather bland, irregular melanistic speckles displayed by a few of them. Nor strange because of their stubby supernumerary fingers, their long bodies and stubby legs, their habit of walking upright on short curved feet with almost atrophied fingers. Not even strange because they were endothermic from birth, inefficient though that seemed for a large terrene animal without any particular evolutionary strategy for

coping with extremes of climate, so that even in temperate areas they hung themselves in insulating layers or smeared lotions on their hide to protect it from sunlight.

The mammals that Gourami was familiar with were small dense-furred darting things, prey to reaverbirds and redcaps. But humen were big—mostly bigger than a person, although they had a tremendous dimorphism between their reproductive subcategories, so that some of the small ones were about Gourami's size and some of the big ones more than twice as big as anything but a great-parent—and Gourami understood, from talking with some of the friendlier ones, that on their home-world there were even bigger mammals. Some bigger than a full-grown nessie, which was the biggest living thing Gourami had personally seen.

This particular human was a large one, though not the biggest. His name, according to the humen liaison who had pleaded Gourami's help, was André Deschênes. And despite Jean Kroc's warning that he would be helpless, he paddled better than Gourami had dared beg luck.

Gourami was not in the skiff with André. The humen had sky-eyes, things that saw as well as any winged predator, and anyway se preferred to glide in the skiff's shadow, directing from below. Se had rid self of every bit of Rim equipment; se slate and the other accoutrements of se trade were slagged—carried off by friends or new allies in three directions and scorched over fire. Se would not trade them; humen technology had tracking devices in it, their equivalent of the air-filled metal tongue-bell roped to the harpoon one hunted greatfish with, so that one could swim down the wounded animal by sound. Any person to whom se offered the devices would have been at risk. Se had strapped in place only a knife, a slate of the sort intended for humen offspring, se belt and carrybag, and a (cocked, locked) harpoon crossbow with five extra quarrels.

Se was a "civilized" person, having metamorphosed near Novo Haven and been around humen all se life. Se had never been without their toys and shelters before, and se kept stroking the crossbow for reassurance. If the worst happened, at least se could shoot something.

Se mottles were back to a skin-plain pattern, however, which was comforting. Se had been a little worried se would be green for half the season. It had faded with a gelpaper Caetei had given se; one that Gourami had let dissolve on se tongue, because se did not care to stay out of water long enough to adhere it to se shoulder until it melted in the mucus. So se had chosen to ingest it, though that seemed an oddly reptilian way to consume medication when one was still perfectly fit, and permeable.

The water was too fresh. Persons had euryhaline tendencies, able to tolerate ocean or river water, or the brackish regions between...but saltless water tended to osmose into a person's body, which meant a lot of spitting and urinating as one's body processed it back out again. It was, anyway, better than becoming waterlogged.

But Jean Kroc had asked, and his reasons had been good. And so André paddled, and Gourami glided, and the gray light of dawn pricked through the reeds and made the surface reflective as they moved upriver, divided, side-by-side.

They were not alone. Caetei and Tetra swam before and behind, an honor guard masquerading as a reconnaissance team. They were part of the disguise; André could claim that the persons accompanying him were hired guides, coolies who had agreed to bring the hunter through the bayou and help find the renegade. If they were stopped, seriously, Gourami would have to disappear. Se genetic material was on file; se could not submit to a scraping.

Se fingered the box Jean had bestowed. Inside was a waterproofed ampoule, continuing the theme of things-to-be-internalized. It held luck, the human said. Luck being one of their humen words that meant

nothing, or meant four hands of things that were all importantly different. For example, they used it to mean *chance*, randomness. And they used it to mean a beneficial break in the same. And they used it to mean a repeated pattern, either for good or ill, that seemed in contravention of randomness. Which Gourami found philosophically opposed rather than allied concepts.

And, even more confusingly, they also used it to mean the *manipulation* of random chance and of probability, and the *ability* to manipulate it. Which is what Gourami would call luck. If se had to try to think in humen words. *And* they had other words that could mean some or one or several or all of these things, and which overlapped other concepts or sets of concepts as well.

The humen mind was quite incomprehensible. As if they did not recognize continuums of individual things, but rather assigned things to lumpish discrete sets and made a game of putting each one into as many sets as possible.

In any case, Gourami was certain from context that it was the last of these definitions that Jean Kroc intended. *Mojo*, that was another word for it. A better word, closer to the skin of the idea, like a bolt-hole one could just squeeze into.

Se could inject the luck, internalize what it offered, accept the contagion. Accept the mojo, choose entanglement, and accede to Jean Kroc's influence over se fate. Just about the time that se was concluding that enfouling self in the humen world—more than se was already—was a poor sort of plan.

Se scratched the underside of the skiff to let the human know se was swimming away, and tucked the rewaterproofed box into its pouch. Se would decide later. Right now, se was going to get something better to eat than could be filtered from the reedy water. A sweet fish, which could be shared with Caetei and Tetra if it was a big one, that would be nice.

And maybe it was technically poaching. But hadn't this been the people's home, the people's river first? And wasn't se already an outlaw?

Fine then.

Upriver se would take the human. To the greatparent-self, if need be. If Jean Kroc thought it important, thought André needed to learn, then so would it be done.

For a human, Jean Kroc was nearly a civilized thing.

The next day, a little after lunchtime, Jefferson Greene went for a walk. The suspended, slat-construction streets and the canals between the barges were almost deserted in the heat of afternoon, and the creak of the city pulling at its moorings and rubbing against its bumpers almost drowned out the distant laughter of a pair of children, though what little breeze there was blew the voices across the water.

It was still enough that the city stank, though Rim's offices were in a desirable spot on Bayside. Upwind of the bulk of Novo Haven, and with a clear view of the pale blue bay and beyond it, the long blue arc of the horizon, broken by the black slashes of drilling platforms silhouetted against the darker blue of the gulf.

Things got caught between the ships, though, ground up and trapped there, and there they rotted. Seaweed, sea animals, algae, the floating bodies of birds. Nobody was supposed to dump trash or offal in the bay, of course, but that happened, too—householders frankly more often than the crews of fishing craft. And when the city hadn't been broken up for storm in six or twelve months, as happened coming

up to the hot months after a quiet winter, the stench grew oppressive.

Jefferson wrinkled his nose and hung over the railing, resting his forearms on the top. He had a slip of silver and zinc and copper in his right hand, and he flipped it off his thumb and caught it over and over and over again. Heads, tails, heads, tails, heads, tails, heads. The sequence had only broken twice since he started experimenting the night before.

With a sigh, he folded the coin in his fist and resumed walking, elbows pulled back and hands tucked into his pockets. The street rasped under his steps, slats dipping a little. Not too much, and Rim kept its walks matted with springy white nonskid, so he couldn't hear his footsteps, just the pivots rubbing against the office barge. The laughter came again; it must be riding on an air-current coiling one of the other barges, because there was nothing to Bayside but the butter-yellow sails of a dark-green pleasure boat, tacking to windward with silver stickle-backed torpedo shapes darting through its wake. The sails moved in the breeze, rippling, but there wasn't enough wind to bell them out.

A cracked shell lay on the nonskid next to a pinkish stain. The remnants of some bird's lunch, and Jefferson swept it into the bay with the instep of his shoe. Things falling into water made a satisfying plonk.

The thought made him sick after a second. He turned and kept walking.

It wasn't that Jefferson didn't trust Closs, exactly. But he did know Closs thought he was an idiot. That Jefferson held a 53 percent share in his grandfather's company, as licensed from Rim, and so Closs had to do what Jefferson told him to do had no bearing on it. Closs would only protect him so far.

You couldn't buy loyalty. Not loyalty of the sort that Anchor Greene had commanded as the head of an explorer's crew and then the patriarch of the initial Greene's World Charter Trade Company, the sort of loyalty—and deference—that Jefferson had been raised to expect.

Anchor Greene had possessed that gift of leadership. And a not insignificant portion of the network of friends and associates that he had assembled was still in place. But Jefferson had never had his grandfather's knack for inspiring loyalty, or for identifying the sorts of people in whom it could be inspired.

He chose to believe that he did not care to trade on his grandfather's name. He had attended school offplanet, by telepresence at a Core university where his name meant as little as any Rimworlder's. Whatever Closs thought of him, he had earned his degree, his grades, his position.

It wasn't cloudy and the sky wasn't growing dark in any dramatic fashion, but the temperature had begun to drop. With the awareness of those who live on the water, Jefferson thought there might be some weather coming.

He'd fire Closs if Timothy wasn't one of his grandfather's protégés. That might be more ill-will than the fragile remainder of Anchor's circle could support without the vibrant presence of the man himself. And Closs knew too much, anyway. Such as, all about the decision to eliminate Lucienne Spivak once Rim's monitoring of her connex, her contacts, and her movements indicated that they had no choice except to silence her.

Tails, heads, tails, heads.

That sailboat had found a wind Jefferson didn't feel. The half-slack sails snapped, cupped and taut, and the little craft scudded over the bay like a symbol of freedom and self-determination. He followed it with his gaze; they were going the same way.

The sight ached under his breastbone, a lifting sensation. It didn't matter, after all, how ugly things had gotten, what mistakes had been made. He'd find a way out of it.

The wheeling gulls followed the sailboat, but after watching it a moment longer Jefferson turned away. Closs wasn't ruthless enough, when it came right down to it. He couldn't see—and do—what needed to be done. And if he didn't manage to catch up with the ravid witness, it would be up to Jefferson to field the contingency plan.

His hands were back in his pockets as he walked downtown, toward the center of the spiderweb of moored vessels that comprised most of Novo Haven. This wasn't something he'd ever want on connex, but there were still people he could call on. And some of them were in town.

André probably shouldn't have admitted it, as a city boy at heart, but he was enjoying the exercise. The skiff slipped through the water like a minnow, his paddle barely rippling the surface, and he only saw the froggies who were his constant silent companions when the tall one—Tetra—showed itself ahead of him to direct his route.

The work was like a meditation. Dip, dip, glide, the occasional brush of reeds against his bow as Tetra led him through a narrow gap, the sun on his shoulders and the nape of his neck beyond the shade of his hat.

He had no illusions that the trip would stay pleasant once it began to be measured in days. Or even possibly past lunchtime. And he wasn't wrong. By afternoon, clouds piled teetering against a stiff breeze from landward, high enough that he could see them over the tops of the arching reeds. Classic thunderheads, and if the breeze failed they would tumble in off the ocean on a wave of low pressure that would make a man's joints pop and groan.

He didn't paddle any faster, though. He struggled toward no shelter, in fact did not even have a destination. The storm would catch him if it caught him, and if not it would slide north and make landfall at Dabrey, where the continental shelf dropped off more steeply and sharp waves pounded crumbling red cliffs.

He was going to get wet sooner or later. Though the timing was inconvenient; his freshwater stores weren't down more than a couple of liters, and with good luck seeming to be at a premium, it would likely rain tonight and then in ten days he'd be down to purifying swamp water in the still.

It was a pessimistic thought. He didn't want to be paddling around a swamp in ten days.

Well, if he wanted out that badly, he could always bring Closs the frog's head on a stick. And forfeit his chance at learning from Kroc.

You paid your money and you picked your poison.

He was thinking about that, the poison and the taste of it, dipping his paddle and gliding, when not just Tetra but Tetra and one of the other two emerged from the water about ten meters upstream. The smaller one—Gourami, he thought, his proposed victim, though both of the little ones were of a size—swam forward and extended its wrist, with the slate.

—*storm coming*

He nodded, leaning away to balance its long-fingered weight clinging to the gunwhale. "Are you certain?"

It flexed its hands, a singular beckoning gesture that he thought was an irritable confirmation.

—*not safe for humen on the water, it slated. Follow. Shelter you.*

It slipped back, skull-deep in the channel before he could answer, and stroked away. Awkward and incongruous as they were on land, ranids moved through water with a stroke and glide his clumsy manipulations of the paddle could only mock. He followed, though, paddling harder now that he was not intent on setting a pace he could maintain all day.

The wind died as he passed through the next belt of reed, and now he smelled the storm. Funny to think you could, over the fermented reek of the bayou and the nearby salt of the bay, but the smell of rainwater and ozone was as sharp and strong as that of his own sweat.

No matter how hard he paddled, the froggies were faster. It almost became a kind of game, straining over each stroke, making it long and smooth, leaning into the next one, digging at the water with all his weight. The temperature dropped, cooling the sweat on his neck, and now the sun must be occluded, because its warmth vanished.

The third shape darted past him, green and mottled just beneath the soft brown water. And then he heard something pattering behind.

A hailstorm.

Brilliant.

When the precipitation started to hit, it stung even through his hat. At first that was all; the leading edge of the storm raised goose pimples—a stiff updraft tugging André's brim—and what fell was fat, shocking drops of water. It might have been refreshing after the heat of the day, if it hadn't gusted sideways into his eyes to prick and blind.

But behind him, he could hear the reed canes cracking like twisted straws. Two of the froggies swam backward, legs moving with long sculling strokes and pop-eyes above the water bearing an expression he would have thought worried, if they hadn't looked that way as a matter of course.

The channel grew choppy under his bow, the skiff lurching drunkenly as the wind hit it crosswise. Hailstones rattled around his feet. One smacked sharply above his knee, a blow solid as a fist. The skiff rocked violently to the other side. André grabbed the gunwale left-handed, almost losing his paddle as the little craft pitched.

Another big hailstone glanced off the crown of his hat and left him stunned, shaking off scattered bright flashes. One more struck his shoulder, numbing his arm to the elbow. *If I'm not lucky the next one's going to crack my skull.*

What the hell.

Lucky.

He stared at his left hand, made the fingers close though he could not feel them, lifted the paddle, and dragged it through the water. The skiff rocked forward. André ducked his head against the blinding rain. Luck.

It would be lucky if the big hailstones missed him. It would be lucky if the wind swung round to his back. It would be lucky if he didn't get brained by a fist-size chunk of falling ice—

He hunched his head between his shoulders, regretting the return of sensation in his arm. Numb was better than prickling flashes of electricity.

A storm was a chaotic system. No way to model the whole thing, not without a more powerful computer than his headset. No *need* to model the whole thing, though. Messing around with weather systems as a whole tended to have long-term repercussions. And nobody could hold that in his head.

Not even Jean Kroc.

Maybe he wouldn't have to. Because the only thing he had to affect was this particular corner of it, this microcell. Just blunt the force, angle it around him—another hailstone rabbit-punched him, and he rocked forward, gagging. All it would take was a series of lucky coincidences and the wit to take advantage of them.

He had the knack. He'd always had the knack. Jean Kroc wouldn't have taken him if he didn't have the knack—

Sideways, swirling, eddies, angles, wind and rain, random chance. Not so random. You could feel it when it clicked, Jean said. Like a wave pushing, like a wind filling your sails. You grabbed it and you rode.

Had it, had it, balanced, fine-line, the wind parting the rain before him, the hail bouncing harmlessly to either side, cold numbing his fingers, stinging his face. He got the paddle in the water and his weight behind it, shoving the skiff forward, the froggies slick shapes in the water, greeny-brown.

One of the ranids popped up out of the water like a prank snake from a can. It hunkered, wincing, head sunk against its shoulders, short neck completely retracted. The hands paddled, wide-webbed, in an unmistakable beckoning gesture.

Solid earth. Land. A little hillock rising between the reeds, a green bulge rising out of the channeled swamp, the reeds parting on either side. The ranid winced and meeped as falling ice struck it, kicked off with a powerful leap and splashed down five meters closer to the skiff. The shock of impact nearly sent André face-first into the water.

Had it. Had it. Riding the edge—

The hailstone that struck him roundly between the shoulder blades knocked even the thought of breath away. He held onto the paddle mostly because he was doubled over it, wheezing, failing, struck again, again.

And then the skiff surged forward, propelled from behind, strong ranid kicks driving the prow onto the muddy bank. André spilled forward over the gunwales, rolled, pushed himself up with the paddle, gasping. Ooze dripped down his face as he grabbed the skiff and hauled, and then one of the ranids was beside him—Gourami, the smallest of the three—helping haul, flinching at the smack of ice. It pushed, and André heaved, and the skiff flipped over. As the froggie slithered down the bank, André dropped back into the mud and writhed under the edge of the skiff, a hailstone bloodying his mouth before he made it.

He retreated into the shelter, the mud soaking through his shoulders, and listened to the hail smack against the hull of the skiff.

It was not going to be a pleasant evening.

WHEN MORROW CALLED CLOSS, IT WAS A CAUSE FOR CONCERN. When she called him at home and didn't waste time on pleasantries, it was very nearly a cause for panic.

"Cricket Earl Murphy," she said, as Closs towed his close-cropped curls. He wore another towel wrapped around his waist, water still beaded in his chest hair. No matter where he was, Morrow's calls rang through.

"Who is she?"

"Nobody," Morrow said. She smiled that particular, mysterious smile. One of the things that Closs liked about her was that she wouldn't milk it, though, or make him abase himself for the information. She'd enjoy the superiority of knowing she had his curious attention for a minute, and then she'd share.

She didn't let him down. "She's an archinformist. With no past. Or possibly too much of one."

Closs nodded, running searches. Empty. Empty. Empty. "She doesn't exist."

"But she does. She's fucking André Deschênes. And she's colluding with Jean Kroc."

"I'm not turning up any images. Any information at all."

Morrow's smile transformed her face. She was at home as well, he guessed; tendrils of hair caressed her cheeks, and her face was scrubbed pink between the freckles. The focus was tight on her face, but he thought she was wearing a collarless white shirt. "You wouldn't. It would take a better data miner than her to pull that, and there aren't that many data miners better than Cricket. But I can tell you something about her. You'll need to know it: Spivak managed to dump part of her information to Cricket before she died."

They had what Deschênes had brought back to them. But it was incomplete; Spivak had, they thought, been in the midst of deleting her hard memory when she died. And they hadn't succeeded in cracking the encryption. Which was actually reassuring, because Jefferson's man Kountché had procured copies of everything Security got off Spivak's body and corrupted the originals.

However, if the rest of the data were out there, and in the hands of a competent archinformist, they had problems. And an opportunity, because if this Cricket Murphy cracked the codes, and if Charter Trade could retrieve, collate, and access the files, it was possible that they could uncover the identity of whoever it was in Charter Trade that had given Spivak the information in the first place.

Closs wasn't about to forget that he also had a burrower to contend with. Greene would be starting a witch hunt any day now, if he hadn't already. "We'll need to retrieve her."

Morrow nodded. "There are rules."

Cricket Earl Murphy was *Cricket*, Closs noticed. Not *Murphy*. Morrow would no doubt eventually get around to explaining that, as well. He nodded, to let her know he was ready to hear her conditions.

"Protect her," Morrow said. "Keep her safe. She can be detained, but she's not to be harmed."

"How do I find her?"

Morrow's smile was so irrepressible as to be infectious. It made her brown-flecked eyes seem to glow.

“It’s easy,” she said. “She hasn’t changed her appearance. So, unless she’s skinned, she looks just like me.”

Cricket liked that nobody cared how she looked while she did her job, and that she could work anywhere. Reclining on the second-story deck, for example, crosswise in a broad colorful hammock with her feet up on the railing so she didn’t swing on the wind.

Or anyway, that’s where she would have been if it hadn’t been pelting down hail, chunks of ice big enough to dent the poly of the conservatory roof. Instead she sat inside, her hands folded around a steaming mug, her eyes half-lidded, and with the fraction of her attention that was not otherwise engaged, watched the ice fall.

André was out in that somewhere. She wished him joy.

The undersides of the clouds were gray and flat, smooth-textured. As good a backdrop as any for the images that waltzed across her retinas. She didn’t know what she was looking for. Sometimes that was all right, though; you knew it when you found it.

Lucienne’s fragment-of-a-file also commanded a third of Cricket’s attention. It was tightcoded, bio-locked to Cricket’s neural pattern. Useless to anybody else unless she extracted it. And yet Lucienne—dying, *murdered*—had felt it was necessary to encrypt it as well. Which argued a high level of sensitivity.

Enough to kill someone over. She’d tried every code key she could think of, every half-remembered joke and lame catchphrase a friendship developed over the years. She had nothing.

She blinked itchy half-forgotten eyes and leaned against the chair-back, wishing her spine would release. If she didn’t go in for a massage soon, she’d regret it. André was useless for helping her relax...and she wasn’t about to let him put his hands around her neck again anytime soon.

She paused the search and backgrounded the decryption session. As she rose, the thought struck her.

What if it hadn’t been Lucienne who encoded the files? Then the code key would be something Lucienne knew, or had memorized, and probably saved to wet memory only, where nobody could hack it. She listened to Cricket, and Cricket had taught her everything she could think of that might help.

There was no way Lucienne could expect Cricket to know such a code. Not unless Lucienne somehow passed it on to her.

Which, of course, she might have. With the recording of her death.

Cricket was going to need more than a cup of keshu to get through this.

She didn’t keep any rec drugs at home, other than six different herbal stimulants—two kinds of earth caffeine and four offworld brews—so she was stuck waiting until the hail slacked off. The trip through driving rain, down to the next barge to buy liquor, was long enough for her hands to have started shaking, cold at the center of the palms, when she let herself back into her apartment.

She’d bought harsh, cheap vodka, something intended to numb her brain and her tongue. It came in a fragile disposable. She drained the last of the keshu, touched the heating element off, and popped two bubbles over the empty cup. Even the rough scent was steadying.

She gulped, two mouthfuls, then gagged on the searing third but choked it down. The alcohol made her light-headed, as much from the fumes as from the scouring sensation.

She should be sitting down, lest she wind up on the floor again. Not in the chair; that might tip. She settled cross-legged, leaning against the wall, and decided that was uncomfortable. She stretched out on the floor instead, her head pillowed on a repurposed chair cushion.

And went inside.

The first time, the pain had taken her whole attention—the pain and the awful knowledge, the migraine lights flashing before Lucienne’s vision, an aurora of green and violet and shocking pink. Now she tried to look through it, sort the surface thoughts, riffle the images and words and strings of thought flickering through Lucienne’s racing, failing mind. She pressed her palms to her closed lids, as if she could press the swelling agony back inside her skull. Her brain might have been herniating into her eye sockets; whoever told her a cerebral aneurysm was a painless killer had obviously never died from one.

It was easier without the distraction of the massive, interrupted download and Jean clutching at her. She could focus; she could feel it, everything, the waves and the pitch of the flashboat, the coronas of color, the scent of the sea. A suprisingly rich environment. A suprisingly rich feed to waste bandwidth on, when you were dying.

It had to be here. Lucienne had hidden it in here somewhere. There was no other reason for all this...detail.

All the way to the end, she rode Lucienne’s death down. Again. And she didn’t find it.

She opened her eyes and lay, flat-back, staring at the pinkness through her fingers. The vodka came up her throat, burning; she choked it down again. There was more on the counter if she needed the help.

And if she was too drunk to notice what Lucienne had been trying to show her when she found it, that would be stupid. Cricket sighed, gritted her teeth, and went through it one more time.

All those colors. She wondered if there was something fractal, concealed in the water, in the silhouette of the shoreline against moon-streaked indigo. If she subtracted the colors, the shattered light, might she see it then?

Nothing. No help there. Nothing out of place—

—nothing but the colors themselves. Those specific values. Green and violet and shocking pink.

Wavelengths.

Wavelengths were expressed in numbers.

The colors were the key.

She was just slotting them into the decryption protocol when her downstairs alarm starting ripping into the back of her head. *That* was a reflex. She was on her feet and moving, wishing the postmigraine tension headache pinching her upper face were a mask she could peel off and drop aside.

And then she forgot its existence, as she kicked her flat monitors to manual override and found the place encircled by half a dozen men and women in Rim Security uniforms. They’d circumvented the perimeter—they might have managed it even if she hadn’t been distracted, though that was no excuse.

A single flashboat was moored across the channel she could see from her window, two more uniformed officers climbing up to the street. Patrol officers routinely carried chemical accelerant weapons on Greene's World for animal control and dealing with the smugglers and activists, who could be violent. The short arms and tasers strapped to their thighs gave her pause, nonetheless.

She had Lucienne's unlocked data in her head.

There was no way she was going quietly.

There were options. She could take a hostage, but Cricket didn't want to shoot some cop who was just doing her job. And that would still leave her trapped in her house with no way out—they were trying to shut her connex down now, but her countermeasures were holding—and information she needed to get to Jean Kroc. She'd had no chance to look over the files, did not yet know how damaging, or how critical, they might be.

The timing was almost too bad to be coincidental.

That thought cascaded implications, bringing the stinging pinch of her headache back with a vengeance. At worst case, that was a very nasty suspicion indeed. It could be chance and luck and even a bit of conjuring. Or it could mean somebody had a bug in Cricket's head.

That wasn't a chance she could take. She caught up a jacket off the back of the chair nearest the sliding door to the upper deck—it lived there, for just such reasons as this, and was waterproof, with sealed pockets—and let herself out under the conservatory roof, next to the open sundeck. She wasn't wearing shoes: a lucky break. And as long as she stayed under cover, in the warm moist space, the officers across the channel would be unlikely to spot her. The greenhouse was cramped with plants, ornamentals and flowers rather than the practical vegetables she and Lucienne had grown.

For a moment, she mourned the conservatory. A convenient, sharper ache to distract her as she took a breath and severed her connex. Her sight dimmed, the flicker of attention messages scrolled out of existence, her archive links and news feeds and the conversation boxes of a couple of black chats frequented by archinformists and freelancers vanishing like blown flower petals.

It made her chest hurt when they went, as if her breath had been cut and not the flow of information.

She did it at Jean Kroc's, but this was different. Then, she *knew* when she'd be stepping back online.

The shrilling alarm in her head vanished, but a real sound took its place. A voice, male, baritone. Calm. Counting backward from fifty.

It was as much of a warning as she could offer. She really didn't want to kill anybody. And she'd always thought a countdown was self-explanatory.

There was an air supply in her escape coat, along with some other things. The water four meters below was gray and filthy, churned by the storm. She'd have to hit it straight, or she could break an arm, her back, her neck.

She kicked the channel-side window out and dove through the reaching branches of an Earth-imported ficus. Not even the officers on the street below got a shot at her, or else they were holding their fire.

It was nearly sunset and the afternoon storm had blown inland, trailing wreaths of mist, by the time Jefferson pushed his chair back and stood. He felt it, too, the pain in stiff muscles and joints provoking a

groan as he twisted and stretched. The damn chairs his assistant had ordered were comfortable, but you forgot you were sitting still in them, and then you paid for it. He should set an alarm, something to ding or zap him every half an hour so he'd get up and move around.

The office was quiet. If summer weren't half here already, the sky outside the windows would be the blue-gray of a Rim Security uniform rather than streaky silver still. The storm had left a chill on the air; he bulked his sweater and grew it a high ribbed collar. He hated a cold throat.

He glanced at the silvery coin on the edge of his desk blotter, an English fifty-pence piece from about 5 B.G., but didn't pick it up. He'd tried a few; that was the best one for flipping.

His support staff had received permission to go hours before, so when the light on his panel blinked pink-white, incoming, he activated his headset and took the call himself. His first job had been in his father's office, taking calls. He'd worked his way up; he believed, as his father and grandfather had, that it made him a better boss. And that it built loyalty.

This call was voice only, internal. From the lab. Someone calling from a headset rather than a desk or wall phone.

"Jefferson Greene."

"Hello," the caller said. A woman, pleasant, efficient. Dr. McCarter, he thought. "May I speak to M-Greene, please? Panel says he's still in the office?"

"This is Greene. Not the only one working late, I see."

She hesitated. "I'm sorry, Chairman. I didn't expect you to answer your own phone."

"They all left me here," he joked, trying to sound vexed. "I've been trying to find the door for the last half an hour."

She laughed, which didn't mean anything. Everyone laughed at the boss's jokes. "Chairman, I've been working on a research project, assisting Dr. Schaffner—"

If Neil Schaffner had brought her in, Jefferson could probably trust her. Schaffner was old school, a college friend of Jefferson's grandfather who had spent enough time relativistic that he'd already outlived the old man by fifty years. Family relationships got a little complicated when near-light-speed travel got involved.

"The rapid health issue," he said.

"Yes. And I'm a little unclear on what we're going after here—"

"We have intelligence that a rogue splinter group of ELF called GreenWorld has been in contact with illegal biolabs offplanet," he said. "We're concerned for the health of our rapid workers. We're dependent on them for our undersea mining operations. And there are humanitarian reasons."

"Indeed," she said. "How reliable is this...intelligence?"

"Cross-confirmed by three sources. And we know what ELF provided the lab."

"GR-R seven twenty."

The rapid pathogen that Jefferson had arranged for Schaffner to have access to. "Yes."

“They’re a coolie-rights organization,” she protested, while he paced slowly back and forth, the index and middle fingers of his right hand pressed to the bone behind his ear as if they effected the slightest improvement in his hearing. “Do you believe they’d . . . introduce a weaponized pathogen to the native population simply to prevent them from working for Rim?”

He cleared his throat. “We don’t know,” he said. “We can’t take the risk that they might. Which is why I need you to tell me first of all, if it *can* be weaponized. And if it can, to tell me how virulent they could make it.”

“And to come up with a cure.”

“Right,” he confirmed. “A cure.”

Cricket swam with frantic concentration. The blast would be directed upward; everything was carefully shaped, both to protect bystanders and to prevent her own soft flesh from soaking up the side effects of the demolition. And the water would protect her from gunfire if the Rimmers decided that swimming away constituted a defensible assault upon a peace officer. But that wouldn’t prevent somebody with a spear gun from coming after her.

The explosion might, though, so when the water glared barred crimson and the shock wave thumped her solidly in the ribs but did not turn her inside out, she gave herself a half-second’s pause to enjoy the relief. The oxygen supply was functioning well; she bit down on the regulator and drew one careful breath, pacing herself. Then she kicked forward again, driving through the water.

She had some way to swim. Her closest safehouse was a mile east; she could not do that underwater on emergency air. But she wanted to put as much distance between herself and that swarm of Rimmers as feasible before she dragged her dripping, disheveled self up onto the street in the middle of the weeknight dinner crowd. Not that people didn’t slip off scoots all the time, but it was memorable.

And memorable . . . was bad.

The closest safehouse was probably a bad idea, too, simply by virtue of being closest. But it was well stocked and pleasanter than the other ones she could get to on foot, which were more along the lines of bolt holes. If she made it there she’d have dry clothes, additional changes of identity—there was one in the escape jacket, but only one, and she didn’t want to trust it unless she had to—and something to eat. She’d also have access to an uplink that wasn’t connected to the one inside her head.

She missed the connex already. Dead reckoning was a crude way to navigate; the global positioning coverage for Greene’s World was riddled with gaps, but it was better than this.

She dove low, grateful the tide was in, and sculled through water still turbid from the storm. The great checkerboard of the channels and barges made squares of light and dark overhead. The undersides of the barges were outlined with safety or running lights, waterproof strings of green or blue or gold, sometimes interrupted with an odd-colored bulb. The water, milky with silt, caught and diffused the glow so that Cricket thought she swam through clouds of rainbows.

The lights weren’t the only thing shining. The storm had borne along quantities of warm water. This made Cricket’s impromptu nighttime swim more pleasant, but it also meant that her arms and hands were outlined in eddying swirls of minute stinging jellies, though these were too small and immature to so much as raise a welt on even human skin. Shoals of long-bodied fish sharked through them, sweeping up mouthfuls, as innocent of Cricket as Cricket was of anyone who might still be hunting *her*.

Her air ran thin after fifteen minutes. She might have a breath or three left, but she'd rather save it for another crisis. She let herself float to the surface, almost motionless, arms angled out to stabilize. When her head broke the water she gritted her teeth to breathe slowly, saltwater drooling from her nostrils on ropes of mucus. She dared not cough. There wasn't much water down her throat anyway. It had all gone up her nose. All she could smell was ocean, as if her sinuses had been misted with a spray bottle. It stung the inside of her head, the back of her eyes, grit coating her teeth as she expectorated. A head full of muddy ocean: that was asking for a sinus infection.

If she was lucky enough to live long enough to be spitting out green snot, she decided, she'd endure it cheerfully.

More hazard lights outlined a dangling ladder. Not far. She drifted toward it, the lap of wavelets bumping her shoulder against the crusty waterline of the nearest barge. She heard voices but not close, maybe inside, behind open windows. They didn't seem to notice when she slithered up the rope ladder, though it seemed she banged and thumped with every rung. There was music, too, though, and secondary voices. An attenuated explosion made her shake her head.

They were indoors watching the news.

Like most of Novo Haven would be, if she'd stopped to think about it. There was more than a primary distraction provided by a pretty good boom.

The streets would be half empty.

A disadvantage, too: no crowds for Cricket to get herself lost in. But she wouldn't have to worry about absolute crowds of people remembering a dripping woman with seaweed in her hair.

Sirens sounded. It was a moment before she realized they did not come from the news feed. She tucked herself against the barge's external bulkhead in the shadow of a fire escape. Her jacket had autocamo, unless she turned it off. She blended into the white walls and dappled shadows as if she were part of the wall.

Two flashboats sizzled past, narrow and hissing, both of them in Rimmer livery with the blue-mauve-gold flashing on the prows. What she caught of the news story blamed the blast on terrorists, perhaps the same ones responsible for the destruction of a rapid recruitment center and a security barge earlier in the week. *No group has yet taken responsibility*, Cricket mouthed along with the feed. She raked her hair back with her fingers, trying to make the sodden curls seem intentional, and moved away from the wall.

Her first safehouse was six blocks on, and if she hadn't already been on knife-edge and shaking with adrenaline, she might have missed the nondescript white scoot parked at the dock, the Rimmer plain-paint flashboat half concealed behind the usual gaggle of water taxis. But she was wary and watching, and after putting herself against a low wall—to break her human silhouette—and peering over, she found two other watchers on nearby roofs.

This, too, was closed to her. Which was a quandary. She was cold and disregarded, had no dry clothes, and the cash cards in her pocket might be compromised. If she connexed, they might find her. And if she didn't connex, she had no resources at all.

She could try to get to Jean Kroc, but as Lucienne was dead and Cricket was being hunted, his house would be hotter than anyplace else on Greene's World she might try, short of walking into Rim and snapping the cuffs on herself. Dammit.

Cricket had made a practice of never limiting her options, and here she was with none. She needed a dry

place to sit, first off, a warm corner out of the wind, and someplace to finish cracking Lucienne's message and find a way to get it to Jean. Because if Rim got her, she wasn't going to let them do it while she still had that in her head.

She stepped back out of the streetlights and headed for Bayside, away from land—away from where Rim would expect her to run. Toward them; their headquarters. Their strength.

And just the sort of place, among the docks facing open water, to find a nice cabin cruiser to break into for the night.

The first thing Cricket did after reactivating the security system was steam herself pink in the shower. Subverting the cruiser's expert system had consumed a timed forty-two seconds. A strictly mechanical alarm would have withstood her longer.

Thank God for the stupidity of smart machines.

She scrubbed at salt and filth, angling her face this way and that to try and clear her vision with the moisture from the steam. She didn't need her eyes for Lucienne's documents; she flicked through those as fast as she could parse them into hard memory. She didn't slow to consider the content; if she started thinking about what she was ripping, she'd—

She didn't know what she would do. Her hair clutched her fingers as she shoved it back from her temples, working stolen conditioner through. Sand gritted her scalp, wedged her nails. If she didn't grease the rat's-nest up and comb through it before she washed, she'd set the salty tangles into knots.

Three cycles of lather and rinse later, she was still pinching sharp quartz from the strands, but she didn't think she was likely to get any cleaner. And she'd finished the first crash-pass on the data. From here on in, she could read as well in a hammock as in the shower.

Under other circumstances, she would have scorned the clothes she'd swum here wearing. But she didn't have the luxury of fastidiousness, so she borrowed the cruiser owner's bathrobe while she ran shirt and trousers through a cleaning cycle. The jacket wasn't home-washable, but the waterproofing had held up; she hung it in front of a fan. In the morning, with luck, she'd be able to beat the salt crust off and go.

She heated soup—she'd run a DNA scrub through the whole place before she left—and ate it while she listened to the ghost of Lucienne. The implications of even the fragmentary data were profound enough that her spoon was clicking on the mug before she realized she didn't know what soup she'd eaten.

Rim kept secrets from the Core. The Core kept secrets from Rim: no surprises there. One of the stranger benefits of having once been someone else was that the someone she had been *knew* how much was concealed. And sometimes even had a general idea of what not to ask about in order to ensure everyone's comfort and continued peace of mind.

Or, in this case, where exactly to shine the light.

The mere existence of omelite itself was classified. Rim and Core ran the Slides; the technology was unpatented and tightly held, the secret enforced by loyalty oaths backed with wet viruses. That the stuff occurred naturally—that it was *mined* on Greene's World—was a bit of information that it had taken *Cricket* ten years to unearth, and she was generally unrivaled when it came to finding things out.

What Lucienne had transmitted, to Cricket's unscientific but educated eye, was a series of documents regarding mining practices at Charter Trade tanglestone bores. The stuff was innocuous, found laced

through crumbly shales that were as often as not also oil-bearing. And it was more precious than any other substance known.

Patterns were Cricket's stock in trade, and as she sorted files, she found patterns emerging. Patterns of injuries, disappearances, safety failures. Strings of shocking accidents, unreported to the Miners' Union or that laughable body, the Rim safety commission, because the victims were not human.

And odder things. Coincidences, sidelong references, sly jokes in e-mails about elves and hauntings. Or of inexplicable happenstance and random chance, déjà vu and double vision. Things got a little weird near the Slides, and near coincidence engineers in general. She'd seen it happen around Jean.

But this seemed more concentrated.

There was more—enough callous safety violations that even Rim's emasculated media might not be able to resist the story. But what really caught her attention was a sine wave pattern of duplicated events; a compressor piston arm breaking, for example, and then three weeks later the replacement breaking in the same place and manner.

Another pattern, and she guessed she knew the cause of this one. A pattern of sabotage.

Which led her to another conclusion; that Lucienne *had* been somehow involved in the recruiting facility bombing.

Cricket stood and carried her mug to the sink, washed it—by hand—dried it and put it away. She left the spoon on the counter; she didn't mean to hide her presence, merely display politeness.

Maybe it would encourage the owners to put in a decent security system.

This—was a quandary. She held in her hands—or her head—a friend's dying bequest. A stolen gift, one tangled up in an uncomfortable moral netting of extremist politics and radical actions. But it was also exactly what Jean Kroc needed: the evidence of cascading coincidence, of disregard for life and limb, of cover-ups and concealment of the environmental cost of the tanglestone mines. And even if Lucienne had painted a target on Cricket with this information, it had cost Lucienne her life. Cricket owed a friend something for that kind of commitment, too. Whatever her life was now, Cricket had made her own mistakes in the past—was still making them, if André Deschênes was any indication—and frankly, she'd class some of them as mistakes only because she got caught.

Cricket had done worse than anything Lucienne and Jean might have committed. The fact that it had almost all been perfectly legal—

—well, that was beside the point, wasn't it?

She would find a way to get the file to Jean. Anything else was cowardice. And then she'd figure out if she had a chance to restart her life just once more, or if the cat had drowned for the last time.

Three explosions in three days, and not even one of them had been Closs's idea. Standing on the ravaged street beside what remained of Cricket Earl Murphy's flat, he contemplated a fourth—more metaphorical than actual. But he considered it a point of honor that when his staff reported a failure, they did so with more shame than trepidation. He didn't care to be feared—at least, not by his allies and subordinates. That was a crutch for men insecure in their power. Machiavelli's outlook had not been so much simplistic as limited by his times.

There *was* a certain sort of person for whom fear was the most powerful motivator. Closs understood and accepted this, but he considered such people erratic and unpredictable, and they were not the ones with whom he chose to surround himself.

Of course, Machiavelli's prince had not had the luxury of selecting his subjects, and Closs did not have the luxury of selecting his...prince. But then, what soldier did?

He bore that in mind, and kept his temper and his voice level as team leaders and liaisons explained in painful detail exactly what had gone so wrong with the attempt to capture Cricket Earl Murphy, aka Moon Morrow. And truthfully, he couldn't muster much anger.

Legally, in both Core and Rim, the cloned offspring became the parent at the moment of birth. This cheerful legislative dodge effectively discouraged replica cloning except in terminal cases. Given his own close association with Morrow's clone-daughter—the new, legal Moon Morrow—he was reasonably certain that the original was more than a match for Rim security.

It was to his officers' credit that they had come even so close as they had. Especially considering the shoestring haste of the operation.

And now, Closs had to call up his own version of Morrow and explain to her how they had missed. And see if he could get her to explain how somebody got from Earth all the way out to the Rim in...less than two Terran standard years.

He already had a headache.

"Maurice, please."

"What would you do if I ever left this office, Major?" The image was, again, high quality. Maurice wasn't at his desk this time, unless he was running a skin; the background was the bay view through the screens in the staff lounge. Nobody had died in this explosion: the spiral up the fluted edge of Maurice's ear shimmered crimson, fuchsia, silver.

"What can you tell me about experimental or theoretical means of faster-than-light travel?"

"Experimental? There's no such animal, unless I missed an *Astrophysics Monthly*. Theoretical...space warps, tesseract, what, you want something practical?"

"Let me give you a base assumption. Assume it has been done. How did they do it?"

"Oh, chum the water, Timothy. That'll keep me up nights. Okay, how did they do *what*, exactly? What are my parameters?"

"Get one person from Earth to Greene's World."

"How fast?"

Closs shrugged. "I don't know. A couple of standard."

"Man, you don't come cheap. All right, I'll get back to you. Would you like any more impossible things before breakfast, Major?"

Closs smiled. "*I'll* get back to *you*."

Eventually, the rain stopped and André slithered from the shelter of the overturned skiff. Clotting mud flaked from his shirt, cracking off his skin when he bent his neck. Something was wrong with the shirt now; it didn't flex properly across his shoulders or in the crease of his underarms.

"Lousy damned tech." The point of the smartshirt on a trip such as this was not to have to worry about laundry or carrying extra supplies. If it had stopped processing dirt and perspiration, he couldn't repair it by rinsing in a channel and drying over a branch.

He should have prepared for an equipment failure. It was his own foolishness. But this wasn't his usual venue, and he hadn't exactly had a lot of time to pack.

He tipped the skiff back onto its belly and rummaged in the hull. Fortunately, his supplies had been lashed securely—otherwise he'd be picking everything out of the mud. He pitched his shelter and set it to inflate, assembled the filtration system, and walked the perimeter of his mud spit until he found a bank that wasn't strictly slime and shattered reeds like broken knife blades. He took a leak against a shrub, then picked a gingerly path to the water's edge, keeping his boots on. The jumble of hollow stems looked sharp enough that he wasn't sure even thick soles would protect him.

Bruised and strained muscle twinged as he squatted at the channel's edge. He'd never get *clean* this way, but he didn't have to be crusted.

Babysitting, he thought, rolling his eyes. It wasn't just the coolie that Jean Kroc was getting out of the way. André knew he shouldn't expect more. He was paying the immemorial price of apprenticeship: things concealed, games of trust.

He didn't believe for an instant that Jean was through testing him.

He paused, elbows on thighs for a moment, resting. Sunset was over, the sky still dimming. The smells of rot—some rich, some fetid—rose all around him. The mud was full of flat black-stained particles of decaying leaf; he worked his tongue against his palate, turned his head, and spat. Mud curled over the projecting edges of his boot soles.

Full moons tonight; there'd be enough light to go on by, if he chose to. But if he was hunting a running coolie, he'd camp for the night rather than risking the swamp in darkness. The savages killed people.

And under cover of night, he could have a longer conversation with his tour guides without fear of satellite observation. They would be invisible, as long as they stayed in the moonshadows. Amphibians did not show up as warm spots to a sky eye.

He palmed up water, scrubbed crusty dollops from his eyebrows, and rubbed them from his beard. The mud had dried in little hard berries; they crushed into powder and the powder, wetted, melted instantly back into mud.

That was a good sign that it would dry due to body heat and crack off his shirt if he just kept wearing it. The autofit and self-clean might be able to take care of the rest if he gave them a chance to regenerate.

He washed his face again and rested a few moments longer, contemplating the deep ache in his muscles, the pull of tendons against bones. He was tired—weary—but despite exhaustion and bruises and the sharply tender spot on the back of his head, he was also hungry. And thirsty, but the water purifier could satisfy that want.

He parted reeds and stepped through, surprised to find two of the three ranids crouched beside his cooker, three bright fish speared on twigs turning over it. "Hello, Tetra," he said, making an effort to

sound polite and then rolling his eyes at his own silliness. As if they could hear the sound of his voice. “Hello, Caetei.”

The short one made a gesture André took as greeting. The tall one extended a scraped and roasted fish; he pinched the twig between his thumb and first two fingers. He expected bland meat, scorched with the scales burned off. But it smelled of herbs. He sucked flaking flesh from the skeleton, chewing carefully. Gagging on a fish bone out in the bayou would be a hell of a way to die.

Not bad, but it could use some salt.

He’d never actually seen them eat before—not anything more solid than green tea or gruel—and the process was fascinating, if revolting. They hadn’t teeth; they were filter feeders. Their wide bony mouths weren’t fitted to chew or tear, though the bony frill around the rim of mandible and maxilla could deliver a nasty bite...if you believed the media.

Tetra was processing the filets, using an unlotus leaf spread in a flat dryish spot as a cutting board. It did not so much slice into bites as mince into a paste. The knife was teak-handled, with a blade of some plastic or shock ceramic. The ranid cradled it in a three-fingered, one-thumbed hand. The thumb and the outside two fingers folded around the handle; the first finger extended along the spine of the blade, turning the knife, in essence, into a slicing claw.

A claw that it used with graceful facility. It portioned the minced fish into thirds, scraped each onto another unlotus leaf, and handed the first to Caetei. As it was half rising—to call Gourami from the water, at a guess—André realized he had the means to give the fish the help it needed. He stuck the twig with the nibbled meat on it into the ground and stood as well.

He was turning back, a squeeze tube of salted plum paste in his hand, when he realized that Tetra and Caetei had both frozen in place like run-down clockwork novelties. Caetei was still couched on the ground, fingers spidered over its plate. Tetra was drawn up tall, shivering slightly with the strain of standing erect on its crooked legs. It stared at André, both eyes focused on his chest, pupils contracted. If it had been human, he would have guessed that it was about to go for him.

It was about to go for him. Or it was waiting for him to go for it.

He leaned forward, against the pressure of the regard. Not to make the ranid look down; it wasn’t staring him in the eyes. But trying to reassure it, to reach out to it without grabbing or invading its space.

Caetei hunched lower on the ground, a glossy mottled rock.

André actually yelped when something wet touched his hand. The third frog was there, Gourami. It beckoned him closer with two webbed, hooking fingers, and when he hunkered down, it tapped the backs of his knees.

Well, that was plain enough. *Sit*. André dropped onto the reed-covered mud and leaned toward the slate Gourami held out. Backlit letters confronted him.

—*You stood when se stood.*

André nodded, hoping the ranid would understand the gesture. Without retracting the slate, it keyed a next phrase, and a next.

—*Se reacted to threat. Se is a far-swimmer. Se would fight.*

André lifted his gaze from the panel. He didn’t want to get into a fight with a ranid in a swamp.

“Far-swimmer?” He shaped words carefully.

Gourami’s fingers rippled, one of them lumpy and swollen. Whether this was agreement or irritation, André was too human to tell. He turned to Tetra; it was fussing with Gourami’s leaf plate as easily as if nothing had happened. It reached out without looking up and brushed the side of its hand against André’s. He was already coming to recognize that gesture, the request for attention, like catching someone’s eye if one were human.

You couldn’t catch another frog’s gaze through muddy water, though, could you? It made sense, if you thought about it.

Tetra held out its hand, making a pincher movement. Its webs expanded, as if sucking something that might wriggle away into its grasp. The fingers pointed down; the overall effect was rather like the grab of a crane.

Bemused, André lifted the salted plum paste into the creature’s grasp. Startlingly swift and deft, Tetra unscrewed the top and began investigating the contents just as any chef would.

“I’m not sure that’s safe,” André said, but all three ranids ignored him. He turned back to Gourami and its damaged hand. Its fingers writhed on the slate, as if it was trying to frame a comment. When André reached out to touch, the ranid did not withdraw its hand though it leaned its whole body aside.

André touched gently, stroking tacky, coated skin. There was no heat in the injured flesh, which was odd, because he could feel the sponginess of retained fluid, cushioning the twisted joint. “That needs to be put right,” he said, enunciating carefully as Gourami watched his mouth. “It will slow us.”

Of course, Tetra wouldn’t understand his words—could barely hear his voice. And even if it could lipread, it wasn’t watching André. But the noises he was making must have drawn its attention, because it sealed the tube of plum paste and shuffled over. André scootched back, not wishing to make the mistake of standing again.

Even if his butt was getting soaked.

Tetra reached past him and took Gourami’s hand, disentangling the sticky fingers from the case of the slate. Gourami shuddered, eyes staring off at an obtuse angle from each other. André had the bizarre impression that it was staring at its knees. Tetra must have said something, because Gourami flinched dramatically. And Tetra did something sudden and uncomplicated with its hands. A slight nauseating pop followed, and Gourami made a sound André felt more than heard.

These conversations would be easier on the headset, he thought. But who’d let a ranid uplink to their wetware through a slate?

But then it was done, and Tetra went back to fixing Gourami’s dinner. It handed the plate to Gourami without ceremony, though Gourami made a little dance of receiving it. It dabbed at the smears of plum paste decorating the minced fish doubtfully.

Tuna tartare, André told himself resolutely, watching Gourami scoop the pasty substance into its mouth between sidelong glances at Tetra. The taller ranid crouched over its own dinner in apparent oblivion. Some sort of courtship ritual? Gourami seemed flustered enough.

André shrugged and applied himself to his own dinner, much improved by the addition of a condiment. As Gourami was wiping the sheen of fat and salt from its leaf with a forefinger, André piled the last sucked fish bones on the ground. “You were going to tell me about far-swimmers,” he said, when the

motion caught Gourami's attention. Maybe he was getting the hang of this.

The froggie scrubbed its hands together, then wiped them on the underside of the leaf before searching out its slate.

—*One who has earned mating.* It still favored the finger when it typed.

André touched the tip of his tongue to the center of his upper lip and pressed, feeling flesh indent. “But you don't...mate.”

—*We don't fuck,* Gourami corrected, stabbing at the keys with vicious satisfaction. —*We have exoparents and endoparents.*

Typing more slowly now. André wondered if he had guessed right, if it had been angry, or just in a hurry. “Fathers and mothers?” André tried. He had some idea how it worked, or thought he did, anyway.

Gourami nearly slapped the *no* key with the side of its palm. —*Exoparents mate. Endoparents bear.*

“What does that have to do with far-swimmers?”

—*You swim from home to mate,* it explained. —*The farther you swim, the stronger those who will mate with you. Exoparents contribute zygotes. Endoparents raise the broods and teach them.*

“Somebody else's children.”

This time, it just pointed at the *no* button. —*Your children, humen. Somebody else's genes.*

André gestured around the camp. “You're not a far-swimmer.”

—*I was a liaison.*

“So was Tetra asking if you would be its...endoparent?”

The ranid hesitated long enough for André to wonder if he'd crossed some line of taboo. Then it crumpled the leaf in its hand and made a quick oblique gesture that André thought meant no. As if realizing that he didn't understand, it reached for the slate again.

—*not that.* And pushed the slate away, decisively. And then just as decisively, took it back. —*Pay us.*

“...pay you?”

—*We take you through bayou, not for bandweal or clanweal, you owe. Pay us.*

It stared at him, fishy eyes unblinking, focused intently on his chin. The dropped articles were haste, he thought, not ineptness. Alien cultures, and no way of knowing what sort of bargaining Jean Kroc had done to make it accept his protection. “How do I pay?”

—*Tell me a story, André.*

Gourami was good at understanding humen gestures, for a person. Which was not very good at all compared to the complex information that humen could convey with nothing but a rearrangement of their facial muscles. Se thought the long blinking stare was befuddlement, perhaps shock. But se could not be sure.

—A story?

—A narrative. A tale. A fiction. This new slate came with a built-in thesaurus. All these complicated human synonyms that weren't, quite.

Se liked it.

André Deschênes stopped and now he was definitely staring. Staring and blinking: for a moment, Gourami almost thought of him as a person. But then he said the most astounding thing se'd ever heard. He spread his stubby hands, paler on the ventral than the dorsal surface, and shook his head.

—I'm sorry, but I don't know any stories.

9

CLOSS WAS LATE ENOUGH THE NEXT MORNING THAT JEFFERSON beat him in, even though Jefferson overslept. Centuries before, virtual commuting had been hailed as the wave of the future. People would eat, sleep, play, work in the same spaces.

Like so many other predictions, it hadn't quite worked out. In Jefferson's opinion, this was because the setup ignored the basic human need for politics. For a community.

People seemed to enjoy the separation, the act of putting on a suit, skinning up, and coming in to the office. And the ones who didn't enjoy it needed the discipline. Leaders and followers, the top dog and the pack animals. It was how it was.

Anyway, Closs's uncharacteristic tardiness was extraordinarily convenient when Jefferson had contingency plans to lay that he didn't really want Closs getting wind of. And that Jefferson preferred to implement in person.

Not that he ever expected to have to use any of this. But it was good to have a fallback position.

The bioengineering labs were on the *Richardson Explorer*, a massive vessel currently moored about thirteen kilometers offshore, using the oldest group of omelite platforms as its base. The labs were too delicate to trust to a barge in Novo Haven, and trying to build a permanent structure bigger than a minifab on land on Greene's World was an exercise in pissing to windward. If unstable earth didn't collapse into sinkholes beneath it, a vast tropical storm would scour it from the surface.

On Greene's World, security meant being able to run.

Jefferson took a helicopter out. He flew himself, because the day was clear and he needed the hours, and it was just as well if Closs couldn't corner his pilot and ask awkward questions. All of Charter Trade's helicopter pilots were ex-military, and all of them revered Timothy Closs.

The clear morning gave Jefferson dazzling light off the water, and he spent the brief flight marveling as he always did at the view through the poly floor panels. The bay itself was brilliant as white spinel, the drop-off to the gulf delineated by the dashed row of drilling platforms.

Any clouds were scudding, cotton-candy things, but Jefferson double-checked the weather report compulsively. Weather blew up unexpectedly in Novo Haven, and cyclone season was upon them. Not that a real howler would come tearing out of the tropics without a week of warnings to get the city out of the way—and Rim's Exigency Corps conjuring like hell to bend its path in the least harmful

direction—but savage squalls could arise out of nowhere. And helicopters were inherently delicate creatures, hanging as they did from a single joint.

The flight, for all his caution, was uneventful. The *Richardson Explorer* had cleared her landing deck for him. After setting his chopper in the bull's-eye and powering down, he clambered out of the bubble and met the second mate on deck. “Don't worry,” he called, as soon as he was close enough to make himself heard over the sea wind without screaming. “This isn't an inspection tour.”

The woman smiled too much, but at least it wasn't that canned fake laughter. “Dr. Schaffner is waiting for you below.”

He followed her down. Her role of tour guide could have been played by any ensign, and he amused himself by deciding, as they walked, if he would choose to accept the honor in the spirit in which it was offered, or have a word with the captain about the wasteful use of trained officers.

Maybe a memo, he decided, rather than picking a fight today. And one that didn't mention this particular officer's name: she was trying too hard, but her heart was obviously in the right place.

The forward bioengineering lab was two decks down, still well above the waterline. The second officer rapped on the door, then opened it from a keypad.

“Why knock if you're going to let yourself in?”

She shrugged, lifting the handle. “It's polite to let them know we're coming.” And stepped aside to let him precede her.

He followed her into an unpleasant, echoing space. The ceilings were low, metal, ringing back sounds with hard crispness. The long room was crossed at regular intervals by slate-topped tables cluttered with interfaces, isolation hoods, incubators. A centrifuge hulked at one end of the nearest lab bench like an irate stone toad. Other things hummed or dinged; Jefferson winced.

He glanced over his shoulder at the second officer. She shrugged. “The safety officer is always after them to wear ear protection in here.”

“I'll see to it,” Jefferson said. “Why haven't they requisitioned soundproofing?”

“We were denied, M~ Greene.”

He turned. White noise had drowned out her footsteps, but Dr. McCarter's voice carried over the machinery hum. She was a tall woman, broad-shouldered, made taller and broader by high-heeled slides and a white labcoat. She was a startling blue-eyed blond, her hair twisted up at the nape of her neck. Jefferson wondered how much of it was a skin; she didn't affect particularly pretty, but there was something about the eyebrows and eyes that was very...engaging. “*Denied?*”

When she smiled, her cheeks appled. Even when it was as insincere a smile as she used now. “An unnecessary expense, Chairman. If you would come with me? Dr. Schaffner is expecting us. He's just selecting some images for you to look at.”

Jefferson glanced around the lab, with special attention to the scraped ceiling. He hurried two steps to catch up, aware of the second officer's understated withdrawal. “Unnecessary?”

“So the lab budget committee informed us. This way, please?” She gestured through a sliding door; he stepped through, and it sealed behind them, cutting the worst of the noise. This was a smaller compartment, the walls upholstered in noise-dampening foam. Dr. Schaffner sat before a wood-topped

desk, hunched over an interface. He peered one-eyed through an eyepiece, and lifted one hand in greeting as they came in.

“Hello, Doctor.”

“Jeff.”

Schaffner got up, rubbing his nose to smooth away the dent from the eyepiece, and blinked a few times to refocus. He stuck out his left hand, and Jefferson shook it while Dr. McCarter stepped back, rounding the desk to the far side.

Schaffner was slab-cheeked, tall, a little stooped, with theatrically busy eyebrows. He continued. “I’ve picked out some good ones to show you, but I hope you don’t think this is going to be easy. Or fast, for that matter.”

Jefferson nodded, taking the chair Schaffner gestured him into. He smoothed his hands over the warm wood of the table, considering its contrast to the dinged and whining equipment on the other side of the wall. “What are we talking about here, in terms of fast?”

“Years,” Schaffner said. He fielded a significant glance from McCarter and amended, “Years at the earliest, reasonably speaking. If we had a sample of the pathogen to back-engineer, it would be different, of course. But we—”

“—don’t. I understand. Hey, Neil, what if you got lucky?”

“How lucky? Lucky enough, we could have you something—for testing, not for use—in a few months, but that’s so unlikely I wouldn’t want to hang a statistic on it.”

“I think the chairman is asking what would happen if he saw to it that we got lucky,” McCarter translated, without looking up. She seemed to be scanning files on her headset; Jefferson caught the telltale flicker of her eyes and the micromotion of her fingers. “If I’m not out of place in saying so.”

Was her voice cool? Or was she distracted? She seemed not to notice as Jefferson eyed her, briefly. He cleared his throat and said, “How come you can get a hardwood interface, but no ceiling tiles?”

The last directed at Schaffner, who rolled his eyes theatrically. “Because the desk comes from equipment and durable goods, and the tiles come through facilities. Genius, isn’t it?”

Jefferson shook his head. “Genius. I’ll see if I can get somebody fired for you, Neil. Now, what about these pictures you wanted me to see?”

Schaffner reached for the control, hesitated with his fingertips resting against it. “Was Judith right, about what you were offering?”

Jefferson nodded. “Yes, if you’ll take the entanglement. It’s painless.”

Neil Schaffner looked at him, pale eyes catching light under the silver thatch of his hair. He pushed the start control.

“I’m going to need some rapid volunteers.”

It wasn’t a great idea to call Moon Morrow for comfort, but somehow Closs found himself doing it anyway. He caught her at lunch, dining from hand-painted china with delicate silver manipulators. The

food was bitter greens and some cold, rare, shaved red meat. Bison, probably, unless it was offworld. He didn't imagine that Morrow would eat anything as unsafe as Earth beef, even if it were possible to get.

She wrapped greens in a shred of meat and raised them to her mouth, balancing the bundle on slender tools. He waited until she had swallowed and cleared her palate with a sip of water. He was opening his mouth to request her attention when she fixed him with a glance and interrupted. "There's been another attack, Timothy."

His voice died with the breath that carried it. "Where?"

A transfer icon blipped red in the corner of his display. Expecting a map or a series of still images, he accepted the data stream. And found himself immersed in VR as if dumped into fifty feet of water in a weighted vest—the images rushing past him while he struggled to start breathing, to remember to keep moving the air in and out.

And then the hard-earned combat reflexes took over, and—like a fish dumped overboard—Closs began to swim.

A starship—not a lighter, no, and he still read consoles well enough to see that they were slowing from relativistic; inbound rather than outbound, then. Alarm claxons sounded outside his helmet; he was suited and armed, the powerpack of a beam weapon weighing across his back. This ship had been relativistic for some time; the equipment was not unlike what he'd used when he was active duty.

For a moment, he was afflicted with a powerful sense of déjà vu. He could have been twenty-two and a lieutenant again, a kid fresh from Titan Academy, with more brains and guts than sense. But then the body he rode in moved and he wasn't in charge of it, and he relaxed. This was a game he'd played as a line commander, riding along in the back of a sergeant's or lieutenant's head—sometimes four or twelve at once. The miracle of modern warfare: even the guy at the back knew what was going on at the front, from many angles.

He couldn't imagine what it must have been like when you had nothing to go on but estimated positions, radio reports, and guesswork. What a way to fight a war.

He checked his vehicle's vital stats—PFC Amelie Heaney, age twenty-three (or about 115, nonrelativistic), currently nursing a sprained ankle from training and a sour stomach from the antifungals she was taking for a welting, cracking case of athlete's foot.

The information might flow faster, but the soldier's lot never changed. Currently, her heart rate was elevated, her eyes were darting port and starboard and up and down, and she was only breathing slow and deep because she was consciously regulating the pattern. Her squad was six; two were right behind her, three more detailed to survey a different corridor. Her ship was the Earth Core Company *True Blue*, and she was one of twenty-four marines on board, each of them working out a resettlement stake.

Their normal concern was pirates, though PFC Heaney had never seen one. She thought they were pretty romantic, for space scum—striking, pillaging, and vanishing into the future on a trail of hard-bent light. But there weren't many; cargo didn't travel by shipping, which left only the ransom for human lives to interest an opportunist. So they mostly struck shipping close to its point of origin, while there might still be somebody alive on the homeworld who cared.

Once they'd passed the halfway point, she'd started anticipating a quiet trip.

And it had been. Until about ten minutes ago.

And now she was sidling along the *True Blue*'s aft main corridor, her half-squad guarding her back, a beam cannon strapped to her right arm, and every siren on the ship warning of imminent hull breach. Unless they wanted the ship herself, PFC Heaney didn't have the first idea what might be going on.

Closs envied her innocence. Because now Morrow was feeding him schematics, the real-time record of the ship's nervous system, the sensory motes that webbed her hull and bulkheads. That knowledge overlaid Heaney's advance, and he wanted to shout at her, as her own commander must be doing, that the hull ten yards down the corridor was losing integrity, that the corridor would soon be violently open to space.

He multitasked; Morrow threw more feeds at him. He could handle the six half-squad leaders; he made Heaney primary—she was closest to an incipient breach—and watched the other five peripherally, also prioritizing the hull sensorium.

Heaney and her squadmates quit their cautious slide and hustled. Forward, not back, as befitted marines. Their goal was to clear the airproof bulkheads and be on-site when the boarding party came in through the breach. External cameras were showing something weird; not just crawlers ripping the shielding with armored talons, but a night-black macro-fog, a machine made of multiple-component machines—each as big as Closs's fist, and black enough that the object looked at first like a missing patch in the hull of the *True Blue*. It flexed against the hull like a starfish humping a submarine, and sudden white crystals glittered around it.

The snow-globe effect was why Closs knew a split second before Heaney did that the hull had been breached. She found out the hard way; the joints of her vacuum suit stiffened, and the boarding claxons fell silent, though she could still feel their shiver through the magnetic soles of her boots. In the corridor, both behind the half-squad and ahead, airlock shields crashed down, sealing them in.

The rush of expelled air ripped at her suit, but the magnets held, and she was still planted solidly, bringing her weapon to bear, when a knobby matte black tendril curled through the rent in the hull. It groped, twitched, telescoped at the marines with reflexive speed—

Heaney's weapon lashed out silently—no atmosphere to sizzle under its bolt—and was followed a split-second later by those of her squadmates. There was a projecting bulkhead on either side of the sealed airlock and just inside, designed to provide cover; the squad dove behind it.

Just in time, as the black tendril slammed after them. It sparked and arced, withdrew, shedding ragged bits of eviscerated foglets. Some of the component machines stuttered and twitched on the corridor floor. Heaney kicked one away as it grabbed at her suit; the armor held. The thing went flying.

She looked up to see the tendril coming apart into hundreds—thousands—of crawling machines...

Morrow cut the feed. Closs slumped against his desk chair, rolling his shoulders back. His right hand ached from clenching on the trigger of Heaney's weapon. "All of them?" he asked.

Boarding, making sure that the marines and crew saw the enemy, interacted with them... when the enemy could have just shot a big rock at the *True Blue*. Starships were impossibly easy to destroy. This didn't make any sense. He looked at her, image to image, light-years between them, and waited for her to give him an answer he could accept.

She shook her head, and failed him. "It took the ship apart," Morrow said. "Find me a solution, Tim."

Clean, dry, illegally skinned, and wearing stolen clothes, Cricket spent the next morning and afternoon hiding in plain sight. It was both easier and harder than she expected, and quite strange overall, because she didn't dare connex.

She could surf news through a public terminal, but she wasn't confident that the false persona she'd chipped off the stuff in her jump kit would hold up to a Rim security scan. She had a nasty suspicion that something had come in with the information that Lucienne had sent her.

The data was tagged, maybe. And the data was in her head. And there didn't seem to be much she could do about it, because Cricket couldn't find the tag, or beacon, or whatever might be in there.

Which was a problem long-term, if she wanted to live. Or if she ever wanted to work again. And a problem immediately, in that activities as simple as hailing a water taxi or paying her lunch tab became infinitely more complicated when you couldn't just connex the bill. She had money; her jump identity was supplied. But accessing or using it was going to be a real trick.

There *was* somebody she could talk to, if she wanted to take the chance. André trusted him. But André trusted Cricket, too, which wasn't exactly a testimonial to his excellent judgment.

How far she'd fallen, if Nouel Huc was the best she could do for an ally.

She was waiting at the Zheleznyj Tigr when the doors opened. She paid at the door, with a dwindling cash card, and was the first one into the club. Uncool, but she wanted to beat Huc here.

At least André was unreachable. Huc couldn't ring him up and spill the beans; whatever Jean Kroc said about André's motivation, Cricket didn't trust him either. She didn't trust his ethics or his glib head full of self-justifying stories and she didn't buy his motives for wanting to learn to conjure. But she'd had that fight with Jean, and Jean was as stubborn as they came. It didn't matter how many times Cricket pointed out that André was the worst kind of sorcerer's apprentice—the sort that lied and snuck and eventually betrayed. Jean was sure he could save André, and if he couldn't save André, that he could use him.

And Jean was mad enough to see it as a challenge, too. A test of his dedication, to reclaim the man who had killed Lucienne.

She wasn't going to make excuses for Jean Kroc. He knew the parable of the snake as well as she did. He was just crazy enough to think himself immune.

She picked a round table at the front, near the stage. Nouel Huc's habitual table, with its red-handkerchiefhemmed tablecloth and its white waxflowers nodding sleepily in the vase. The server tried to talk her into another seat, but she tipped her head and said, "I'm expected."

She wasn't pretty enough to be believed, not dressed like this. But Huc did his own species of business, and his clients weren't all as natty as André.

"Will you be on M~ Huc's account?" the server asked, with at least a show of politeness.

Cricket thought of the dwindling balance on her cash card. "Yes."

Let Huc take it out of her hide. She had enough to offer that he could stand her the cost of a meal.

Whether the staff of the Zheleznyj Tigr called him, or whether he was just running early, it was less than a quarter before she looked up to find his shadow falling across her. "M~ Huc," she said, placing a hand on the edge of the table to help her balance to her feet. He laid a hand on her shoulder and she sat back.

It was a reassuring hand, whether or not he meant it to be. “I understand we are acquainted?”

She relaxed into the chair as he stepped away, moved around the table, and sat. She liked the way he set his elbows on the table, too, wide apart, and leaned forward between them, not bothering to hide an amused smile. He wanted her to soak in that warmth, she thought. Soak in it, drown in it. Trust him.

He was better at it than André, and she thought he could probably also beat up her father if he had to. But she really didn’t need to go about collecting spare thugs. Not right now.

“Not under any name it’s safe for me to use,” she said. Her skins were pretty good; they’d hold up even under a parser filter. “But I’m a friend of André Deschênes.”

“How close of a friend?”

“Very,” she said, calmly.

He nodded. “We’ve met before. You’ve changed your hair.”

“And everything else,” she answered, and he laughed. “I’m in trouble, M~ Huc.”

“Call me Nouel,” he said, and patted her hand. “You may speak freely here. Though I’m recording.”

“Thank you, Nouel.” She hesitated, and he stepped in smoothly to fill the silence.

“And what shall I call you?”

Cricket hesitated. There was the name on her false ID, of course, but that was intentionally bland. She wanted something that was less of a lie, at least as much hers as *Cricket*. “Fisher,” she said, after consideration. “Like the cat.”

“There’s a cat named Fisher?”

“No,” she said, laughing. “There’s a kind of weasel they used to have in the part of Earth where I grew up. They were called fisher cats. They weren’t cats. And they didn’t fish.”

“Ah,” he said. He looked up and waved the server over. “I see. And you’re not what you pretend to be either. One moment”—as he ordered wine in a lowered tone—“please, continue. Are you a fisher, Fisher?”

“I’m a data miner,” she said. “And I have some information I will pay very handsomely to get to Jean Gris.”

“And there’s a reason you can’t deliver the information yourself.”

She had her mouth open to answer as the wine came, and held her tongue while Nouel pronounced it acceptable. The server filled their water glasses. They ordered, and as the first course was brought to the table, Cricket reminded herself that it was unwise to let him penetrate her defenses so easily. Formidable charm and a formidable wit did not translate to unassailable honesty.

When she had eaten the first few bites, he smiled and said, “So. You owe Jean Gris money.”

Cricket had been waiting for it, and so she managed a cool look, rather than bursting out laughing. “If it pleases you to think so.”

“If there are greater risks,” Nouel said, with a negligent gesture of his snail pick, “it would be clever of

you to inform me of your reasons. It will affect the precautions necessary to see that your message goes through.”

“I have several reasons, all of them excellent.”

His right hand rolled through the air, two fingers extended as if winding the words from her throat onto a ribbon.

She shook her head. “It would be safer for you not to know.”

“M~ Fisher, you have just described my stock-in-trade in its entirety. Perhaps you would be so good as to explain to me exactly what you need, and what you are willing to pay?”

Which was the challenge she would have to meet, of course. She sipped wine, rolling it over her tongue, almost shocked by wood and vanilla. It had been a long time since she’d had wine like this. Part of successfully reinventing one’s self, of shedding an old personality, was reinventing *everything*. Likes, dislikes, favorite places, the type of people one associated with. Not just the hair, the clothes, the skin, the postures. To become someone new, you had to swallow it whole, without reservation.

Cricket Earl Murphy wasn’t a wine drinker. Maybe Fisher would be, when Fisher became more real. “I have an entire clean established legal persona to offer,” she said. “Also, five thousand demarks in cash or cash-equivalent. And a favor from an archinformist. In return, I want a message taken to Jean Gris, and I want assistance in documenting another legal persona, though I’ll do the hackwork myself. I just need somebody who can forge the necessary. The problem is that the message I need sent to Jean is all in my head and I need a clean isolated system to download it to, because I think I have a beacon in my head as well, and I can’t connex. Jean, by the way, is no doubt being watched. Which is why I don’t dare go to him.”

“You’re offering a lot for some pretty simple requests.”

She wasn’t going to tell him about Lucienne. If he’d helped André do it, she didn’t want to force him into a conflict of interest. “I have proof that Rim is covering up a major ecological disaster in progress,” she said baldly, and forked up a mouthful of scallop sashimi and shredded radish. “I’d like to force them to do something about it before they poison Greene’s World so badly that Novo Haven goes the way of Patience Station or Port Katherine.”

Fifty years after a reactor core excursion, a radius of a hundred miles around the former planetary seat of Enlil was still uninhabitable. Cricket couldn’t be held personally responsible for *that* one, but the long shadow of Port Katherine had been one of the cudgels used to bludgeon her from office...when she had been someone else. She scratched a nail across the tablecloth, feeling the tip catch, bend, and release on each thread. “Nouel?”

He seemed suitably impressed, still staring into his wineglass with his lips pursed out and twisted. He glanced up when she said his name. “You trust me not to go to Rim with this? There’d be a lot of money in it.”

“Enough to retire on,” she agreed. “And you’d have to.”

In an industry where contracts were unenforceable and a deal was still sealed by a handshake, she wasn’t exaggerating. If he turned Cricket in, there wasn’t an archinformist on the Rim that would give him so much as the time of day or the local acceleration due to gravity.

He scratched his thumb across his chin. His nod did nothing to ease the tightening wire of tension laced

across her spine. This was merely embracing danger in a new shape.

“Stay through the play,” he said. “Come home with me tonight. We’ll set you up. Now sit tight, won’t you, and finish your supper? I have to make a couple of calls.”

In the morning, the earth shook. This was not uncommon, and Gourami would usually have slept through it, drifting weightlessly for sleeping, anchored by se toefingers in the bottom mud and with eyes and nostrils just protruding from the water. But it was se watch, predawn, while Tetra dreamed, the human slept in his temporary structure, and Caetei swam hunting. And so Gourami was sprawled on slick mud churned up by mudskitters—driven from their tunnels by the previous day’s rain—waiting for the human to awaken.

Gourami calculated quickly, decided that they were far enough up the bayou that any water surge would spend itself among the reeds and hillocks before it reached them, and rolled supine to sun se belly. Rustling shook the tent; the human struggling into his clothing, no doubt. Gourami licked eyes to clear the night’s grit from them, the warm sun flooding se veins with heat and energy. Se couldn’t sun too long, but se could certainly use a little exothermal assistance in digesting last night’s excellent meal.

And then the earth shook again, harder and sustained, and Gourami flipped upright and crouched. Se trilled an alarm note. There was a thrash, a splash, Tetra jerking awake, and now thumping inside the tent and some humen noises. A moment later, André flailed out, his boots flopping unsealed. Gourami lurched forward, croaking in dismay, already certain what would follow.

Se did not reach the human in time.

He hit the fallen reeds, which were covered in the layer of wet silt and rotting plant matter the mudskitters had expectorated. He took three staggering, sliding steps, windmilling his arms, and for a moment Gourami almost thought he was going to regain his precarious biped balance. Their mode of locomotion was just falling forward and catching themselves anyway; how hard could it be for them to stop an unintentional falling?

Hard enough, apparently. He went down ugly, all weird angles and wiggling, whatever noise he made audible to a person’s ears as a high-pitched yelp, and he hit the mud with a quick green-sounding pop. The earth was still shuddering, a long hard rumble, and Gourami wanted to be in the water so badly se skin itched. Instead, se dragged across the splintery reeds on all fours, scratching palms and ankles, miraculously making it to the fallen human’s side without putting a stick through webbing.

The human lay on his back, one leg tucked under him and the other splayed out. He panted heavily. That was good; he was alive. His eyes were screwed up like fish mouths, though, little puckers in a sweating face, and his hands clutched into the mud and reeds, fingers sunk deep. Gourami did not think that was promising.

Se reached out, tentatively, and touched the back of a humen hand. He groaned, and se flinched back, realizing as se did so that the earth had stopped shuddering. Whatever noises he was making weren’t words, se didn’t think, except occasionally when his mouth moved in the shapes of profanity.

He couldn’t read a slate if he didn’t open his eyes, and se made a louder, insistent noise. A vibrato thrum, as one would use to summon eggings. Se remembered something about humen bones; they were all hard, calcified, like skulls and jawbones, and like skulls and jawbones they could shatter.

Se tapped his hand again, harder. His eyes opened this time, pupils contracted. Sweat stood out in beads

across his scalp and trickled down the furrows alongside his nose; humen did that because they could not secrete mucous, and also when they were in pain or shock. Gourami had seen injured humen before.

Se thought this might be bad.

André blinked, several times, breathing more evenly now, as if consciously controlling each intake and outflow. Could humen do that? They must be able, because Gourami could see the lines that meant concentration or fear or anger—fuzzy creatures, one signal for so many things—and they were easing as he breathed. Se typed quickly, for once using the abbreviations se usually spurned.

—*u need hlp*

He nodded, and mouthed —*I broke it. And my back is cut, I think.*

The reeds, of course. Fingerpads skipped over keys. —*let tetra look*

Se came beside Gourami, hanging back a little, and touched Gourami's ankle to steady them both. André nodded again, and closed his eyes, waiting, while Tetra and Gourami quickly deflated the shelter and dragged it down beside the injured mammal. Gourami tucked what se could of it under his shoulder and hip on the side that seemed less hurt. He could help, at least. He lifted his hand and reached up into the air when she pushed the fabric under his torso, but rolling his hip up made him squeak.

His hands were already palm-flat, in the mud and on the fabric; when Gourami touched him again and made se hands tumble over and over, he nodded sharply. Se saw a taut flicker cross his face at the same time the muscles in his arms and shoulders tensed, and he levered himself up and over, falling face-first onto the tent. Tetra caught the injured leg before it could fall, but André shuddered anyway, like a dying fish, and went slack and still.

—*breathing*, Gourami said, holding fingers under André's nose to feel the tickle of air moving.

Tetra was looking at the limb. —*This is bad.*

Gourami looked at it, too, and retracted head between shoulders, an instinctive pained flinch. Thick blood dripped over Tetra's fingers and stained se webs; something white showed through torn flesh above the lip of the humen boot. His back was cut up, too, but he hadn't impaled himself; the bits of reed poking through his shirt were only slivers.

—*Give him to the humen? They can help.*

—*Make him uplink when he wakes?* Gourami asked. *I will hide. Except.*

—*He's bleeding now. How long will it take him to wake? Will he die before then?*

—*Yes. Those are problems. And also, if we send him back, Closs will send somebody else.* And, Gourami thought, sending André back now wouldn't help to teach him any of the things that Jean Kroc wanted him taught. And se had promised Jean Kroc.

They had a bargain.

And anyway, André's luck was suddenly, coincidentally, very bad, wasn't it? As if somebody were changing it.

—*We take him to the one-tree-island band. It's not far and they will hear us if we call*, se said, deciding. And was surprised when Tetra, a far-swimmer, did not argue.

Se just said, instead, —*go call them. I will keep his limb from falling.*

As Gourami wriggled toward the water, the earth began to shake again.

10

JEFFERSON WOKE TO THE SHRIEK OF AN EMERGENCY CONTACT alarm and a blue light winking by his bed. He came up clear-headed and with his hands trembling; his headset read the coded transmission and dumped epinephrine into his system. A call waited; he swung his feet to the floor, covers tangled around his ankles, and scrubbed granules from his eyes. “What the hell is it?”

Amanda Delarossa, the god-botherer. “Chairman, we have a problem.”

He stood, turned off alarm and flasher with a thought. His wife rolled over and pulled the pillow over her head. “Fill me in,” he said, heading for the closet. “What’s going on?”

“Did you notice the earthquakes?”

“I’m afloat,” he said. “I don’t hear the tsunami siren.”

“No,” she said. “No tsunami. Here”—she hypertexted a link—“look at this.”

Once upon a time, humans had bothered to use different terms when they studied of the dynamics of different planets. Now, it was all geology; separate names get unwieldy when you’re talking about more than ten or fifteen worlds. The site Dr. Delarossa sent him to was the Greene’s World seismic and vulcanology monitoring project, usually quite heavily dotted with recent activity. Jefferson thought it had something to do with the planet’s astounding tides, but he wasn’t even remotely a scientist.

He knew where his drill platforms were, however, and the three yellow star shapes on the globe that indicated quakes in the last quarter were all centered firmly along the edge of the continental shelf, offshore of Novo Haven, where his omelite wells blossomed. “That’s unusual.”

“Dr. Gupta has a secure packet for you,” Delarossa said. “He’s produced a very unsettling hypothesis.”

“Send it,” Jefferson said. His call-waiting blinked. “Closs is on the other line. I have to go.”

In the morning, Cricket went to see a fortune-teller. She knew better, but you couldn’t always let that stop you.

Nouel had warned her to lie low before he went out, but she couldn’t stand another quarter stuck in a cabin on his barge, trying to get some work done with the clunky manual interface he’d scrounged for her. She couldn’t risk connex, even with her hard memory downloaded; whatever was leading Rim to her might not be gone. She’d have to scrub the whole thing and reformat, which she should do anyway, before she installed her new history. So she spent maybe three quarters click-clacking on the keyboard and then got up, found her shoes on their sides under the sofa, and stuffed her feet into them while she skinned. She made herself a blue-eyed blond and about a half-decimeter taller, and used the good stuff—high-grade wearez, implants she wasn’t supposed to have. She’d gotten them on Earth, after she ducked out of jail. Or sent her clone to prison in her place, to speak precisely.

She didn’t use them often; mere possession was illegal. She’d run light-years to stay out of prison,

created a whole new person and betrayed her. Whatever self-knowledge she'd found, it wasn't the sort that left one eager to pay for one's mistakes.

The skin would hide her from just about anything, though. An ordinary cosmetic skin affected the perceptions of the viewer through his headset. *This* was a nanotech hack, and physically altered her fingerprints and retinal scan. She'd have to drop it to get out of Nouel's house and back in: he'd introduced her to his expert system, which expected her to look and smell and scan like herself.

Every plan had its flaw. But sometimes, living in the future was damned cool. Even if she couldn't get a rocket car.

She wandered through a too-warm morning, window-shopping geomancers and fortune readers. No friend of Jean Kroc's could take a storefront tarot reader seriously, but it beat waiting by the door for Nouel to come back.

And she had never been good at waiting for men.

She picked a place at random and pushed through the half-door, which was hung with bells and chimes made of silicate shells so that a layered tinkling surrounded her. Inside, she stood in shadowy coolness; fans moved air across her skin, soothing her nape. She peeled sticky strands from her neck, rubbing fingers smearing sweat rather than relieving her discomfort. "Hello?"

A thin, stooped man came out of the back, his hair a colorless fringe against his weathered forehead. "Early riser," he said. "What's your pleasure, M~?"

"Tell me a story," she said, and took the three-legged stool he gestured her toward.

"Your own or someone else's?"

She shrugged. It didn't matter. One lie was as good as another. "Whatever's more interesting." She extended her hand, in case he wanted it. He ignored it, and instead lit a candle with a gestured flame. Just a neat bit of wearez, but pretty. She wondered where he'd gotten the candle, and if it was the same place Jean Kroc went for his.

There was a mirror on the table, facedown on black silk. The fortune-teller turned it over with a flourish. Cricket was unsurprised to see nothing reflected in it but rippling black.

"Twenty," the fortune-teller said, and Cricket chipped him the cash from an anonymous account. He blinked crystal projection contacts over his irises—checking his balance, she guessed, and not wired for connex or hard memory. A lot of mystics got fussy about things like that, though most not as hardcore as Jean. Others didn't seem to care at all, and some had swallowed as much wire as Cricket had. "It works better if you ask a question."

"It works better if I give you hints, you mean," she said. She folded her arms across her chest and leaned back in her chair, aware how defensive her body language was and not caring at all. "Sorry. You're on your own."

After all, where was the entertainment if she gave it all away? Far more fun to watch him thrash.

A real conjure wouldn't play these games. This wasn't how the mojo worked. It wasn't for parlor tricks.

"You're not a believer?"

"Let's say I'm willing to be convinced." Jean Kroc had convinced her. Lucienne had convinced her—

Oh, hell. She sniffled as he bent over his water-dark mirror, studying the reflection of the flame. It was the only thing that showed there. A pretty good trick, Cricket thought. Probably a skin as well. Still, it was pretty.

Which made it better than half of everything in the world already. Maybe better than two thirds.

“There’s a man,” he said, after a few quiet moments. She caught the wet flicker of his eyeballs through his lashes as he glanced up to check her reaction. It was as good a starting point as any, and unless she was an orphaned lesbian, likely to provoke some kind of a response.

“Of course there is,” she answered, amused. As long as you didn’t take it seriously, you could look at these little trips as a cheap sort of psychoanalysis. And it sure beat the stuffing out of talk therapy with an idiot expert system. “Are you going to tell me that he’s tall, dark, and dangerous?”

“Actually,” the fortune-teller said, sitting back and crossing his own arms in mirror of her own, “I was going to tell you to look out for a frog to kiss. But you seem to have arrived with a narrative intact.”

It set her back on her heels, or would have, if she had been standing. Instead, she tossed her hair back and tucked her chin in, and started to laugh. “All right,” she said. “You get points for that one. I’ll quit giving you a hard time.”

“Oh, just be yourself,” he said, bending over the mirror again. “I enjoy a challenge.”

It was still bullshit, but once they decided they liked each other, he spun her a pretty good story. It even ended happily ever after, though there were trials and tribulations enough in the midgame to make the solution seem earned. Cricket left in a much better mood than when she had arrived, promising to keep an eye out for kissable frogs. She bought a cinnamon-sugarcruusted bagel from a street vendor and ate it steaming warm as she walked back to Nouel’s barge, wondering if he would even notice she had gone.

He was waiting for her in the sitting room, with a slender man she knew by reputation, a soft-cheeked archinformist with a coil of neon light up one ear like the stripped half of a DNA helix. They’d never met in the flesh before, but that didn’t mean anything to a data miner.

She hadn’t known, even, that he lived on Greene’s World. But she did know that he worked, almost exclusively, for Timothy Closs. Betrayal was a stone in her belly, and she couldn’t shift it just by swallowing, even when she told herself that she’d expected Nouel to hand her her head and had just been too fucking tired to really care.

Sorry, Lucienne.

“Fuck,” she said, as the door hissed shut behind her. “I should have gone out looking for that fucking frog prince instead.”

André woke mostly dry, mostly clean, and muzzy-headed. Before he opened his eyes, he let himself lie still, breathing, assessing the place in which he found himself. He was pin-and-needle prickles from the waist down, which was both reassuring and unsettling; if he was badly enough hurt to need a neural block, he was badly hurt indeed.

Except—

Whatever he was lying on smelled more like compost than a hospital bed. Green and sour-sweet and heavy, and so when he opened his eyes he wasn't expecting the papery green of trauma wards. It *was* green, green and fawn, and he jerked reflexively when he saw the reed-woven roof overhead, thatched with feathertree leaves.

Whatever numbed him, it wasn't narcotics. His movement brought sharper pain, an agonizing twist up his leg that he felt in his eye sockets and across the bridge of his nose. His hands curled into the bedding he lay on; a rank scent arose. It was moist and soft, and it wasn't at all the sort of thing he would normally sleep on.

The pain was vast. He lay back, balling his fists against his eyes, and concentrated on breathing. His leg throbbed; the pain paled and ebbed while he out-waited it.

He opened his eyes again. Everything was flat—undetailed, unaugmented—and real. The colors were off, the sounds muddy. This was a disconnect beyond merely shutting down his connex. Visual detail was sparse and undefined: he could not see the fronds of the feathertree thatch stirring in the breeze. Rather, a general sense of movement told him what must be happening, two meters over his head. He caught motion, and some part of his brain extrapolated it into an image.

Peculiar as all hell. It left him feeling half blind.

And unable to call for rescue. His headset was as useless as a pair of empty seashells strapped to his ears, as useless as his leg and his goose-egged, aching head. He didn't know how long he'd lain unconscious, but it was awhile, if the froggies had managed to throw a shelter over him.

But it was still daylight. Unless it was daylight again.

The leg was splinted uncomfortably, the padded ends of flat restraints pressing André's thigh above the knee. When he stretched even slightly, nauseating ripples of heat rolled up his leg from his shin again. Definitely broken. He grunted and closed his eyes until the pain subsided, then cautiously lifted himself onto his elbow.

The shelter had no walls. By the sun, he guessed it was late morning or early afternoon, and he could see enough mud to know that he was on a different island. If a mud spit in a swamp could be dignified with the term.

This one was larger and dryer and taller, though it still bore signs of periodic submersion. Half a dozen ranids clustered before the reeds, crouched or sprawled, their green and yellow mottles almost invisible against green and yellow leaves.

André couldn't tell them apart. Except maybe the tall one, draped in a net vest hung with old treasures, pierced trophies, jingling shells. That might be Tetra. Beside it huddled a crippled ranid, missing an arm from long ago, one side a ragged mess of scar tissue and proud flesh. André wondered if it had caught up with the wrong end of a nessie.

Another ranid bobbed forward, not as strikingly long and lean-limbed as the one he thought might be Tetra. If he could get a good look at the mottles on its back he might be able to tell, but for the meantime, as it extended a slate, he decided to risk it. "Gourami?"

It had to repeat that peculiar hand-puppet-like motion of its body before he realized it was imitating a human headshake. Pain dropped from his immediate awareness, replaced by an uncharacteristic spike of worry. "Is it safe?"

A scratchy-looking affirmative, from its free hand. André let his breath out slowly, wobbly with dumped adrenaline. Everything seemed muted, gray. *And what were you going to do if it wasn't?*

Panic, obviously. He did *not* want to be the one who explained to Jean Kroc that he had lost Jean's froggie. And anyway, the frog was...kind of engaging.

Not that he needed to be getting paternalistic about alien amphibians. Getting soft wasn't a good way to succeed in André's line of work, or even a good way to stay alive. He spared a moment to picture Timothy Closs or Jefferson Greene worrying about a coolie, and shook his head to clear it.

Getting soft wasn't the way to get ahead in anybody's line of work.

A moment's thought lead him to the obvious conclusion: "Caetei?"

And that was better: this time, it scritch'd affirmation with one hand, then thrust the slate at him again. It hurt even more to prop himself on one elbow and accept the device, so he dropped his shoulders back against the pallet. It was surprisingly comfortable, if a bit moist. His shirt adhered to his shoulders and his trousers—with one leg cut away midthigh—adhered to his buttocks and legs. He didn't think it was all blood or sweat or swampwater. Whatever the ranids used for bedding, on the other hand...

—*Good u wake*, the ranid's slate said, as he raised it in front of his eyes. —*Tide rsng*.

They couldn't be too far upriver, then. The New Nile boasted only a shallow gradient, and as far as André knew, if it hadn't been for the mitigating effects of the rushy bayou and the paramangrove, the tides might roll miles up the broad, placid river. But those features existed, and even Greene's World's embarrassment of lunar influences couldn't quite push the ocean through them. The New Nile remained an outflow channel.

The ranids must have moved him out-bayou, closer to the bay, because the tides had been minimal at the overnighting island. The move was good, a smart thing; it would make it easier for a rescue team to reach him.

"Move where?" he asked slowly, enunciating.

He couldn't heads-up the time or a tide chart, but Caetei had no reason to lie to him. That didn't reassure him as he metaphorically picked his way around the fissures in his mind caused by his headset. Even his hard memory was out of service, leaving an unsettling gap. He wondered how much was irretrievably lost. He had backups, of course. He was sane and careful and not as thoroughly paranoid as Jean Kroc, nor the sort to take mad risks. The backups were a vulnerability, of course, the sort that somebody like Cricket could exploit if she knew where to find them, which was why André's were hidden, physical access only, and key-coded.

Unfortunately, that meant he had to get *to* them to get them back.

"I can't move myself," he continued, when Caetei did not reach to answer.

This time it typed quickly. —*We move b4*.

It reached down and tapped a stick by its foot; André, in a moment of disconnect, realized that he was lying not on a pallet as he'd assumed, but on a sort of stretcher. "I need medical help."

—*We take u grtprnt*.

...whatever that was. A witch doctor? Some sort of ranid village elder? A bayou-living human? The

froggie equivalent of Sitting Bull?

It sounded very significant. But he needed a doctor more than the answer to a coolie xenocultural exam. “Have you sent someone to bring help? I need an evacuation now. The leg will fester.”

Caetei might not know that word, but there was probably some kind of translation protocol in the slate. But Caetei stayed stolid and pulled the slate back. It hung it on its belt and crouched beside the shaft of the stretcher. Three more ranids hopped from the weeds. Tetra was not one of them, and all those who came up wore not vests but web belts strung with tools. André remembered that Tetra had some sort of special status in the group, a dominant reproductive and social role. Which perhaps exempted it from work.

Or perhaps it was just tired, and he was reading too much into things. Other ranids were surrounding them now, more than he had noticed waiting, so that his stretcher—his *litter*—was borne in the midst of a sort of hopping, weaving green honor guard. While Caetei was still looking at him, he asked again, “Where is Gourami?”

But Caetei’s hands were full, and it didn’t answer.

Gourami, it transpired, was already where they were going. It lolled in a shallow backwater, the ridges of its hips and its protruding eyes and nostrils breaking the surface. André didn’t see it until the others set his litter down on a pair of cross-braces that must have been prepared in advance. A fair amount of planning had gone into this operation.

Gourami paddled to the bank and stood, water sheeting down its sides. It came up to the litter—now a sort of crude couch—and lifted itself up so it met André’s eyes directly. It held its slate alongside its face, and blessedly constructed complete sentences containing entire words, vowels and all. —*Are you feeling better, André?*

“I need medical care,” he said, for the tenth or eleventh time.

—*Your bone is set, the ranid answered. —Tetra did it, and the greatparent remembered-ahead for you. It will heal. You are safer here. There is too much coincidence surrounding you.*

“Shit,” he said. But he wasn’t entangled. He hadn’t taken Closs up on the offer. He couldn’t be...

The hail storm. The bad fall.

Somebody was trying to kill him.

It was a wonderfully clarifying realization. A conjure man was after him. Kroc, or somebody from Rim, or another freelancer: it didn’t matter. Somebody was trying to kill him.

Good: a circumstance he knew how to deal with. And one he couldn’t do much about right now. On the other hand—*greatparent*. There was a word that made some sense of Caetei’s incomprehensible string of consonants. What a greatparent might be was another question, and “remembered-ahead” sounded suspiciously like conjuring. If it wasn’t superstition and sorcery. But Gourami was blinking at him intently, nictitating membranes flickering across glossy eyes, and he thought it was waiting for an answer.

“What’s a greatparent?” he asked.

Gourami chirrupped. One of the other ranids—not Caetei, he thought, but one that was in the

water—picked up the noise and made it again, and again. Like clicking one’s tongue to summon a pet, almost. —*old personage*, Gourami typed, with amazing speed, its fingers skipping across the controls of its slate. —*se remembers. I have been telling se new stories, that se may keep them safe.*

A pause, as if Gourami revealed a confidence. —*Someday Tetra may be a greatparent, too*, Gourami finally said, and André thought it wasn’t exactly what it might have typed. —*Tetra has many stories: se may grow very old. If se can give up swimming. That is always hard, and some do not.*

Gourami typed more, but André did not see it. Because something was rising from the water, great-backed and amorphous, green and dripping with great strings of algae. Its back was as broad as the islet André sat on, and it seemed to have no limbs, only a glass-clean, mucous-slick fringe about its edges, pulsing softly. And eyes: not two only, but all around the rim, and under them mouths, toothless mouths from which water squirted as it rose. Ballast, and probably food, and maybe respiration...

He would have stepped—hopped—back if he were standing. As it was, he startled hard enough to rock his improvised seat.

Gourami held up a marked slate again, as Tetra—he was sure it was Tetra, the only one wearing a decorated vest—trilled to the monstrosity rising from the mud. —*André Deschênes, meet the memorizeur...*

The symbols that followed were musical notation, a chord progression overlaid by a quick run of simple notes. A ravid’s *real* name, written in the only human language that could handle them.

“Delighted,” he said, his hands flexing on the carry poles of the litter where they ran along its sides. “Please, ah. Extend my regards. Or whatever the protocol is.”

Gourami bobbed, a movement he was starting to anthropomorphize into laughter. —*Se wants to meet a human*, it typed. —*Se has been told much about you, but has never seen one before. Please, sit up straight so se can look. I am sorry for your pain.*

“It’s a *crater*,” Greene repeated, and despite temptation, Closs—leaning back in a chair in Greene’s office—didn’t make the chairman go back and explain it a third time. “The whole damned gulf. The Bay of Novo Haven. That’s what Gupta thinks, anyway. The omelite deposits are around the rim—which tells us where we might want to drill inland, by the way, because while the river’s backfilled some of it, you can see where the original line would have extended—and that’s also where the recent earthquakes are centered.”

Greene was dressed with particular care, but his eyes were red-rimmed, pupils pinpricked from too much stimulant. He paced, gesticulating at the screen on his office wall with first one hand and then the other, using a light-wand to outline features on a projected detail map. He paused, tapping the wand on his fingertips, and directed a stare at Closs, as if checking to see if Closs had followed him this time.

“And the probability effects our engineers have been struggling with for the past year?” Closs asked, to make Greene say it out loud, to get it into the discussion.

“Strongest at those sites, yes. And radiating out. But are you seeing the implications, Timothy? Gupta’s map suggests that the omelite is the side effect of an explosion.”

“An impact? It came from *space*?”

Greene shook his head, hands fanning wide, the tip of the light-stick leaving a dazzled streak across

Closs's vision. Something wrong with his connex; there should be antiglare protection. "Gupta thinks the explosion was ground level."

"A tanglestone mine. Blew up. An *alien* tanglestone mine." Closs tried to get his brain and his tongue to wrap around the concepts at the same time. "A *ranid* tanglestone mine? You're telling me they had, what, a technological society? *Industrial mining*?" It was hard to imagine worse news for Charter Trade. Not that Rim had encountered one yet, but there were rules in place for dealing with technological societies.

And they did *not* involve colonizing their planets.

"Omelite mines don't just *blow up*. I'm telling you they had a production facility. Whether it was the ranids or some other alien species, hell, maybe colonists here before us. Maybe there was a dominant land species...it doesn't matter. The omelite is a...a by-product. Of whatever they were doing. Of the explosion."

"There'd be an archaeological record," Closs said, very slowly. "If there had been a technological species on Greene's World."

"There might be. Someplace we can't get to it."

"Spare me the Chinese puzzles, Jeff."

Greene took a breath. Closs tensed: he knew that expression. "I have to tell you something about Greene's World. Something important, that almost nobody knows."

"This is going to keep me up nights."

"And how," Greene said, seeming as if he nerved himself. "When I say it's secret, you should know—I mean a proprietary secret. Covered by your nondisclosure clause. Some of the coincidence engineers and physicists are aware. Dr. Gupta is one of them. Other than that, just my grandfather's descendants. And whoever spilled the story to Lucienne Spivak. Not even my wife. Do you understand?"

There was no end to the things Greene's wife didn't know about him, but this didn't seem the time to mention it. "It's that hot?"

"The hottest. Greene's World is potentially unique in the universe."

And other planets aren't? There was something about Greene that made biting your tongue harder than it might be under other circumstances. "Explain, please."

Greene dropped his chin and looked up at Closs through his lashes. "What do you know about the theoretical phenomenon of forking?"

"Like alternate histories?"

"Sort of. I'm not the guy to explain it well—that would be Gupta—but... There's one multi-universe theory that postulates that the timestream is constantly forking, and rehealing—so things come back together again, and refork, and rejoin. So time is like a braided rope where strands keep getting switched around. Except maybe sometimes, after a really catastrophic event, it forks completely. And never reheals."

"Parallel dimensions."

“Sure.”

“So?...”

Green sniffled a bit and rubbed his nose. “So an early survey team postulated that Greene’s World is partially forked. By which I mean this, this catastrophe...”—he waved vaguely at the lighted map—“almost shook the planet into another dimension. But not quite. There are two of them, in other words, and they...sort of overlap. A quantum bifurcation. And if whatever caused the catastrophe wasn’t destroyed in it—”

“It’s on the other branch.”

“Yes.”

It might be early, but Closs suddenly found the idea of a drink supremely attractive. He stood and went to the stand in the corner, but poured himself a cup of coffee instead. “You just explained where tanglestone comes from.”

“It’s not my explanation.”

“What could...cause something like that?”

Greene winced. “There’s a reason we don’t put Slide facilities on planets, Tim.”

On second thought, maybe it wasn’t too early for a little whiskey in his coffee. He added cream on top, stirred it meticulously, and turned back to Greene when he was sure he had his face under control. “A Slide failure.”

“A prehistoric one. We theorize.”

“Can those aliens get back here?”

A shrug. “The probability storms are getting worse—”

“No shit.” The coffee was strong, sweet from the whiskey, scalding hot. Closs drank down half the cup in three slow swallows and wiped his mouth against the side of his hand. “The dimensions are...what, pulling apart?”

“Or remerging, as we consume the omelite. If it’s the first, pretty soon, no tanglestone. If it’s the second—”

Morrow’s aliens. What if they didn’t come from...somewhere else, exactly? But right here, right...alongside? He poured and stirred, aware of Greene coming up beside him, holding his own cup.

“If the Slide theory is right, we can *manufacture* omelite.”

There wasn’t enough whiskey in the inhabited galaxy for this conversation. “By blowing up a planet.”

Greene’s shoulders rose and fell. “It doesn’t have to be an inhabited one.”

But what if it did? What if you needed...observers on both sides? What if it only worked if you had, say, the ranids and the mysterious theoretical technologists?

Closs put his coffee cup down again. He rubbed his palms over tight curls and turned to Greene. You looked a man in the eye when you admitted a mistake. “Deschênes has dropped out of contact,” he said.

“I think we have to prepare ourselves for failure on that front.”

Cricket could have run. But she was inside Nouel’s house, at the mercy of his expert system, and she hadn’t had the foresight—or the equipment—to wire *this* place to blow. So she put her back to the sealed door, folded her arms across her chest, and waited. Nouel stood up and turned to her. “Fisher,” he said, shocking her. “I’m sorry; you weren’t here, and I couldn’t contact you to let you know I was bringing Maurice home. Maurice Sadowski, this is Fisher.”

Not even a hesitation to hint that it was a brand-new name. Cricket let her brow crinkle, and her first stuttering panic recede. There was, obviously, more going on here than the evident. She stepped forward and extended her hand, and Maurice stood as well.

“We’ve met,” he said, only a crinkle at the corner of his eye—half smirk, half wink—betraying any amusement at her change of name. “Virtually speaking.” His hand was warm, broad-palmed, the grip certain. “I’m not here for Rim.”

“Of course, if you were—”

“I would say the same thing.” He had a good, flickering smile. “Honey, there’s one way I know I can prove I’m on your side. I can tell you what was in the file I gave Lucienne.”

She really shouldn’t have been so surprised. It had to have come from somewhere. Somewhere close to Closs or Greene, specifically, or somebody who had stumbled across the information. But—

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she said.

And Maurice clucked his tongue. “Lucienne took a risk to meet with me,” he said. “I took one to meet with you. Take a risk yourself: this is too big not to.”

Nouel stood back. Cricket studied Maurice instead, watching his eyes, the corners of his mouth.

Rim, she thought, would just have killed her. The way they had killed Lucienne. They didn’t need to talk to her. Unless they somehow thought she could lead them to a bigger fish, but that hadn’t been a concern in the past. Quick, ruthless, but not prone to long-term strategy—that was the Charter Trade Company.

“Do you have any proof? Anything we can use to force the media to follow up?”

He glanced at Huc. Huc, jowled head lowered, seemed not to notice. “I purged the file once I transmitted it. You don’t keep something like that in your head. I can promise, however, that the tracker didn’t come from me, or with that data.”

“You say that as if it was good news.” Cricket snorted. “It also doesn’t help us sell this to Com.”

“People love conspiracies.” Huc, without raising his head.

“They also,” Cricket said calmly, “tend to think they’re full of shit. Tell me something, Maurice. What could Lucienne have done with your information that an archinformist couldn’t?”

“Give it provenance,” he said. He rubbed his palms together, fiddled a gold bracelet. “I could connex it. But not without revealing myself—and we’ve seen how that works out.”

“*Lucienne?*”

Maurice's eyebrow went up. He glanced at Nouel, who was still simulating withdrawal. "Well," he said, "I guess it's okay if I tell you now. Lucienne was an agent."

"Oh, no," Cricket said, gulping against bitter nausea. She hadn't trusted anyone, not since Patience. Not since Moon Morrow's confidential secretary had turned out to be not so confidential, after all. "Core? Not Rim, or Rim wouldn't have killed her. What, infiltrating the insurgents?"

"You are not analyzing the evidence," he said. "Think again."

She did so, paused, staring at the back of her hands. "Holy shit. Unified Earth."

"Yes. Apparently some senator or another actually thinks bringing down a corrupt Charter Trade Corporation might just be a ticket to reelection."

"Earth thinks it can bring legal proceedings against Rim? Against Core?"

"Monopolies," he said, echoing Huc, "make people nervous. You don't know who she was reporting to? You can't get us in contact?"

Cricket shook her head. "I can't." She turned away, folded her hands behind her back, and stared at the wall. Nouel had withdrawn against it and was still waiting with his arms folded. "I've got no authority."

"You've got Lucienne's froggie friends, don't you? What about Jean Gris? Would he know?"

Ah, of course. *That* was the thing she could give Rim that they couldn't get without her.

Assuming Maurice wasn't trustworthy. A big assumption, because if he was, they needed him. On the other hand, Lucienne had been shot immediately after meeting with him. And he was conspicuously healthy. "No," she said. "With Lucienne gone...and anyway, what news feed is going to care what a randi has to say for itself? We could manufacture a provenance for the documents, if they're authentic."

"They are." No trace of impatience. "There's more I need to tell you, though. There's another thing I find unlikely to be coincidental, and extremely fascinating."

Slowly, Cricket turned her head and stared, not at Maurice but at Nouel. It was thirty seconds at least before he lifted his head, returned her gaze, and shrugged. "You're looking at the wrong man, Fisher."

She rotated on her heels. Maurice had been staring at the back of her neck. "What do you know?"

"I know this," he said, and pulled a flat chip of hard plastic from his pocket. He flipped it at her; she caught it out of the air reflexively, and slapped it onto the back of her left hand. It was an Australian dollar from A.G. 50 or so, when they were still using the old notation:2048.

Tails. "So what?"

"Do it again."

Heads. Tails. Heads. Tails.

"Trick coin."

"It's not."

She tossed the coin at him. He fumbled the catch, and it rolled off his fingers and under a chair. Cricket almost *heard* Nouel roll his eyes, but nobody went after the coin. "So *what*?" Cricket asked again,

though she knew, more or less, so what.

So they were neck-deep in a probability storm, and there was no telling what might happen. And as if to prove her conjecture, what Maurice said next was an almost complete non sequitur.

“So you’re a quantum clone of Moon Constancy Morrow.” And while she stood there, blinking at him, he continued: “And Closs *almost* knows. He’s this close to figuring it out, and when he does, I have no idea what he’ll do about it. Also, I wouldn’t connex if I were you until we scrub your head completely; the real Moon has ways of finding you when you do that. Which is why I’m absolutely certain it wasn’t my data.”

“Thank you,” she said. Her throat hurt; after a moment she realized that it was because she was dry-swallowing, over and over. “I figured that out.”

No, no point in playing it cool at all. And Huc hadn’t known either, based on his reflexive step forward and then the cringe that started in his neck and shoulders and traveled his length. “But I’m not a clone. I’m the original. *She’s* the clone.”

“From what I understand,” Maurice said, “I would guess she told Closs the same thing. There’s only one problem with that.”

“Yes?”

“If it’s so, how did *you* get *here*?”

11

WHILE ANDRÉ WAITED ON SHORE, GOURAMI TALKED TO the greatparent. Se voice was deep and grand, a reverberation through the water that tickled Gourami’s skin like a caress. The greatparent’s attention soothed and opened Gourami’s thought, made se pliant and considering and willing, increased se concentration and powers of recollection.

The effect was biochemical. Taken to an extreme, if a person stopped swimming and matured; it was memorizy that made greatparents the center of people’s culture and history.

Because greatparents could remember *everything*. Everything they had experienced, every story they were told. So younger persons—adults and far-swimmers, not the presentient eggings—told greatparents their stories, and some of the ones that did not get eaten or killed in accidents or while defending their bandweal became greatparents in their turn, and memorizy other things. Old persons did not die. They either swam until they stopped, or they were killed somehow.

Gourami tried to explain this to André, on the slate, while se spoke with the greatparent, but soon gave up and left the human on the bank.

—*They’re like living databases?* he had asked at one point, and se was forced to admit that this was close to the truth. Except not exactly, of course. Because the humen remembering-machines did not tell stories. Or make patterns. Or make sense of things. Or comfort the afflicted.

Or soothe the young and fragile with the weight of their experience and wisdom and accumulated centuries of knowledge.

The remembering-machines could talk like greatparents, across vast distances. But greatparents also had

the knack of changing luck, for which they used the same coiled organs with which they generated bioelectricity. Like some of the small swimming things, greatparents could defend themselves with shock if their bands and clans did not succeed in keeping danger at bay. It was a talent that only developed with the final metamorphosis. Adults and far-swimmers were expected to run from danger, or fight it.

Coming to a particular point in se narrative, se dug in se belt pouch and pulled out Jean Kroc's watertight case, explaining what he had wanted done with the device inside. Conversation with a greatparent was so easy: they understood, and explained back, sometimes more than one understood oneself. Though *this* greatparent was one of the youngest—se had stopped swimming since the humen came—se was also interpersonally gifted.

Gourami found se challenging and reassuring by turns.

—*The human wanted to entangle you?*

—*He did.* Gourami basked in the ambient calm and well-being. The sort of inclusion that se had not felt since se went to live among humen.

It had been a sacrifice. But having adventures and bringing home new stories was one way to make oneself worthy. Even if, sitting in shallow water with the greatparent floating beside se, Gourami could not imagine how se would ever become what this person so effortlessly was.

Oh, but se wanted it.

Of course, as Tetra and Caetei had hinted, first se had to admit that want, and take the first steps.

—*You did well in not accepting the entanglement. As you grow, you will not wish to be bound to the humen.*

—*No.* They were erratic and inconsistent, and their political structures seemed to be applied with very little consideration for bandweal or anything but individual gain. Gourami suspected it had something to do with their method of reproduction, which seemed very...competitive. Probably everything could be traced back to that: their hierarchies, their violence, their jealousies. Their survival strategies were very different from those of people.

They were climbers, not schoolers.

—*The Company humen are dangerous,* Gourami added. Which of course the greatparent knew already, but it bore reinforcing. An opinion expressed was a step toward consensus. —*We do not wish to be bound to the rebel humen, but we wish their assistance in opposing the Company humen.*

The greatparent thrummed, stroking Gourami's forelimbs with se fringe, draping a curtain of tendrils over se shoulders and back. No sting and no shock, just the comfort, the calm of the womb, of being enclosed in and protected by another. It was a memory that lingered in every person, peace from the eggling's first seasons in an endoparent's care.

The greatparent continued, —*Many of the others do not care to have any humen here.*

Gourami thought of how fast rumor could swim, and of the attempts on se own life. Se thought of one-armed, so-scarred Parrot, whom se knew from the drill platforms in other days and whom se had become reacquainted with after se and Tetra and Caetei had brought André, unconscious, to the one-tree-island band. Se thought of Tetra's harpoon gun, which se had been at pains to conceal from André. Of se own crossbow. And what a person might do with a weapon like that.

—*Will it be fighting? Tetra and se followers? Will they do more?* There was already skirmishing, and Gourami knew at least some of the greatparents were involved. It was only they that had the skills to make their luck. They rooted deep, sent down trunks into the sediment, and brought up the oils the humen dug for, too.

The greatparent bobbed placidly in the shallows. Water slopped over Gourami's back, refreshing se mucous; cool mud squelched under se handfingers.

—*There will be a war*, the greatparent said. Loud enough that the echoes would carry wide, to many ears, when se could have murmured it against Gourami's skin, under the curtain of tendrils draped between them. —*You will swim with Tetra and the others, when the time comes. You will bear a weapon.*

Gourami's throat swelled. Se would. Se would do it. The greatparent had decided. Had foreseen.

It was not an unalloyed tribulation. There would be adventure, risk. Glory. Status to be won.

Stories.

—*You must tell the persons who work for the humen, they must stop. They must come away, come home. You must be the messenger, as you were between people and the humen.*

—*And there is no way of avoiding it?* Gourami asked. Not an argument: se was incapable of argument, huddled against the greatparent's fringe as se was. But a question, a fair question to ask.

—*The humen could become peaceable.* The greatparent's tone, murmured softly now, indicated heavy irony. Not a likely outcome, no. —*Speaking of Tetra, se thinks well of you*, se said, changing the subject entirely. Although of course it didn't call Tetra by that name, but the one that could not be translated, or spoken by humen. —*When are you going to start making your vest?*

Seductive, yes. Gourami croaked harshly, in pain. Se knew—se *knew*—what the humen would do. Could do. Not so many who came home to the clans knew the humen culture as se did. Not so many had studied it.

—*I must tell you some humen stories, greatparent*, se said. Not arguing. Telling was not arguing. Just providing information that the greatparent might not already have. That, also, was permissible. —*They will destroy us if we try to fight.*

Jean rather thought Ziyi Zhou was expecting him. Her door swung open as he came up the gangplank, and she was dressed for company. “No,” she said, before he could open his mouth.

He stopped, one foot on planks, one on a strip of tarpaper nailed crosswise to the gangway. “I haven't asked yet.”

“What are you doing with André Deschênes?”

Jean closed his eyes and let an extended hand fall back to his side. “I have uses for him.”

When he looked up again, Ziyi was slowly shaking her head. “That's like keeping a nessie in your bathtub, Jean. You're not actually planning to train him?”

“He's too gifted to leave wandering loose,” Jean said. “He's more of a threat untrained than trained.”

“There’s another solution to that.”

“Maybe,” he suggested, quietly, “we should take this conversation inside.”

She bit her lip but stood aside, and he walked past her into the cool, dim living room. Unlike Jean, Ziyi didn’t isolate herself from technology. Which was the reason he was here.

She shut the door and immediately said, “You took him as a *pupil*?”

“I think I can straighten him out.” Not waiting to be asked, Jean settled himself on a soft burgundy sofa. “But it’ll get ugly, Ziyi. Soon.”

“I turned him down, you know,” she said. “Do you want lemonade?”

“Make it a double.”

When she came back from the kitchen, she had two glasses in her hands. She poured the lemonade from one to the other, to assure him that it was unadulterated, and held both out for him to pick from. He chose the glass to port and waited until after she tasted hers to drink.

“He killed *Lucienne*.” Not stridently, but the stress was there under her voice, a suppressed whine. “Jean, how could you?”

“We’re holding this planet together with our teeth and fingernails. We’re going to need him, and the ranids, and everybody else we can find with an ounce of talent.”

“I hope I’m not included in that we.”

“You can’t be blind to the toxic level of coincidence lately. Unless you’ve stopped tugging God’s coat-sleeve.”

She rolled lemonade over her tongue, resting the tall glass on one palm and steadying it with the opposite fingertips. “I’ve noticed,” she said. A tactical retreat. “It’s the worst I’ve ever seen. But...Deschênes. I’ve been tracking his probabilities.”

“Divination? That’s about as useful as casting tarot cards.”

“Which I happen to know you keep a set of.”

He snorted. “What did you find?”

“Deschênes’s line crosses yours. Practically winds around Closs’s. And crossed Lucienne’s, before it ended.”

Jean threw one arm over the back of the sofa. “He’s not entangled. Your readings are no better than guesses.”

But she shook her head, rolling the glass between her palms, and he swallowed. He was not used to being taken by surprise, and even before she spoke he knew he’d just walked into a doozy.

“He is now.” You could have cut cake with her smile. “I know his baker.”

He set the lemonade down on the arm of the sofa and leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “Oral application? You might as well throw darts.”

She lowered her gaze, redolent of false modesty. “Two months of trying,” she said.

“Damn. I never want to hear another *word* about my ethics—”

“Jean,” she said, suddenly serious, her expression smoothing. “I just wanted to let you know I wasn’t going to weep if anything happened.”

“Don’t cry for him,” Jean said. “Cry for me. Look, I need your help. Before she died, Lucienne sent some data to her friend Cricket. The packet was interrupted. Cricket got the data out—”

“How bad?”

“Bad enough. It would help if we had the rest.”

She seemed to contract, elbows pressed to her sides, chin dropping. “I already said no once.”

“Rim has it,” Jean said. “If it’s anywhere. I’ve got the best archinformist in the business”—if we can get her head fixed, he did not add—“and I’ve got André Deschênes, though I have to go fetch him back first. And I have Nouel Huc.”

“That’s already two people more than can keep a secret.”

“It doesn’t have to be kept for long. If we can get this information, Ziyi, we can bring down Rim.”

“*Rim?*”

“Charter Trade on Greene’s World at the very least. Get Jefferson Greene the hell out of there. We’ve got them dead to rights on environmental and safety issues. But we need to find out who contacted Lucienne. And we need to establish a provenance for the data before the media will touch it. We have a witness—”

“Shouldn’t that be enough?”

“It’s a ravid,” he admitted, and Ziyi winced.

“Oh, hell, Jean...”

“For Lucienne?” he asked. “If you won’t do it for me?”

“What do you need?”

“I need this data broken out,” he said, extending a chip across the gap between the two of them. She leaned forward to take it, manicured nails brushing his fingertips. The opposite of Lucienne. “It’ll need to be combined with whatever we bring back. Careful—there might be mines in there. Don’t stick it in your head.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Dad.” She turned the chip over curiously, rolling it across her fingertips. “This isn’t an original?”

“Not on a bet.”

She nodded, considering. “Mines?”

“I’m told that Rim was locating the person who had it whenever she connexed. Even after a biometrics swap.”

“Damn. That’s vicious.”

He nodded. Of course, it probably wasn’t the data, but it didn’t hurt to install caution. “That’s Rim. I’ll bring you the rest when we have it. Start thinking, would you, about how we’re going to get hold of somebody who will push the story.”

“Jean, darling,” she said, setting the chip down on the table beside her. “I know perfectly well why you came to me. You don’t have to dissemble. But he won’t take it unless you make it good. It’s his career and his life, too, taking on Rim.”

Her lover—via connex, anyway; a decades-long-relationship that she had told Jean had started in university and that would never result in a meeting in the flesh unless they *both* went relativistic and met in the middle—was Bryson Pace, a minor newsnet legend.

Ziyi’s mojo got bent to make sure she knew everyone. Jean had no idea when she had time to earn a living.

“I know,” Jean said. “I’ll make sure it’s unimpeachable.”

“And what about Deschênes? If it doesn’t work out, your plan to... whatever it is you think you can do.”

“If it doesn’t work out,” Jean relied, “I’ll shoot the son of a bitch myself. Just give me the chance to find out if I can help him turn into a human being.”

Her eyes widened, all perfect feral innocence.

“Ziyi.”

“All right,” she said. “All right. I’ll stop trying to kill him, Jean. For now.”

A sensible man would take off into the bayou and stay there until it blew over, whatever *it* turned out to be. A sensible man would have stayed home in the first place. Would never have taken on Closs and Greene.

Would be spending a lot of time in front of the simstim, pretending to be alive because it was easier than getting out of his damned chair and doing the real thing.

At least Jean had the option of taking off into the bayou temporarily, if not for good.

The tide was in: his house was temporarily on an island, and the channel where Lucienne had usually met Caetei was under several feet of brackish water. Instead, he loaded a pack up—he wasn’t planning on coming back, now that Cricket was hunted, and there was nothing in the house that mattered. He poled his skiff past reeds tattered by the hail storm, heading inland through laced waterways. An electronic chime hung from the stern of the skiff, emitting an intermittent ping.

If Caetei wished to speak, he would find him. If Caetei was still alive and at liberty. A big if, when he’d heard nothing from any of the renegades since the night before. Whatever he’d told Ziyi about his well-established conspiracy, it could all have come down on his head.

Discomfortingly, it was not Caetei who answered his call. When he had been poling for about four quarters, a green head broke brown water. It was scarred terribly, though, and the ravid swam crooked in the channel, an effect of having only one arm. Jean winced in sympathy, as he did each time he saw

Parrot.

At first he'd tried to conceal the compassion, as he would for a human, but the ranids reacted to the injury of another with patting and cuddling and a head-ducked empathy.

Parrot was inconvenient in another way. Gourami had Jean's slate, and he hadn't had time to obtain another. And Parrot was not a liaison: it could not lipread human speech.

Jean hoped that neither Gourami nor Caetei had come to collect him due to an inconvenience, the sort of thing that made a funny story later. But it was something to tell himself, not something he could believe.

In his belt, between layers of hide, he had a second chip. A holographic playback device in a waterproof carryall lay stuffed into his bum bag. There were greatparents in the bayou; maybe Ziyi could help, and maybe...

Maybe a few hundred amorphous amphibians that were little more than giant, highly specialized, floating, quantum-connected brains could do it better. At the very least, if he gave it to the greatparents, he didn't have to worry about Cricket's headworm alerting whomever had put it there in the first place.

The lack of connex had to be driving Cricket crazy. She could barely spend an afternoon at his house—at what had been his house—without jittering like a tobacco smoker denied a fix.

But everybody was entitled to a few bad habits, he guessed. He had a share of his own.

Parrot bobbed beside the skiff, swimming crookedly. It wriggled in the water, spun about, and grabbed the gunwale in one spreading, webbed hand, tugging the boat in a new direction as it frog-kicked. Jean swung his pole around, pushing the skiff after. Seeing that it was understood, Parrot dropped off the bow and sculled forward, moving gracefully enough though it swam on a diagonal. They cut through the water silently, swiftly, gold-limned brown ripples folding out behind them like the ribs of opening fans.

He was still poling determinedly two quarters later, when the first of the helicopters went over.

Cricket ought to be worried about liking Maurice Sadowski too much. It was a dangerous habit to get into, liking people. But it was hard not to like the man who had arranged for her to be sitting in Nouel Huc's living room, her feet tucked under her on scratchy fabric, while she watched him lie to Timothy Closs.

She was off-camera, the expert system handling the uplink instructed to ignore her existence, with Nouel sitting cross-legged and gnomelike on the divan opposite. They could see each other, and they could see Closs, but Closs could not see them.

Magic.

"So tell me more about Moon Morrow," Closs said in the presumed privacy of a coded connection. "What have you learned about this cloning process?"

Maurice picked at the luminous coils in his ear, caught himself, and fussed with a nub in the couch fabric instead. "Well, I can tell you that the situation is being misrepresented. There's no way Cricket Murphy can be Morrow—the original Morrow—because to have been here for fifteen years, even if she sent the clone to jail in her place... quantum clones wouldn't survive Sliding any better than anybody else."

Closs couldn't see her, but that didn't keep Cricket from breathing like there was a snake in the room.

This was the person who had ordered Lucienne's death, the one who would do the same to her and Jean—and Maurice, too, and that poor frog—if he could. She studied him, the cropped hair, the hazel eyes lighter than his skin.

André, she reminded herself sternly, bore just as much responsibility for Lucienne's death as Closs did. André was the one who had pulled the trigger.

Her palm itched. She wasn't sure if she wanted to touch him, or strike him so hard his head would spin around. She wasn't sure either if she wanted to hit André more, or Closs.

"So if she's not Morrow," Closs said, "she's the clone? Legally inconvenient. For Morrow. Although that doesn't tell us how she got here."

And that was it, wasn't it? Her nails weren't sharp enough to cut her flesh. Unfortunately. Because she couldn't argue with Maurice's logic, and it was kind of stunning.

"She is the clone," Maurice said. "I'm convinced of that. Which means, legally, she's Moon Morrow, and legally, Moon Morrow does not exist. She's not a *person*, Tim."

"And dead from having Slid here."

"There's a theoretical answer." Another day, Cricket might have admired how smoothly Maurice interrupted Closs. "When you create a quantum clone, you don't have to create it in the same place. It's easy enough to reconstruct your parent body..."

"On the other end of a Slide," Closs finished. He stared at his steepled fingers, blinking, for long minutes. "What's to stop anyone using that as an instantaneous method of transportation?"

"Nothing," Maurice said promptly. "As long as you don't mind duplicates of people piling up all over the galaxy. Or you're willing to indulge in a little flexibility with regard to your definition of the word *murder*. If I'm right about how this works, when word of the technology leaks—"

"When."

"—information always leaks, Tim. It'll mean the end of interstellar travel by ship. Adjust your portfolio accordingly."

Maurice glanced down at his hands—a mistake, Cricket thought. That always made it look like you were lying even if you weren't. He cleared his throat and continued, "Did you get anything out of the Spivak file?"

Thank you, Maurice. But of course he cared as much as she did. If Closs cracked it—assuming Maurice was telling the truth, and boy wasn't she getting tired already of caveating her every thought with that clause—then Maurice was as dead as Lucienne.

"We're working on it." Closs's steepled fingers interlaced and dropped together. He looked up, as if glancing over Maurice's shoulder: something on a wall screen, or his headset, or somebody had come into his office. "No luck identifying a code key yet. Also, I need to see if you can dig up some information for me on what Jeff's up to."

"Chairman Greene? You mean, my notional employer?"

"Tell him all about me if that's how you feel about it," Closs said. "He's up to something, and whatever it is, I have a feeling it's a dealbreaker."

“Ethics?”

“I think,” Closs said, “I think I shouldn’t offer too many leading comments. Just see if there are any currency transfers, unexplained visitors in the middle of the night. You know what to look for.”

“I do,” Maurice said.

“You’re the best in the business, after all.” Cricket’s chin snapped up at that comment, but of course—Closs didn’t know she was there. “Anything else?”

Maurice nodded. “You wanted to know if we should blame GreenWorld for the recruitment barge explosion.”

“It doesn’t matter so much now, with Spivak dead.”

“It might,” Maurice said. “I don’t think it was them. Mostly a gut feeling, but if they needed a conjure man, and if we’re right about Spivak being the replacement for Tavish... well, why would they need anybody but Kroc?”

“It could have *been* Kroc.”

“Explosions aren’t his style,” Maurice said. “Too random. Too much collateral damage. I think we’re looking for somebody else. And there’s another piece of evidence.”

“You turned up something about Angley?”

Maurice smiled. It wasn’t a nice smile. “You might want to double-check and see if she’s really dead, Tim. Because I found a pattern of credits to her accounts that match incidents of sabotage and news leaks. She might be your girl.”

“She faked her death?” Closs did not seem to change expression when he was startled—if he *was* startled. He did, however, get up from behind his desk and begin slowly to pace.

“I’m not prepared to commit to that,” Maurice answered.

Cricket fidgeted. Across the room, Nouel sat like a statue, but his eyes were unfocused. Cricket suspected he was a few hundred light-years away.

“But you’re suspicious.”

“I’m always suspicious,” Maurice answered with a flick of his forefinger against his forehead, as if he were tweaking a nonexistent hat. “Cheerio, boss. Unless you have something else for me?”

“No,” Closs said. “Thanks. Closs out.” His image snapped one-dimensional and went out.

Maurice sat back on his chair. “Fuck,” he said. “I think we are going to have to hack Rim.”

“Not with a bug in my head, we aren’t hacking anything. My motherself is a nasty piece of work.” It was actually a sort of lightning relief to realize she wasn’t exactly who she thought she was. A chance at denial, at a new life, free of guilt.

She hadn’t done those things.

Except she had, hadn’t she? If she was honest? If she accepted responsibility? She hadn’t served the jail time. But legally, she was Moon Morrow.

She caught herself nibbling her nail, and made herself stop.

“Fisher—” Maurice said, and when she looked up she realized he was staring at her. He blinked three times once she met his eyes, and then smiled at her. Cricket realized he’d had her filtered, too, so that his reactions to her presence wouldn’t give anything away to Closs. “Sorry,” he said. “You know, I can go in and look for what she left.”

She let her hands fall to her sides and stood, pacing like Closs. Time to decide. Not about who she was, what she owed.

She wasn’t Moon Morrow. She was Moon Morrow. She wasn’t sure any of it lessened the burden of guilt. Moon Morrow had forked herself in two. But Cricket was a graft on the same root.

That could wait. About Maurice and Huc. Time to pick a side. “If we find it, can we use it to hack into Morrow’s head?”

Maurice smiled like he was sucking ice chips. “Nouel. Can I isolate your entertainment system? Take it offline for a while?”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“It should have enough memory to download whatever Fisher’s got in her head,” he said. “And then we can pick it over on a code level.”

“How long will that take?” Nouel sounded more curious than unwilling.

“If we’re lucky, an hour. If we’re not lucky or there’s nothing to find, a month.”

Cricket knocked the back of her hand against a chair arm for attention. “What about me?”

“We purge your system and start over from the ground up,” Nouel said. “We can’t use your backups.”

She scratched her thigh. “I want to start clean. Fresh licenses.”

“Big deal,” Maurice said, with a respectful half-nod. “Can we do this?”

Do I trust you? Cricket wondered. Nouel trusted him. And André trusted Nouel.

And Cricket did not for a minute trust André. But sometimes you had to commit.

“All right,” she said, into the silence in her head.

Maurice tipped his head, his earwire shifted red-green-scarlet. “Excellent. Come on over here, darling, and we’ll see about getting your pretty head scrubbed clean.”

“And then,” Nouel said, “we have an awful lot of work to do.”

André didn’t hear, at first, what caused the frogs to cringe and scatter. The enormous creature they had gathered around submerged abruptly, trailed by ropy stings of algae and bubbles. Mud swirled through viscid water.

André’s shin shot white heat to his groin as he struggled upright, trying not to think about what he’d do if the ranids left him there. There wasn’t anything within reach from which to improvise a crutch. His

lacerated back, a minor irritation beside the pain in his leg, flared when he turned, craning to see what was behind him.

He heard the thumping of rotating blades, and knew. *Bastards*. There was nothing he could do to avoid them. And they'd used him, hadn't they?

Like a Judas goat.

But then a green-yellow shape trailing slimy greener strings of algae and waterweed charged up the bank in one tremendous leap. Gourami crouched beside André, long arms pulling him out of the stretcher. André knew enough about froggy physiology to know that it must have hurt the ranid when it ducked under his arm and lifted. He felt its protective mucous coating skid and tear, and felt its astonishing strength as it shoved him upright.

And then they were staggering down the bank, toward the water, as three helicopters swept over in formation. No gunfire, not yet, but they were low, bending reeds until they snapped against one another like the sticks of a rattled fan. At least there was no dust, though bits of hurled plant matter whirled around them. André coughed and shielded his eyes.

Gourami staggered, slid. What surprised André most was its silence. A human would have grunted, whimpered, made some small sound of distress. He felt its joints pop through the contact; alien as its strength might be, he was still nearly twice its mass. But it just got under him and heaved.

André helped as he could, using the ranid as a crutch and trying to limit the weight he put on it. It hopped and he hobbled, and the thump of retreating, turning, returning choppers shattered the steaming, insect-stirred stillness.

The bank here, at least, wasn't covered in wooden knives of broken reeds. André opened his mouth to ask what was going on, closed it again in red frustration. Even if he could get Gourami's attention and make himself understood, distracting it might get them both killed. And it had no fast way to answer him; he didn't think either of them wanted to spare the time to type lengthy explanations.

He stumbled gamely along, thought about crawling, decided it would be faster to hop. The splint wouldn't help him bear any weight; he didn't dare put the broken leg down. Muscle spasm locked it, anyway. He gritted his teeth and, with intermittent success, tried not to let it drag.

Gourami seemed to be headed for the water, though. Which was smart; less than a meter would protect them from propellant weapons. Less than a meter, and they would be safe.

Pity he couldn't breathe it. He hoped Gourami remembered that.

There were some reeds standing along the bank. André patted Gourami's arm as he'd seen the ranids do for attention, and gestured.

Its head didn't turn, but its eyes swiveled. *Then* it croaked, a deep rolling resonant sound.

He wasn't sure if he'd expected it to drag him the length of the bank, across the stinking mudflat, or if he thought it would leave him precariously balanced on one leg while it bounded down to the stems and tore them loose. Instead, it croaked again, urgently, and another weed-dotted head lifted from the water, followed by a lean body strung about with nets.

Tetra.

The second ranid lurched from the water, through splintering plants, and up the bank. Something

chattered in the near distance; gunfire, and André sucked in his gut, as if that would make the slightest difference. The old atavism didn't care, though—and the bullets were aimed somewhere else. He didn't even see the muzzle flash.

Tetra caught them still ten meters from the water, and so did the second wave of choppers. The downdraft was like a strong hand pushing André down. Bullets smacked around them now, and Tetra—slick, tender-fleshed—dove under his other arm. Gourami and Tetra grasped André each by one elbow, and leaped.

His arms snapped against his shoulder sockets; he would have yelped in pain if he'd had the air to do more than huff. His head jerked back on his neck, whiplash and insulted muscle, but the hurt was nothing to when they hit the water.

It knocked the air from him and spasmed his diaphragm; as if expecting it, Tetra punched him in the back. He gasped, kickstarted, and the ranid shoved a broken reed into his hand. One quick desperate breath, that was all, and they were under, muddy water gritty in his eyes. Tetra's long fingers enfolded his hands, molding them around the reed. He held on somehow, as the ranids pulled him under, turned him bodily, and rolled him onto his back. The water in his ears thrummed with cries and argument. He didn't understand a note of it, but it beat against his skin until he felt like a sounding chamber, resonating with anger and distress.

But he guessed what Tetra and Gourami meant him to do, and stuffed the end of the reed pipe into his mouth and sucked.

No air.

He might have panicked as the ranids dragged him deeper, but he was too goddamned tired for hysterics. He puffed out, felt whatever was in the reed give way, and blew harder. The air in his lungs was used up anyway.

The plug shot from the reed like a blow-dart.

The next breath came laden with dust and fiber-glass-sharp broken plant. And sweet, sweet moisture-drenched air.

André gasped like a fish, breathed out through his nose because it was faster, dragged at air again. The water was tepid, too close to body temperature to knife shocks of pain through his wounds. But he knew; infection was inevitable, amoebosis likely.

He couldn't think about that now. He breathed, and let the ranids pull him. Long pulsing strokes kept them moving. André concentrated on breathing, and wished he could ask where they were taking him.

12

GOURAMI SPENT FAR TOO LONG THINKING ABOUT WHAT TO do with the human. But se couldn't have left him to be shot. Se had brought him to the village. Se had brought him to the greatparent's attention. Se had left him stranded on the bank.

Se hadn't expected Tetra to be the one to help. Se hadn't expected Tetra to crouch beside se, hunkered under the overhang of a bank of reed bound together by cutthroat weed and broken at the root by the hail.

—*They are hunting the greatparent*, Tetra said, bleakly, as the killing machines made another pass. Gourami flinched, but Tetra laid a hand on se thigh. —*And they are hunting us. Watch what happens.*

They crouched low, lifting the human from the water so he could breathe and see. He huddled, quiet despite what must be enormous pain, floating between them. The tide was in. Gourami caught self rattling fingers against the reeds and stopped, an act of will.

And bore witness.

The helicopters came over, gunning, churning the water where the greatparent lay submerged. The bullets could not reach it, and the people stayed out of sight, under cover, under water. But then the explosions began, and Gourami, unwitting, would have started forward if Tetra had not restrained se. Reflex. Programming.

The elder was in danger. Eggings were expendable, but the old were the memory of the race.

Others did not have a far-swimmer to caution them. Some rushed forward heedlessly; they would not be herded by bullets, and some of those were cut down. The water grew violet; it all tasted of blood, like a hunter's kill. Gourami ducked and shivered, rocking back and forth against Tetra's touch. Se could not pull free, se could not stay where se was.

Se had to help, and se distress rolled up se throat in ringing harmonics, quickly damped. Tetra took the human's hand and put it on Gourami's other arm. The human's weird irises ringed with white. He held on, as if he meant to do it gently, but he only had one leg to tread water with, and he bobbed up and down, tugging skin.

The first wave of defenders schooled wherever the humen cared to drive them. Vibrations through the water heralded the phalanxes of scoots, roaring up the channels. But it wasn't the scoots themselves that made Gourami cringe; it was the billowing net each pair dragged between.

The throb of engines was confusing. Se thrashed and warbled—*go to them, go to them*—but Tetra, far-swimmer, less programmed for clanweal, would not let go. Tetra and the human held on, bruising, breaking tender skin, and dragged Gourami farther into their fragile shelter, where the bank was undercut.

The scoots were not moving as fast as they could. They zigged and zagged in unison, keeping the nets untangled, scooping up persons willy-nilly. Gourami saw the captured persons struggling to hold one another up, despite the entangling nets, pushing one another's noses above water.

Se could not watch. Se could not look away. Se trembled.

If Gourami had been a far-swimmer, if se own reproduction had become important to bandweal, it might have been easier to abide. Se might have maintained Tetra's presence of mind. But se was a young adult, and not carrying eggings. Se thought of the greatparent, of the babies, of the village.

Se bore witness, and moaned low chords of agony.

These were not se sibs, at least, which made the slaughter and seizure not less terrible, but less compelling. Se had no ties by blood or water here. Except Caetei.

Where was Caetei?

Although the humen were well armed, the persons were not helpless. The second wave of defenders consisted of far-swimmers as much as adults, and many of these had taken the time to arm.

Se tugged the crossbow from se web belt. Tetra, gently, lifted it from se hands, chirruping.

Gourami saw the attack in slashes of action through the reeds. The humen had apparently not expected automatic-weapons fire. Several jerked from their scoots, which cut off as they were meant to when the rider fell. Persons, no longer dragged through the water, struggled free of the nets, bleeding from abrasions and holding wrenched limbs awkwardly. One scoot pilot, insufficiently attentive or lacking adequate reflexes, lost control when his partner's vehicle stalled. The net swung him into a channel bank. A person Gourami did not know impaled him with a reed spear as he struggled up the bank.

Smoke and fire pillared from one hillock; Gourami's view of the target was obscured by mats of overhanging reed, but se heard the roar and felt the heat as a helicopter died screaming. Another scoot passed so close Gourami felt the wash, and André flinched against se. He made some whining humen sound; Gourami did not turn her head to see if it was a curse or a cheer.

Gunfire scattered ground to air and air to ground. André yanked again, and se was about to shake him away, send him surging back through the water, but then Tetra tugged, too—Caetei, where was Caetei?—and the violet water churned. A great black thundering belly lowered, flattening the reed shelter against their heads, and Gourami caught confused glimpses of hanging cables, of humen thrashing awkwardly through water, dragging steel rings wired to drawn nets. Another circling chopper died, but then the remaining ones were hovering over the heart of the village, where the netted ranids and the submerged greatparent were.

Something sizzled—a chopper returning fire—the rocket trail a long tumorous arch of smoke, cracked with flame. A flattening boom shook bits of plant on Gourami's head. Se did not flinch.

There were no more losses among the humen machines.

Tetra and André were still pulling at Gourami. Se turned to the human and saw the shapes his mouth was making, how they resolved into words. Tetra might be croaking something. Gourami could not hear it over the explosions.

—*We have to go*, the human said. He jerked his paw up. —*We have to run*.

Gourami did not understand, but the human was confident—and projecting urgency—and Tetra dragged at se other arm. Se let self be moved, pulled through the swamp, bobbing low, slinking from tussock to tussock. They made short dashes underwater, only as long as the human could hold its breath. Tetra was really the only one directing, the only one swimming. André was almost dead weight, and Gourami could only think of Caetei, and the greatparent, of the egglings and adults they were abandoning.

A few other persons ran with them; they caught glimpses of far-swimmers, and of one adult so full of egglings se would have sloshed, risking rupture, if se climbed out of the water. The others, the young adults, had run inward.

Into the trap.

The thrumming, the straining thunder of choppers, the sound of explosions took a long time to soften behind them. They sheltered under vegetation when the choppers passed over, hanging nets dripping water, squirming with green bodies. André finally floated behind Gourami, clinging to se back, his hands over se eyes to force them retracted and closed. It helped when Tetra led.

Se still kept wanting to turn back and look for Caetei.

They had not been running long when both André's and—he presumed—Tetra's instincts were proven brutally correct. The explosion flattened all three of them, the compression shock wave through the water thankfully attenuated by distance and topography, or they would have been dynamited like fish. It took both André and Tetra to keep Gourami moving. The froggie was like a sleepwalker; it would paddle despondently as long as somebody directed, but if not provoked and cajoled, it began drifting aimlessly. André wished he could talk to Tetra, ask questions, anything. But there was no means of conversation; damaged Gourami had the slate, and André was not sure Tetra knew how to use it even if it was so inclined.

At first, André thought Gourami might be physically injured. But when they had struggled far enough from the devastated village that Tetra allowed them to rest (not far enough that André felt safe, but he didn't think he'd feel safe anywhere in the bayou) and André beached himself on the cleanest, least-muddy bank he could find, Gourami crawled up, too, and seemed remarkably unharmed. It sprawled alongside him, ribbiting repeatedly, sawing like a distressed insect. André sat up long enough to glance it over.

No lumps he could see, except the ones that were meant to be there. No twisted bits, no oozing wounds.

Did froggies suffer posttraumatic stress? They must; he was looking at the evidence.

If he'd had the sense to secure one of the abandoned scoots during the massacre—or if he could somehow either drag himself back or explain to Tetra what he needed—then he might make it to Novo Haven before fever in his wounds incapacitated him.

But that would mean leaving Gourami helpless. When it had risked its life coming back for him. When he had promised Jean Kroc he would look out for it.

Still, it was his life. And dying of gangrene in a swamp wasn't as enticing as a single bullet through the brain.

He was unwilling to sell himself too cheaply.

He knuckled silt from his eyes and regretted it. He'd probably added more mud than he'd wiped away. If he could see himself, he'd be nothing but flaking clots; he felt cracked and itchy already.

Tetra had remained in the water. It swam back and forth restlessly, periodically submerging or darting out of sight, but always reemerging. André forced himself not to watch. It was too unnerving.

Beside him, Gourami also did not seem to be calming. Its distress, if anything, was growing; it shielded its eyes with its hands and curled tight.

At a loss, André reached out and laid a hand on it, as he might anyone.

The response was immediate and striking. Gourami breathed more slowly, scrunched eyes opening. It peeked between webbed digits without flinching.

“Gourami?”

It was looking at him when he spoke. It shuddered, a sort of releasing gesture, and leaned into his palm. He'd been thinking of pulling his hand back, but he left it there, although he knew he might be hurting the froggie.

Sometimes, you took your chances that you were doing more good than harm.

The froggie stared at him, silent, pouch taut and still against its throat. It extended its wrist, the one with

the slate on it, and calmly, decisively, typed. André felt the muscle and tendon gliding under its slick skin.

—*We have to go back.*

He wasn't about to argue, anyway.

André had never seen so many dead things. He was used to clean death, quick, in comprehensible quantities.

This was unfathomable.

The water he moved through was thick with dead ranids, and parts of dead ranids; the only reason it didn't run red was that ranid blood, though violet when oxygenated, was otherwise nearly clear. Once the water diluted it, the color faded, and the river pushed what remained to the sea.

Tetra and Gourami moved away from him as they came within sight of the massacre. André hauled himself up on the bank, slithering like a snake, and tried not to think about his pain.

He tried even harder not to think about what was in the water saturating his open wounds.

He felt fretful, useless. He lay on the bank and watched as Gourami and Tetra worked among the dead, among the drifting chunks, and was sickly glad he could not help them.

They dragged the dead between them, weighted them down and sank them in the mud. Over each one, Tetra made some gestures; André could not tell if words were spoken. Every so often, fingers plucking deliriously through the water as if it tickled fish, Gourami scooped something up and swallowed it, sometimes with a glance at Tetra that André would have said was guilty, if Gourami were human.

Tetra, for its part, seemed unconcerned. André, on the other hand, was reasonably certain that this was one funeral custom he didn't want a better look at.

He lay back and dozed in a not-too-muddy spot. He'd exhausted himself with the flight, and with the return. He'd salvage a scoot when his leg throbbed less, when he was rested.

But the splashing kept him awake. And a ranid somewhere was ribbiting, wasn't it? Something was, anyway—a terrible cringing sound that made him want to cover his ears. He did, but he could still hear it, and it occurred to him that it must be a ranid crying somewhere. There was a quality to it that itched at him, demanding action, like the cries of kittens or of terrified children.

André opened his eyes. The body of a ranid floated past on the retreating tide, wreathed in gray loops of intestine, fish tugging at the drifting innards. Surely it couldn't be making that sound. Surely *it* couldn't still be dying.

André called out, but maybe he couldn't make his voice carry or maybe ranids did not care to hear him. He clawed through mud for a rock to throw, anything to get their attention. When he rooted one up, it was slimed and muddy. He chucked it overhand; it plunked into the swamp a few meters from Gourami.

Gourami turned at the sound, and as quickly turned back again. André could not keep its attention. As soon as he stopped shouting, he heard the noise again. He pressed his hand to his mouth. His breath tickled his fingers.

He was the person making it.

Jefferson did not like to look at the cages. They were spacious and comfortable, the floors and walls moistened membrane, misters running intermittently for the comfort of the subjects who would soon be installed. A regular vacation spot, Jefferson told himself. He made a note to have the data trail amended so it would seem that Dr. McCarter had been the requisitioning authority for this equipment. An overstep of her authority, but the other option was Schaffner, and he was an old family friend.

Besides, it wasn't as if anybody would ever check. Nothing was going to go wrong.

He checked his headset. Schaffner was just out of sight behind a bank of equipment that blocked the view of the processing floor. Jefferson didn't particularly want to walk out there among the sedated ranids; he contented himself with sending a quick ping.

Schaffner responded immediately, and Jefferson opened the connection. "How are the facilities, Neil?"

Schaffner's image straightened; he dusted off his hands. Jefferson was willing to bet that the real one hadn't so much as looked up from whatever subject he was examining. "It's fine, thanks. These specimens are a little the worse for wear."

Jefferson smoothed a hand over a cool work surface, slick steel and slightly gritty black slate. The lab was new, sound-absorbent tiles making it pleasant. "Best we could do on short notice." There was no point in picking a fight with Schaffner. A ping interrupted before either of them could speak again. "That's Tim. Gotta go."

It was Tim in a fury, too. That was evident as soon as Jefferson opened a screen. "Just what the hell do you think you're trying to pull?"

"Tim? What are you talking about?" Jefferson arranged his icon in the most open pose he could manage, and waited.

"Your attack on the ranid village at"—a flashed map image, grid coordinates blinking—"using Rim security forces."

"A retaliatory raid," Jefferson said. "We have intelligence that that particular native colony was the staging ground for the recent terrorist attacks. We've retained prisoners for questioning. We have reason to believe that one of their elders may be responsible for the conjured explosion at the recruiting station."

"You've started a war."

"We've acknowledged one," Jefferson answered. "Bring it up at the next board meeting if you're unhappy. See you there."

He closed the session before Closs could answer, and set his messaging to *away*.

Jean smelled the carnage before he saw it. The bayou had its own range of odors, from sweetly rotten to musky-cold, briny or gassy or sulfuric. But this was a battlefield reek of cold burned gunpowder, spilled bowels, and shed blood. Ranid blood, more redolent of sugar than iron, relied upon cooperatively bonding haemerythrin as an oxygen-carrying agent.

They bled fuchsia.

He let his skiff glide silently for a while, poling only when it threatened to drift to a stop or run aground. There was silence ahead, and he feared it.

A body floated by—a far-swimmer, still tangled in se nets. Jean wondered where this one had come from, originally, bringing with it the freight of its stories and its genes. After a moment's consideration, he captured the dead froggie with a weighted rope and drew it close, alongside the skiff. Freshly killed, he thought; there was no sign of small crustaceans colonizing the wounds, so it could not have been dead for more than a couple of hours.

And yet, everything was silent.

Considering, he lashed it alongside the skiff, and poled on.

When he came out from among the reeds, he was braced for the worst. Jean Kroc had seen slaughter before. He had been on-planet when the Hogarth's World Charter Trade Company had seen fit to put down a worker uprising there. Hoggie was surface-dry; most of the water was pumped from deep wells. In some of the newer homesteads, though, they were just drilled and capped, and operated with a hand-pump. Half the residents were transportees or the children of transportees; no one cared too much for their creature comforts.

Jean Kroc knew of three people who had been crushed to death—suffocated—when they and dozens of others had climbed into the well-shaft to escape the automatic-weapons fire.

Jean hadn't been one of the civilians hiding in the well.

He'd been one of the militia holding the guns.

Not too long after, he'd found ways to get the money to emigrate. By the time he'd left, he'd had to. A soldier's pay wasn't the price of an emigration stake, even to a manpower-hungry world like Greene's. And Jean Kroc hadn't always been a conjure man. So he'd done what he thought he had to, and he'd gotten the funds to leave.

Jefferson Greene was not the worst rich man on the Rim. Jean Kroc had worked for the worst rich man on the Rim. For three years, before he'd wriggled loose.

But that was light-years and the best part of a century ago. It was just the smell of blood—even rancid blood—bringing back visceral, garish memories.

When he found where the greatparent had died, two froggies Jean knew were singing over it. And André Deschênes was passed out, fevered, on the bank.

When André awoke in the hospital, imperfectly washed and still gritty in the crevices, the first thing he did was call Jean Kroc a fool. "Rim is trying to kill me. Did you hang a target on the door?"

Jean rolled his shoulders in that way he had. "What makes you so sure it was Rim? Anyway, the hospital has a licensed coincidence engineer on duty. And I have been keeping an eye on you. Just in case."

"Thanks," André said, not bothering to conceal his sarcasm. An IV protruded from the back of his hand. He felt no pain; not even in his cast and elevated leg, despite an elaborate arrangement of screws and inflatable appliances that told him a little bit about the complexity of the surgery he'd missed while unconscious. His skin was cool where he pressed the back of his other hand to his cheek. "Good of you to care. Where's Cricket?"

A sideways flicker of his eyes. Jean didn't so much change the subject as refuse to allow André to change it. "Besides, I know who's been gunning for you."

"So do—"

"Not Rim."

It was awkward to lift his head, to try to get a look at Jean while his leg was lifted in the air. His lacerated back didn't hurt at all, but he could feel the cool resilience of a gel dressing laid on the mattress under him. He wondered how much glue and how many stitches it had taken to put him back together again, and whether they'd managed to match his skin tone with the stem culture or if he'd have tan spots he'd have to have corrected. Mottled like a frog, which would have made him laugh if it didn't make his eyes sting.

Jean rose from the green-and-white hospital chair and touched the control to inflate André's pillow slightly. André leaned back, let his neck relax. But he didn't let his guard down. "Who, then?"

"None of your damned business."

André jerked forward; the lack of pain tended to make him forget that he was incapacitated. He felt incredibly pleasant, actually; floating, but not disassociated. And so comfortable. It was hard to sustain the irritation, even when Jean put a hand on his shoulder and eased him back, one more time. "It's my business when it's my life at risk."

"I handled it," Jean said. "You're my apprentice; you're my problem. You worry about it when I say you do."

A shock of cold water, that. He hadn't gone to anyone else to fight his battles in fifteen years. And it was humiliating, infantilizing; *now* André's cheeks burned. He glared and bit his tongue. "Whatever you say."

Jean stepped back. His smile creased his prickled cheeks. "I know you're just mouthing that, but I appreciate the effort." He pulled a talker out of his pocket, the kind used by kids too young to be wetwired yet, pushed in the earbud, and clicked the activator. "Hello, yes, he's awake," he said, and paused to listen. "Why don't you come on in?"

"Cricket?" André asked.

But Jean shook him off, and moved toward the door. "I'll be back. Don't worry, you're safe here."

The door hissed open, shut, open again. André bit down on his tongue, stopping the words before they got out, and was glad. It wasn't Cricket.

It was Maryanne. And she wasn't alone.

She came through the door first, but she was a scout, not the leader. And a meter behind her sailed a taller, older woman, straight as a mast, her broad shoulders and chin already set with disapproval. Zoë Deschênes.

Fucking Zoë.

She was cheaply dressed, under her dignity, and André flinched from it. "What are *you* doing here?"

"The doctor," Zoë said, calmly, "says you shouldn't even have a limp. How are you feeling?"

"I asked what you were doing here," he said. She already had him on the run. *Already*.

“I’d ask the same,” she said. “But I know it. I wouldn’t be here—”

“You shouldn’t be.”

She bulled over him. “I wouldn’t be here if you . . . weren’t. You stupid *bastard*. If Mother could see you—”

“She can’t,” André snapped back, despite himself, so sharp. Under his skin, like that. Instantaneously.

Maryanne stood back against the wall and twisted her fists in her skirt. Chin tucked, eyes downcast. She was a cousin on his father’s side, not the same thing as being one of Zoë Asceline Deschênes’s children at all.

Of course Zoë could push his buttons. Her mother had installed them.

She didn’t smile; if she’d broken his defenses, he thought he’d snapped through hers just as completely. “You are such a bitch, André. Such a bitch. Such a *child*.”

He drew a breath, restored by it. “And you’re here to call me names?”

The frown deepened. And then she did smile, lips furling up to reveal broad white teeth. “No. And I shouldn’t have done that.” She paused. “I’m surprised you kept the name. When you were walking out on everything else.”

“Not fair.” He waved the back of his hand at Maryanne. “I was there for the family.”

“Don’t you bring me into this, André.”

“You brought her!” He made his hands lie flat on the sheet, when he wanted to point at his sister, wave them wildly. He made himself look steadily at Zoë. Too much like *her* mother. Even the name. As if the elder Zoë had been able to imprint her personality on her firstborn child. “I’m surprised you came to see me here. Or not surprised, come to think of it. Did you visit to gloat, or to rub my nose in my crimes?”

“I came because I don’t want to see you floating dead in the street,” she said. “And because if Mother were alive, she’d have come for you. Even now.”

“You’re like a reefcrawler,” he said. His fingers plucked the cool, slick bedding; he forced himself to stop. “You don’t want me near you when I’m strong. But maybe if I’m easy prey, you’ll come see what you pick off my carcass, is that it?”

Zoë hadn’t moved from her spot near the door. She folded her arms over her chest; the cheap fabric of her blouse pulled taut. “Is that what you think of me?”

“I think you’re a charlatan,” he said. “I think you’re a con artist. You wouldn’t know real conjuring if it sent you a birthday wish. You tell people what they want to hear, you keep them trapped in their fantasies, and you skim off whatever you can. You’re a profiteer, Zoë. Just like Mother was.”

She stared for a minute, her knuckles paling where her fingers laced over her arms. “An *ethics* lecture?”

“Leave me the hell alone.”

“Oh, I don’t think so.” A thoughtful purse of her lips punctuated the slow rocking of her head. He was in for it. Good; that would make it easier.

Angry was better than shamed.

But she surprised him. She nodded, and unfolded her arms, and came to him. She didn't sit on the bed; instead, she dragged over the chair that Jean had used and perched on the edge. On a smaller woman, it would have looked delicate. On her, it gave the impression of hunger. "You think you're better?"

"I'm not in the gutter lying to people," he said. "I'm not that."

He'd almost forgot Maryanne was in the room until she snorted. He glanced over; she was looking at him now. She shook her head and looked down.

"You're right," Zoë said, and patted his hand before she stood. "You're in a much better class of gutter now."

The door whisked shut behind them both while he still lay, stunned, chewing on his tongue.

Where the hell did she get off being embarrassed by him?

13

THEY LET ANDRÉ GO HOME IN TEN DAYS; IT WAS TWENTY-FOUR before he was on his feet. He spent the interim flat on his back, at the mercy of a pair of home-care attendants whose visits never seemed to coincide with when he needed them.

He was fortunate; by the time doctors and diagnostics pronounced him fit for weight-bearing exercise and swapped him into a walking cast, he was free of pain and just waiting for the new bone to harden.

Not quite a miracle cure. But pretty effective.

Cricket didn't call him during his recovery, and after a while, he stopped asking Jean if he knew where she was. Jean didn't answer, and André figured that was a good indicator as any that Cricket had found out more than she wanted to. Sometimes people couldn't handle the truth.

He had a long time for thinking, though, between Jean's lessons (mostly theoretical, at this point) and it occurred to him one morning as he struggled off the sofa and into the motorized cart that some truths were not of the nature that people could be expected to handle. He wished he could say it was some sort of a spiritual revelation, but mostly it was the wisdom born of nightmares.

You think you're fine. You think you got through it all right. And then you wake up sure the cold sweat on your face is blood, so real you can taste it.

It was just as well Cricket wasn't talking to him. He wasn't sure, anymore, what he had to offer.

It was almost a relief when Jean came for him, the day after he was allowed to walk again, and told him to pack a bag.

Gourami glided forward alone in the ocean, and thought, *I'm a far-swimmer now.*

Tetra had gone another way. Every capable person that Gourami and Tetra had found in the aftermath of the massacre had swum, bearing reports to other bands, other clans, other greatparents as well. The greatparents would share information, of course, but this way many of them would have different perspectives.

Younger adults had traveled upriver or along the coast. It should have been far-swimmers who braved the open water, but there were not enough. So the older and stronger young adults had swum.

Including those who were pregnant. As Gourami had become.

So now they were far-swimmers. But not far-swimmers such as the bands had often seen. One did not take on eggings when one meant to journey.

Gourami had not considered the consequences when se first saw an eggling thrashing in bloodied water and realized what the birds were feeding on, among the dead. Se acted on instinct, in hope and terror; se netted the fearful eggling in handfingers and swallowed it. The shock of water stretching se virgin brood pouch was like pain. Gourami reeled.

And then seen and rescued another, another, another—

So many endoparents had jettisoned their broods in frantic hope of the young surviving. So many—and Gourami, no matter how se searched, even to examining the brood pouches of the dead, could save only a few.

And they could not live on their own. Gourami saw other young adults collecting eggings, one—Parrot—despite old crippling wounds, another with a broken forelimb lashed to se chest. None of them had any way of knowing which eggings were exosibs. They mostly could not even identify the endosibs. The young were all sizes, from first-hatched to almost-budded.

Gourami worried that the eldest would eat the youngest; they were not old enough to know better yet. And that happened sometimes when there was trauma or hunger.

So se must keep them well fed. Which was not a simple matter when one was swimming in open water.

The warm surface of the ocean coursed over Gourami's back, buoying. When se could not fish, se filter-fed, shunting much of the greens and chlorophyll into the pouch-water for the proper development of the eggings. They needed to establish their skin flora before they could live on their own. Although Gourami's crossbow dragged, se was glad to have it. With a coil of humen twine, it made fishing much easier. Sometimes great schools of silver-flashing jackharley or gray-gill surrounded Gourami, and se could shoot one without breaking stroke.

Se could not rest. Se sucked the flesh from the bones of the catch without stopping. There were larger predators in open water, and they knew the scent of blood. The fish-bones, se ground between jaw-plates until they powdered. Se enriched the pouch-water with it, so the eggings would grow strong, flexible skeletons.

This was especially important for the two eggings who were just budding, absorbing their tails and developing limbs.

Fortunately, the fish were plentiful. So the eggings thrived—except for three that Gourami lost and mourned and ate in the first week. Probably all the dead had been shocked or hurt beyond surviving at one-tree-island.

Only Gourami grew thin.

When Gourami reached the floating colony at two-half-moon-reef, se at first could not remember how to stop swimming. Se butted against the outer bladders, long muscles still twitching. The bladders floated

lightly, taut, and Gourami bumped and bumped again.

But then there was splashing, the water slapping se flanks, someone touching, stroking a back Gourami had not known was sunburned until soft hands smoothed mucous over raw flesh. Strong hands lifted and led se, their owners patting and exclaiming as they brought se before the greatparent, who floated like an enormous stinging jelly in the midst of the colony. Se had heard the news, of course; Gourami had swum farther than many others.

But that was not the same as touching a survivor.

Cricket—Fisher—was starting to prefer her new name. Especially the way Nouel said it, with a little twinkle, as if it were a joke shared. As he said it now, sliding a drink across the desk to rest beside her hand.

“Fisher—” He waited for her to look up and smile. She appreciated the training. “Company’s here.”

She appreciated the warning, too. She pushed herself upright on his couch. In the back of her head, Maurice—present only in spirit—felt the shift in her attention away from the code they were double-teaming, and pinged.

She pinged back. *All clear; your data.*

The inside of her head was a changed place. When she’d scrubbed her headset and reformatted, she’d cleaned everything. Flashed the bios, sealed the old data and wiped it, reformatted, and sent Nouel out to purchase a new drive, memory, and parser off the shelf from a shop chosen at random. Her hardware felt chromed, and in the spirit of reinvention she’d done the same kind of purge and start over with the software. Over the course of years, one layered up clutter. Dozens of half-used programs and heaps of old files lurked in the corners of one’s mind: three or four different messengers or mailers, newsfeeds about things she used to care about, security codes to a house she hadn’t lived in since she was twelve.

All gone now.

“Fisher,” Nouel repeated, “that company. Still need a minute? How goes the war?”

She shrugged. Just under a month, and she was already Nouel Huc’s biggest fan. Except when she was Maurice Sadowski’s. Because Nouel could definitely beat up Cricket’s father. And Maurice could run him into the gutter. And the really shocking thing was that she honestly believed either one of them would do it for her.

Even though neither one of them wanted to fuck her. Nouel, as far as she could tell, was perfectly happy with his long-distance love.

Anyway, she had no glib answers for his questions. “They’ve incinerated Lucienne’s body,” she said. “Maurice thinks that if they managed to download her—I don’t know if we have any way to get that information out of André—”

“Who is in the living room—”

“Yes, I caught that. Thank you. Maurice thinks they’d have it on an isolated system. No connex. So hacking into it, unlikely to happen. Even for him.”

“Well,” Jean said, from the doorway, “then we’ll just have to break in. I’ve talked to Ziyi Zhou. She can

get us coverage in the Core media if we can deliver the goods.”

She'd been braced, she realized. Ready with an emotional death grip on herself, ready to greet André Deschênes with a chill and perfect facade. She almost didn't register what Jean said; she was too busy staring at the door.

André limped in, fifteen pounds thinner, one leg awkward in a green and blue walking cast, leaning on an orthopedic cane. He smiled when he saw her, a sweet childish expression that caught at her composure, fuzzed up its surface like burr-prickles snagging in silk. She couldn't answer in kind; she looked at him, and saw somebody she used to like.

She licked her lips, looked back at Jean, and said, “That doesn't help us if we can't back it up, Jean Gris. If I'm legally Moon Morrow”—in the corner of her vision, André performed a perfect theatrical double take—“then I have access to Rim corporate secrets. If I can prove in court that I'm the new original. But I'll bet you my bottom demark that my motherself has signed a nondisclosure agreement—”

“That matters?”

Maurice, listening over Cricket's feed, seemed about to pop an icon into the room and explain. But Cricket beat him to it. “Technically, she has no rights,” Cricket said. “*If* I can prove I'm her quantum clone. When you sign the paperwork, you sign your identity over to the childself.” Cricket didn't tell them that she remembered signing it, thumbprint and retinal scan and an old-fashioned ink pen, a thing you only used for wills and marriages and adoptions.

Ten thousand years of literacy as a species, and there was still something about signing your name that *felt* like a contract.

“Draconian,” André said, the first word out of his mouth.

Cricket almost looked at him, but stopped herself in time. “Keeps people from cloning themselves for fun, now doesn't it? Anyway, if we're going that route, I need to file papers. And then Rim will be after me for real. André—”

“André is retired,” André said.

“—is not their only gun.”

“Oh,” he said. This time, she did look at him, and found him lip-pursed, eyes half lidded, as if studying his arrogance from an interior angle. “You have a point.”

“The information has to come from somewhere, people.” Maurice, rezzing in the center of the room, threw up his hands. Cricket hid a smile; she'd been making herself bets on how long he could stay away.

André leaned around his image, looked Cricket in the eye, and said, “I'll testify.”

The silence was palpable. Cricket heard her heart beat in her ears. The meta-visual clutter of her overhauled headset, even pruned, was suddenly unbearable. She shut it down, all of it, and focused on the three men and the one icon.

Noel got up and crossed the room. He poured a finger of straw-colored liquor into a squat tumbler and knocked it back. The next one, he tried to hand to André, but he might as well have been pushing it on a mannequin. For André, it seemed as if there was no one in the room but Cricket.

“It will mean jail time,” Cricket said. United Earth didn't have the death penalty, except for treason.

“Maybe life,” Nouel added. “On Greene’s World. Where Charter Trade can get to you.”

And that *was* a death sentence.

Jean took the untouched glass from Nouel’s hand and brought it to Cricket, who did accept. She let the rim rest against her teeth, the smooth glass warm from Jean’s skin, and watched André breathe and think. He still hadn’t dropped his gaze from hers when he shrugged and said, “Life? What else am I doing with it?”

Cricket set the glass aside, watching it click on a checkerboard side table. When she looked up, André was still staring. She crossed to him, put her hand lightly against his chest, and balanced up to kiss him on the corner of the mouth. Warm flesh, dry lips, the small curls of his beard.

“This doesn’t make me a better man than I was yesterday,” he said.

Cricket shrugged and stepped back. He loved her, and she didn’t love him, but that didn’t mean they had to be assholes about it. “See you in hell,” she said cheerfully, and leaned her shoulder against his arm.

Maurice would report to work in person the next day. He would bring Closs the final bombshell that they had been saving—the news that Lucienne Spivak had not been merely a local activist, but an agent of Unified Earth, a government agitator working for the Bureau of Extraterrestrial Affairs. That she had been operating on Greene’s World under several identities, one of which was that of Lisa Anne Angley, who had faked her own death in the process of facilitating a coincidentally engineered explosion on board the rapid recruiting ship.

That she had, with the aid of rapid extremists, escaped underwater before the ship blew up. That she had been instrumental in the deaths of several men.

André listened impassively as Maurice laid out the information he would deliver. Only when the archinformist was done did he speak, shifting uncomfortably on the sofa where he reclined, his healing leg propped on cushions.

“Is that true?”

“Tolerably,” Jean said, when Maurice didn’t answer. Cricket gave him such a look, and he shrugged. “I knew who she was working for. Unified Earth would just *love* a legal excuse to get the omelite monopoly away from Jeff Greene. As you can imagine.”

We were friends, Cricket almost said. But she hadn’t told Lucienne who she had used to be either. Did that make *her* less a friend?

People had secrets. You lived with it or you didn’t.

André said it again, as if he needed to fix it in his head. “I assassinated a government agent for Jefferson Greene.”

“Still time to change your mind,” Nouel said, hands folded together so the sinews in their backs stood out. It was obvious what he thought the best course was, and Cricket was a little startled by his loyalty.

André shook his head. “Keep talking.”

It was at its heart Cricket’s plan, and she thought it was a good one. Judging by their expressions, the

men didn't disagree. Jean let a faint smile deepen the lines between the corners of his nose and the corners of his mouth, and Nouel was giving Cricket that querying eyebrow. Maurice might be a bit less sanguine, but as it was his neck first on the block, Cricket couldn't blame him. They would need an inside man.

There were two choices. Him, or André. And André was needed elsewhere.

To his credit, though Maurice went pale and tight-faced when Cricket made her suggestions, his only reply was a nod.

"Maurice goes inside," Cricket reiterated, wishing she could just flash-highlight the relevant text. Not with Jean in the conversation. She could *talk* much faster than she could *speak*, and with much greater information density. *Words are hell*. "The rest of us, except André, come in from the outside on a data run, and get intentionally messy. Carefully. While we distract Charter Trade's security, André waits on his scoot for Maurice's transmission. Maurice recovers what he can off the internal systems and makes a handoff to André. André ferries the data personally to Ziyi Zhou and stays with her until she sends it to Earth."

"And we vanish into the night like ninja," Maurice said, and embarrassed himself with a karate chop.

She glanced around the room one more time, saw tight concentration, nodding. "Maurice told us something else," she said, looking to Nouel for permission to continue.

Maurice took it as an invitation. "The god-botherers have a theory," he said, "that the ranids used to have a technological civilization. That they possibly abandoned it by choice. It gives us another point of leverage against Charter Trade, if I can pull out some proof. Proof, even that Greene suspects and hasn't reported it."

For once, it was Jean looking most puzzled. André's relief was almost palpable. Cricket took pity on them both. "You know the rule about planetary colonies."

"Only on worlds where the natives are prespace," Jean said.

Cricket nodded. She knew this through her motherself. It had been her *job*. "There isn't a rule for worlds that have *chosen* barbarism. Nobody ever thought of that. If Charter Trade is suppressing that information, the scandal could last years."

"Oh," Jean said. And then, quite unnecessarily, he added, "Damn. I wish Lucienne were here."

Cricket snapped away. She hadn't forgiven André, not exactly. And she wasn't going to let him see her cry.

Her hand caught her discarded glass on the edge of the table. It sailed into the air; she fumbled after it, felt her fingers glance off. Nobody else was close enough to catch.

They stood and watched it fall.

It landed upright on the floor and did not shatter. A narrow column of liquor followed it down, splashed inside, spat a thread up to catch the light, and fell into concentric ripples in the cradle of the glass. Not a drop spilled.

"Wow," Cricket said. "That was convenient."

It was Jean Kroc who murmured, "Oh, *shit*."

THE PROBABILITY STORM SIMMERED THROUGH THE NIGHT, and Jean refused to let anyone travel. “Why put yourself in the way of coincidence?” he said.

Later, as Jean was helping Nouel make up the red-upholstered couches for him and André to sleep on, Cricket asked, “Can’t you do something about it?” Cricket already had the guest room; Jean watched André visibly consider asking if he could share it and then, just as visibly, let go.

The first answer on his tongue was sharper than she warranted. He turned it around until he found a kinder way to phrase it; this couldn’t be easy on her either. “No. Because mucking with probability now is not the best, er, possible idea.”

Her mouth made an O. She looked at her feet and nodded. “Stupid question,” she said. But it hadn’t been, really. Just a human one, and he patted her on the arm. She moved as if he hadn’t touched her, but bent and pulled a sheet taut. Where her fingers dented the fabric, three of them went right through.

As luck would have it.

She looked up, startled.

“It would have happened sooner or later. Nothing to do,” he said, “but sit tight and wait it out.”

As it played out, none of them slept much. Nouel fired up the living room system; they got news on three walls, seven feet high. Cricket reported that Maurice had retired his connection, ostensibly to sleep. The rest of them piled onto the chairs and couches and settled in under blankets, despite the lingering warmth of the night. Jean imagined that the other three were also following newsdrips, feeds, and real-time chats.

Jean was suddenly, unsentimentally grateful that he’d left that behind. He rested his head against the back of the couch and just watched the walls, captions on and the sound turned down. Occasionally, Cricket or Nouel read out a headline. André said almost nothing.

It was a night of news worth staying up for, Cricket’s unspilled cup being the least of it. Broadcast stories included a roster of biblical exigencies: the death by burning of an elderly woman alone in a locked room; the spontaneous appearance of a young man in evening dress—speaking no known language—in the middle of Troutbrook Street; a rash of mysterious objects appearing in public places while no one happened to be looking. A refrigeration unit, a piece of garden statuary, a half-ton pile of whitefish.

There was another seaquake.

A mining platform burned.

Those did not worry Jean as much as the teleporting objects. “Apports,” he said, drawing his knees to his chest. A sinkhole seemed to have opened in his stomach. He pressed both fists into his flesh, but his voice would not be steadied. “Oh, that’s very bad news indeed.”

“Apports?” Nouel asked. He lay on the floor on his stomach, his chin propped on his hands. His eyes were closed; whether he was shutting out the news or watching a scroll on his headset, Jean was not quite sure.

“There is a statistically small, but nonzero, chance that any given object will not be where you left it,” Jean said. “It has to do with timestreams forking and healing. It’s how the Slide works.”

André said, “Oh.”

“The Exigency Corps hasn’t issued a warning—”

“Nouel,” Cricket said, “they didn’t on Patience either.” She also sat on the floor, her back to the sofa, next to André’s unbroken leg. He kept glancing down at her as if he wanted to ruffle her hair, but his hands stayed on the couch. *Her* fingers plucked at the fringe of the rug; she didn’t seem to notice that she was inducing it to shift color with each stroke. She looked up, across the room. Jean looked back. “How bad is this going to get?”

“I don’t know,” he said. And then, because it seemed like a bad time to lie, he added, “worse.” He turned his attention to Nouel. “May I use your screen? I need to make an interplanetary call.”

That was worth it for the looks Cricket and André gave both him, and each other. He expected he could produce superior expressions in a moment, and yet he felt a profound reluctance.

They had planned this. He had been a party to it. He had allowed Lucienne to choose, although he had not been in accord with her choosing. But her death had been part of the game, and he’d let her play it the way she’d intended.

They all had debts to pay. Lucienne had her own reasons, and he’d never asked what they might be.

It didn’t make it any easier to enter the code and call her, though, half a galaxy away.

André had killed her. He’d laid her limp body out, turned her head, slid a cable into the access port for her headset. He’d combed his fingers through her sweat-damp, sea-salt hair, pushing aside tendrils that had snapped off too short for the braid. He’d lifted her body in his arms, held her like a sleeping child, and sunk her in hundreds of feet of water, where she’d become entangled. He’d watched the sea close over her as the weight of the water he’d piped into her lungs carried her down.

Lucienne Spivak smiled at him and said, “André. Nice to finally meet you face to face, even if it is by transmission. I hope you’re well?”

“Oh, fuck,” Cricket said, and ran for the bathroom.

André tried to struggle to his feet, whether to follow Cricket or meet standing the woman he’d murdered, he wasn’t sure. He heaved and fell back, and then Jean was beside him, hand on his shoulder, and he didn’t try again. He couldn’t settle back on the cushions either, though, so he leaned forward and disregarded the twinge from his propped foot. “How did you—”

Not the most politic of questions. Perhaps he got some consideration for shock. Lucienne smiled, and said blandly, “You killed me. No game.”

Cricket had just emerged from the bathroom, wiping her mouth on her hand. André thought she might slump to the floor, from the way she was heeling over, but she braced herself on the doorframe and rolled her shoulders back. “How *could* you?” she said. “How could you let me think you were dead? How could you, how could you let me feel your death? We were friends.”

André had heard children say the word that way, with total conviction and total betrayal. Friends. As if it were the only thing that mattered in the world.

“Sweetheart,” Lucienne said gently, “that wasn’t me.”

André blinked. He reached out a hand to Cricket; without seeming to look, she came and sat beside him, settling into the couch under the curve of his arm. She leaned against him, and it was all sun-warmth and bittersweet longing. Even when Lucienne winked at him like a rabbit punch, the sweet hurt, the emptiness that was Cricket curled against him for the last time, did not fade. If anything, it sharpened.

You don't *always* know, when you touch somebody for the last time. But sometimes you can tell. Sometimes, you get a chance to appreciate it in all its spiky glory. "It was you," Cricket said. "We were friends, and—"

"You lied to each other."

"We didn't tell each other everything," Cricket said. "That's not the same."

Lucienne swallowed. André saw the ringlike shadows move under her skin. "The person you knew was my daughterself," she said, quietly. "She—I—followed you to Greene's World when you fled prosecution on Earth. And you turned out quite different from the Moon Morrow I've been hunting since she got out of prison, I might add." She lowered her eyes. "I hope you don't think your motherself has your scruples."

André squeezed her, lightly, with the embracing arm. She didn't quite shake him off, but the stiffness in her shoulders told him he wouldn't get another warning. "I remember," Cricket said. "I changed."

"You thought you were Morrow."

"I—"

"Posthypnotic suggestion," Lucienne said. "She had a pretty clever plan; to send you on ahead, avoid the prison sentence that way, and use you to solidify a hold over Charter Trade."

"But I didn't go to Charter Trade."

"No," Lucienne said. "You went to ground. You didn't do what Morrow would have. You developed a conscience."

"She didn't?" This time, Cricket snuggled against André's side by herself. He let her, and didn't try to hold onto her.

"You grew up somewhat. You came to an understanding about Patience, among other things."

"If I'm her," Cricket said, "then how can I have changed when she didn't?"

Jean cleared his throat. André had been so focused on Cricket, and on Lucienne—who, he was thankful, was not staring at him with that particular expectant expression—that he had almost forgotten that Jean and Nouel were in the room. "It could have gone either way," he said, with a self-effacing shrug.

Nouel cleared his throat, leaned forward, and said, "Doesn't this all seem a little coincidental to you?"

Cricket frowned. "Don't be silly, I can't possibly be entangled. I've never ever worked for Rim—" Her eyes widened.

"What?" André's plan had been to stay silent. He should have remembered that plans never survived contact.

Cricket stood, stepped away, and turned back long enough to give him an accusing look. He spread his hands. The couch was too hot and too moist against his back. He wished he could just stand up and

follow her.

She tweaked her hair behind her shoulders, and looked back at Lucienne. “When they...made me. But Morrow must have hidden that? I mean, if everybody knew—”

“I work for Unified Earth,” Lucienne said. “I’m sorry, Cricket. Lucienne was my quantum clone, as you were Morrow’s. There’s...an awareness that we have. When you were scared or hurt, she could find you. We knew Morrow wouldn’t let you get too far out of sight. So you were our ticket for taking the whole filthy Greene’s World Charter Trade cabal down.”

“But you had Maurice.”

“Not then.” She tilted her head. “There’s another issue; there has to be enough of a public scandal to discredit Rim before UE wades in. When Morrow did what she did, she was our problem. Us going after her could look vindictive.”

Oh, André thought. And that had nothing to do with it, of course. “So you’re telling us to trust the government?”

“I’m asking you to consider the alternatives. Also, we needed people who could testify. Personally. We needed a bulletproof case.”

“You’ve got it.” Cricket turned her head and looked at André. Looked through André, the brown flecks swimming in her tea-colored eyes. “Don’t you?”

There are moments, he understood, when your life changed in front of your eyes. Sometimes you knew it. You pulled a trigger. You kissed a girl.

Other times, you only caught it in the receding view.

He could walk away now. He didn’t have to go to the wall for them. Jean and Lucienne had just admitted they’d set him up.

He deserved it. But Cricket didn’t, and they’d fucking *conjured* her. And convinced her that he’d killed her best friend. He *had* killed her best friend.

That was something of an unpatchable betrayal.

And *she* was still standing there.

And he didn’t, he realized, have to decide right now.

“That’s why you took me on?” He stared past Cricket, at Jean Kroc, and Jean Kroc nodded. He’d been expecting the question; he didn’t have to pause to think.

“Son of a bitch,” André said. “I thought it was my talent.”

“No,” Jean said. “All the talent in forty worlds doesn’t make you not a killer, André.”

And there it was, held up for him. Something he could look at square, through the filter of the mud and the violet blood and the scent of sugar and the poor damned froggies stupidly trying to bury their dead. “No,” he said, with Jean and Cricket and Nouel all looking at him, and the projected image of Lucienne carefully looking away. “I guess it doesn’t. So why did you take me on?”

Jean shrugged. He got up, came over to André, and helped him to his feet. André balanced unsteadily,

and Jean brought him his crutch. He leaned on it and watched, as Jean stepped back, as Cricket silently withdrew to sit again, this time beside Nouel and not looking at Lucienne at all.

Jean cleared his throat, drawing André's attention again. "Because you're not the only killer in the room."

Nouel lifted one finger, breaking a waiting silence. "Maurice has just been called into work," he said.

"We're on a little early, friends."

By the fourth quarter, Closs knew he was looking at the end of the world. He'd spent the evening in crisis management, but for each one he passed off to a capable subordinate or handed down the chain of command with a resolution plan, two more bloomed in its place. His office became a virtual situation room, the view through the tall windows obscured by projections, icons showing his night-shift troubleshooters working, heads down, eyes moving restlessly.

They even made it through the seaquake; disaster response had protocols in place to handle those, and Novo Haven did not suffer a tsunami. But Closs knew by then that things were going to hell, and he didn't think this failure would be the last one.

When the first drilling platform went—it could have been terrorism, or coincidence run riot, or both—he knew it was time. He told his executary to wake everybody up, to call them in. He didn't bother sending a message to Jefferson Greene. Either his own people would do it, he was already working on a problem and hadn't bothered to inform Closs, or he would find out in the morning. In any case, Closs was not in the mood for a fight, and it was still easier to get forgiveness.

He had already given the order to break the city up when the alert came in warning of a freak storm brewing in the gulf. The first IM from Amanda Delarossa was only half a minute behind, marked *critical*.

Can't reach Greene. Taking the Slide offline, it read. Executive decision. Major probability correction under way. Hang on to your ass.

He called her. It went through on a heartbeat; whether she'd been waiting for the call, hoping for Greene, or whether she was just sitting in her ready room staring at the cup of coffee in front of her, waiting for the storm to blow over so there was something for her to do, he wasn't sure. "*Offline?*"

"The whole oyster," she said. "It's powering down now. We'll have in-system communications, but you should expect a slight lightspeed lag."

Her eyes were slightly unfocused, as if she were watching a countdown; she was, because she popped it up on his display, too.

"Starting about—" The image flickered. Hiccuped. Came back midword. "—ow."

It lasted less than a second. A flutter. The lag was so slight that it could seem like a thoughtful hesitation in speech. It was only what it signified that made Closs feel as if he'd plunged his hands in ice-water to the elbows.

They were cut off. Cut off from Earth, cut off from Core, alone in the measureless cosmologic sea. "There's a theory," Amanda said, "that if they'd done this on Patience when things went squirrely, they might have saved the station."

"If they'd jettisoned the antimatter, they might have saved the station, too," Closs said. "So I take it you

can't give me any help with this storm?" He popped up a weather map, in case she'd missed the warning. A vast swirl of angry clouds confronted them, the twisted meeting of three low-pressure fronts—two warm, one unseasonably cold—feeding into one another.

"Damn," Amanda said. "Is that an *eye*?"

Closs nodded. "An extratropical cyclone. We've got maybe fifty, sixty quarters before it hits." Normally, Novo Haven had two or three days to respond to cyclone threat. The usual recourse was to disperse the city, run before the winds, rely on the god-botherers to send the storms on as harmless a path as possible, and return when the threat had passed. Sometimes, years went by without a drill. Some years, they fled two or three times.

They'd been having a run of good luck, Closs thought bitterly.

"No," Amanda said. "I can't do anything for you. I'm sorry, Major." She looked up, then, startled from her chair fast enough that the coffee wobbled on her table. "Shit, I think I have a more immediate problem—"

"Amanda—"

"*Oh, shit!*"

Closs remembered hearing somewhere that those were the most common last words spoken by those who died in accidents. He had no idea from whence the data came. It didn't comfort him; there was no merciful fuzz of static and wipe of black this time.

Amanda's words were followed by a thump that would have deafened Closs if he'd been hearing it with his ears instead of his brain. A whoosh, and then nothing: absolute silence. There was a split-second of blackness as the power failed, before emergency lights kicked in.

Amanda had been using an external mote rather than a headset projection, sending him her real-time image. So he glimpsed the empty, shattered ready room, the twisted remains of the bulkheads and ceiling, plumes of escaping, frozen air in the weak green glow of what emergency lighting remained unbroken.

And through the torn-open floor, the silverfish flash of a spaceship whose design he did not recognize, turning as it looped away.

"Shit," Closs said. It was thirty seconds before he could bring himself to break the connection, though there wasn't a chance in hell that anybody was alive in there. Finally, he blinked it away, though, and started composing another emergency alert message in his head. If anybody *had* made it off the station—if anybody *did* make it off the station—they would need to keep the landing lanes open and lit for the lighters as long as possible, and volunteers in cutters would need to stay behind to evacuate the crews.

This time, he *did* send an instant message to Greene, highest priority. And wasn't surprised by the *unavailable* tag that popped back. He spun on the ball of his foot and began to pace, fielding the requests for clarification and direction as they flooded in.

Outside, the cyclone alarm climbed the night.

Jefferson passed over the Y-15 omelite rig and landed on the *Richardson Explorer* only a few quarters

after midnight. The sky was already louring, the moon-glow only permeating a few threadbare places in the overcast.

On the rig, work continued under floods despite the hour. They had to meet rising quotas. From his vantage overhead, he got a good view of the workers, as purposeful and mindless as colony insects. The *Explorer*, however, was still and dark. She rocked gently in the chop; Greene checked his weather eye before beginning his descent. There was one hell of a storm blowing up to the south; he'd have to finish here quickly and beat feet back to Novo Haven, unless he wanted to spend the next day tossed on the ship.

This time, the only people waiting for his chopper were the crew members who secured it—a much more efficient use of manpower. Jefferson thanked the nearest one and headed below, refusing an escort. By now, he thought he'd better be able to find his own way down to the labs.

They opened to his ident, and he stepped inside after overriding the interior monitors—with McCarter's code, not his own. The lights were out; he heard only soft chirping. The surviving research subjects: the controls.

They would have to be sacrificed as well.

Jefferson had kept himself well apprised of the layout of the lab and its contents over the course of the previous few weeks. There was a time, he understood, when his desperate plan would have had no hope of success. A time before exigency engineering; a time before a thorough understanding of bio-manufacturing.

But Schaffner had called him that afternoon, and told him that stage one of the project was partially successful. A single pathogen had been engineered. Whether it bore sufficient similarity to the rumored one, he couldn't assure the chairman without a sample, of course. But it was a start, and others would follow.

Jefferson knew where the vials were kept. The inside pocket of his flight jacket was lined with therm. From it, he pulled a padded titanium box thirty centimeters long. Six vials fit into it, nested side by side. He closed it and sealed it, and took one last look around the lab.

A fire would not be obvious, given the ongoing festival of sabotage. But it would be inhumane to leave the animals to burn. Jefferson crossed to their cages—half of them empty now—and felt the thrill of their noises up his spine. They went subsonic as he approached, the sneaking creatures, and crowded the glass, as if trying to see what he was doing.

The emergency purge button was under several layers of glass and fail-safes. He used McCarter's code again, and lifted the bubble with his sleeve wrapped over his fingertips. He pushed it down. There was a hiss of gas.

One of the frogs was still signing weakly against the glass when he turned away. He didn't look back; it would be with its friends soon enough.

15

THE CYCLONE SIRENS BEGAN TO WAIL IN THE SWELTERING dark hours of morning; Cricket almost overturned the chair she had been sitting curled in, her knees cupped in her hands. She stumbled but caught herself. "Crap. Just the siren."

André nudged her thigh with his elbow from his spot on the sofa. She glared, then shook herself and settled. He meant to be comforting. She could tell by his eyebrows. He *was* trying.

“We’ll have to speed up our schedule,” Nouel said, leaving Cricket grateful that he’d filled the silence. “Inside of two hours, we’ll have to resort to a commando raid at sea, and I don’t think—”

“Right,” André said. “I’m on my way.” Cricket helped him up; his palm was cool and sweating. She wanted to pull away from the contact. It nauseated her to see him nervous. Human.

“I won’t be able to help you,” Jean said, and André waved it aside with the back of his hand. “The probability storm.”

“Careful—” Lucienne’s icon said, as wide-eyed as if blind to any irony.

Cricket wondered. Lucienne had been her best friend. Lucienne would have slipped Cricket a sideways glance as she said it, and Cricket would have been meant to understand that the comment had its barbs.

This Lucienne was not her friend. Nothing had changed; André had still killed the Lucienne Cricket cared for.

Why would you choose to die—really die—even if your motherself survived? It didn’t mean that *you* were any less dead.

Cricket couldn’t imagine dying for Moon Morrow. But then, maybe she was just the sort of person who couldn’t imagine dying for anyone. Or the sort nobody should be dying for.

André shifted his cane to the other side and wiped his hand on his trousers. Cricket stepped back. By the time he summoned up his bulletproof smile, she couldn’t look at it. “I’ll come back. I promise.”

Don’t come back for me. But she nodded, dry-mouthed, and touched the back of his hand. “Try not to get killed.”

And there was no more irony in it when she said it than when Lucienne had.

Less than sixty seconds later, he was out in his scoot, pulling away from the dock. He’d paused to put the top up. Cricket didn’t watch him from the window, other than one quick glance when the headlamp flashed on.

She was definitely way too jumpy.

Nouel cleared his throat and said, “Message from Maurice.” Cricket, despite her promise to herself to calm the hell down, shied from a sudden flash of memory: if everyone here except the impeccable Nouel had been better dressed before they started looking shopworn, this could be any UE situation room.

Nouel gave her a curious look and kept talking, once he had Jean’s attention. “He’s not quite at the office. Says they expect to be clear for breakup within two hours; the outermost barges on Bayside are already moving out. He says to tell André that he’s not going to be able to transmit once he’s in. They’ll notice the bandwidth if they’re locked down, and protocol is to lock down.”

Cricket flinched. “I’ll call him.”

“Also, he wants me to pass a message to you, Jean.”

“Go for it,” Jean said.

Half a second later, just as Lucienne was looking as if she was about to interject a comment, her image flicked off like a closed fan. And half—no, *most* of Cricket’s network dropped out of connection. Routes she used daily were truncated, chats—she’d had to find new ones, in the person of her reincarnation, and start working her way up again—were empty, and archives she’d been mining for fifteen years were nonexistent. Most of the data holds were gone.

“Jean—” she said, and then bit the rest of the sentence back as Maurice’s icon resolved in the center of the room. But Jean turned to her, and she had the answer ready. “Earth’s down. No, wait. *We’re* down. We’re off the fucking Slide.”

“No connex,” Jean said. And Maurice interjected, “Not quite none. I’m here. They shut down the station.”

“There’s a massive probability correction under way,” Jean said. “A storm of coincidence.”

“There’s more than that,” Maurice said. “I think the planet is forking.”

“Forking?” Everybody was looking at Cricket, which was how she knew she must have said it.

There was no way she could have felt Nouel’s house rocking on the swells yet, even if a storm was coming, but still she groped backward, sat down where André had been sitting. The dark red cloth of Nouel’s sofa was soft against her palms, though the nap caught her skin. “The *fucking planet* is cloning itself? Planets—” She bounced up again. She stalked toward him, and she thought if he were present in the flesh, she might have hit him. “—don’t just fucking *mitose*.”

She heard herself, and stopped abruptly. “Maurice. Sorry.”

He blinked at her. She saw him shudder, the kind of bone-deep flex your body makes when a chill grabs you by the nape. “Okay. You’re Moon Morrow’s clone daughter.”

“Touché. You were saying when I went orbital?”

“There’s not time to explain,” he said. “Some of our scientists”—Cricket tried not to think about how easily he referred to Charter Trade as *we*—“think that the source of the omelite is a prehistoric explosion. Caused by the ranids’ attempts to build a Slide on-world.”

“So they had a fairly high-tech civilization,” Jean said, but not as if he understood the tiny, shuddering epiphany that hovered at the edge of Cricket’s mind. “You mentioned that before. And they lost it in the disaster?”

“The planet...forked,” Maurice said. “Split. Incompletely. Got stuck halfway. I dunno, I’m not a physicist and I’m not a conjure. If we had six-dimensional eyes maybe we could see the other half of it. And on this side...”

“They took the technology apart,” Cricket said. “Right? They didn’t lose it. They decided not to use it. And Rim is covering it up?”

Maurice nodded.

“Wow,” Cricket said. “And we haven’t got any way at all to get that information to Lucienne?”

A stupid question; she knew it when she asked it. But sometimes, you still had to ask. “I’ll call André,” she said.

He picked up immediately. “Deschênes.” And listened impassively as she outlined the situation. She felt him looking at her, as if he were across the table, and not out in the prestorm calm.

“Right,” he said, after a moment’s consideration. “Tell Maurice I’ll meet him inside.”

If André had had the engine power to manage it, he would have been seeing a redshift. The scoot was full throttle as he zipped under folding sidewalks and between water taxis, threading the needle over and over without so much as a hard rub. He was in his element, and for a moment he could forget. Enough concentration, enough adrenaline, and the thick feel of water full of churned mud and blood dropped off his skin, the noises of the wounded and the grieving fell away from his ears.

If only he could spend the rest of his life running, he thought he’d be just fine.

At this hour, the streets should have been empty, but the claxons had ended that. People and devices scurried about, making ready; sidewalks were scrolled up, rolled up, and stowed, lines cast off, the city made ready to scatter under floodlights and the occasional arcing searchlight of an observing helicopter. The Bayside barges were already peeling away, their white and yellow and sea-green hulls turned shadowy in moonlight, the water curling phosphorescent from their bows. It was an eerie sight—a hundred outbound barges with their running lights red to port and green to starboard, moving in a purposeful ballet.

All channels led from Novo Haven.

In addition to the shipping lanes, three of the inbound lighter channels blinked red-blue-orange rather than their usual green, cleared for outbound surface traffic, though lighters were still coming in on the remaining two, trailing their cargo pods behind them. Tenders hurried to them; enough of the city had broken up that André got clear glimpses of the action through the moving lines of outbound cruisers, which stopped being “barges” as soon as they were no longer moored. His was not the only one-or two-man craft skittering through the larger vessels: escort boats, last-minute errands, and people playing the odds that they could make it home or to a loved one’s residence rather than sheltering in place.

He caught up with the Charter Trade flagship before she was unmoored, just as black water rippled with carnelian and ivory moon-paths and the broken green and red streaks of reflected running lights was opening up beyond her. Her sidewalks were stowed, her engines warming, the anchors rising at her bow and stern. It was a magic moment, if he’d been in the mood to appreciate it; the instant when an office building became a ship of the open seas once more, when an *it* became a *her*.

He hailed a crew member, and got a winch sent down to haul the scoot on deck. It weighed under a hundred kilos empty; they’d just lash it along the rail and forget it. Climbing the Jacob’s ladder in a cast wasn’t something he’d want to do twice, and he tried not to think about what the way down would be like.

He’d have to get this done before the wind picked up.

I hope Maurice is ready for me, he thought, and swung himself onto the deck with some assistance from the woman running the winch.

Jean sat down kitty-corner to Cricket and leaned his elbow on his knees. “Do you really think hacking into Greene’s system is going to make much difference?”

Her eyes were closed, her head leaned against the sofa back and propped on cushions. “Maybe yes,” she said, her lips barely shaping the words. “Maybe no. It all depends on the luck of the draw. But I’ve been running clumsy, unsuccessful incursions at them for the past two weeks. They should think of me as a part of the scenery by now.”

“Oh.” He sat back, feeling useless. She must have heard him shift, because he looked up and saw the shining crescents of half-open eyes through veiling lashes. She regarded him for a moment, and he was struck by how her displayed slender throat, her open slightly moving hands, should have seemed vulnerable but instead gave the impression of a lean, dozing predator.

“Jean, I realize you feel useless. Would it help to talk?”

He shrugged and glanced over his shoulder for Nouel. Their host was still out of earshot, topside, making ready to get under way. “Lucienne,” Jean said.

Cricket closed her eyes again, her face a convincing counterfeit of serenity except where her eyelid fluttered on the right-hand side. “That’s not her, back on Earth.”

“No, it’s not.” And of course it wasn’t fair to talk to Cricket about this, when she felt the loss as acutely as he did. “She thought of herself as expendable.”

“She wasn’t,” Cricket said, after she’d been quiet long enough that he thought she wouldn’t answer. And then she fell silent again, until without opening her eyes or otherwise shifting, she reached out and fumbled up Jean’s hand by memory. “Damn. Who’s going to pick the tomatoes?”

Jean squeezed her fingers and didn’t remind her that they’d be underwater by morning. She didn’t respond. A moment later, he stood and went to help Nouel cast off, leaving Cricket behind.

The water tasted like a coming storm, and the air was full of anticipated electricity. Along the horizon, behind the moving streams of humen ships, a shadow rose as if the edge of the bright night sky was rolling up like a blind, revealing the darkness behind.

Gourami waited in the shallows at the edge of the humen city, and felt se sibs move around se and the eggings move within. The latter swam easy, well fed and content. The former were more restless, their few vocalizations soft with wrath. No person had many words to say. The discussions were over. The decisions had been reached.

The far-swimmers and the young adults had argued it, and the greatparents had decided. Tolerance had extended as far as it might. The humen and their technology were no different—no safer—than the Other Ones. And the greatparents said that persons had driven out the Other Ones, when they would not relinquish the technology that had nearly destroyed the world.

Persons were not humen; they would not make war here as the humen had upon the one-tree-island-band. They would make their own kind of war. Directed, and precise.

It had worked before. It would work again.

The greatparents remembered ahead.

The humen craft continued running before the gathering storm. The breeze was from seaward, and freshening. Gourami felt it tickle when se bobbed high in the warm water. On each side, before and behind, others waited—sibs and bandmates and clanmates and persons to whom se was totally

unrelated. Every one who could reach the humen city in time, who had been within the range of the swimmers and the greatparent summoning.

Se caressed the crossbow stock. Some person—se did not hear who—gave the order. It thrummed through the water, the first coherent word loudly spoken in hours.

—*advance*

The ship shuddered as she got under way, as if she were coming unstuck from the water. Between the cane and the walking cast, André rode over it with only a stumble. The ship boasted enough displacement and a deep enough keel that the interfering wakes of other vessels did no more than shiver her. André made sure of his balance with the cane anyway.

He didn't want to talk to Closs, but he needed an excuse to be there. And then, he had to argue his way in. Fortunately, Closs's position and paranoia warranted a living assistant rather than just an executary. She knew him, and he managed to convince her that the matter was urgent enough to interrupt Closs midcrisis. "It has bearing," André said, leaning heavily on his prop. He managed not to sigh in relief as she eyed his battered self and nodded reluctantly.

He showed himself in past security, which was defanged by the bracelet she issued. No help from the expert system today; the ship was busy, unnecessary niceties shut down. Closs must have alerted the executary to detect André anyway, because the door eased open at his approach.

André stepped inside, and from the hushed, almost deserted corridor, found himself in a war room. Closs stood, spurning his desk and his chair, pacing slowly with his arms folded. As André came forward he raised a hand, one finger lifted, eyes focused on the middle distance and tracking rapidly. André swung his casted leg in time with his cane and Closs's pacing, and stopped two meters from the near end of the arc the major wore in the carpet.

No more than thirty seconds passed before Closs glanced up, connection cut, and said, "Is it worse than thousands dead and downed communications?"

"No," André answered. "But it's not *much* better."

"Thirty seconds," Closs said flatly, André's heart bloomed with joy that he had never developed a reputation for melodrama.

"Jefferson Greene is going to provoke a ranid uprising, if he hasn't already. He destroyed one village that I know of. Took captives."

Closs tipped his head back and let it loll for a moment, then took one deep breath and reassembled his facade. "I know," he said. "How do *you*?"

André thumped his cane on the deck. "You sent me into the middle of his damned massacre. Hunting your renegade. He's out of control, Tim."

There was a pause. Then Closs said, "Thanks. It's going to have to wait. Look, why don't you ride out the storm here? There's a skeleton staff in the galley. Go down, get fed. Are you armed?"

A loaded question. "Never without," André answered.

Closs half smiled, then glanced away. It was a dismissal. André turned for the door—

—and almost walked into Maurice, who had a mug of coffee in each hand. He dodged André neatly, making André feel like a lumbering beast on his cane, and set one cup on Closs's desk. The major, focused on the voices in his head, nodded thanks.

It seemed to be his only delivery, because—the other cup still steaming in his left hand—he followed André back out, without a word until the door was closed behind them. Then he said, “Going to the mess?”

“If I can find it.”

Maurice sipped his coffee left-handed. “I'll show you the way. Maurice Sadowski.” He held out the right hand.

“André Deschênes,” André said, and took it. He was expecting the handoff then, but he pulled his hand back empty.

“Come on. We'd better eat before it gets too rough.”

André hesitated a half-step, and Maurice hurried to walk beside him. They made idle conversation through the corridor and down the lift.

The mess wasn't busy, but a few crew and employees ate with haste and concentration at small tables. “Who would I see to volunteer?” André asked. They queued for food, André stumping awkwardly on his cane.

Maurice gave it an eloquent glance.

“I didn't mean as a deckhand,” André snapped. Maurice grinned, and dropped a packet of chocolate pudding on his tray.

“It's full of calcium,” he said, as André was about to lift it and replace it on the rack. But it was a glimpse of a black glossy data chit underneath that made André return it to the tray.

“Do you always mother strangers?”

“Always,” Maurice said. André snorted, and they flashed their cards at the cash register on the way out, pausing a moment to let it total the food. Maurice led André to an empty table. It rocked slightly when André set his food down: on gimbals. He'd have to watch his knees if they hit any discernable chop.

André palmed the chit and slipped it into a pocket as he moved the pudding off his tray. “I was raised right the first time.” He heard the glib words roll off his tongue and stopped speaking abruptly.

A perfect piece of luck, it turned out. Because he heard the flutter in the background noise of the mess, and started to his feet before he consciously registered the source of the problem. He dropped his fork on the tray, where it clinked dully, and let his hand drop to hover beside the butt of the short arm concealed under the hem of his tunic.

There were five Rimmers near the main entrance, and three more at the back door, all uniformed. They didn't look hungry.

“André?”

He didn't need to answer. Maurice had turned to follow his gaze, and as two members of the first team came forward, he lunged to his feet. The table rocked, creaking on its gimbals. He glanced over his

shoulder. André, aware of their surroundings, already knew what he would see. There were two more armed women and a man behind them, blocking escape through the kitchens.

Should have seen it coming. Should have seen it coming when Closs asked him if he was armed, if he'd been operating at anything resembling normal capacity.

The one André took for a leader stepped forward and indicated his ID. "Dayvid Kountché," he said. "Please come with us quietly, and you'll be treated well."

"Certainly, Officer," André said, but what he tight-beamed Maurice was: "Well, I guess the time for subtlety is over."

Maurice just gave him a wide-eyed stare. Brave enough in his own way, but not exactly an action hero. It was on André.

And then Maurice cocked his head, a funny sideways kind of gesture like acquiescence. André was cc'd on the message Maurice snap-sent Cricket: *Fisher, now would not be a bad time.*

Cricket's agreement flashed green over both of them, and as Maurice shouted—squalled, really—and grabbed the edge of the table, snapping it up hard, the ship's lights and engine sizzled and died. A split second's silence broke on a startled scream; the dinner trays went up and out and over, and whatever had been on them spattered Kountché and the floor around him.

The link was still up. "André, go," Maurice called down it, and threw himself at Kountché. They went sprawling, elbows and fists and grunting, a shot that ricocheted at least once. One shot, and then a woman shouting at whomever to put the gun up.

At least one of the Rimmers had a brain. There was one of André and one of Maurice, and eleven of them, and a couple dozen bystanders. The odds were not in the cops' favor.

Nor were they in Maurice's. And there wasn't a damned thing André could do to help him. Harder choice than he would have expected, but he dove for the darkened galley, his pistol in his hand. André had an advantage: the only person in the room he minded shooting was lying on the floor.

His augments at least let him see where the tables were in the dark. But the Rimmers had that, too, and the ones by the galley must have seen him moving, because one stepped in and dealt him a stunning blow on the point of the shoulder with the butt of her gun.

So they wanted him alive.

André had no such scruples; without turning, he leveled his pistol in her face point-blank and pulled the trigger. The pistol took caseless ammo; he had a good thirty rounds. Her jerk backward was more dying reflex than recoil; her blood and bone still splattered him. The smell of iron made his gorge rise, acid stinging his sinuses. *Shit.*

The second one was also too close to control him with a gun. It kept her alive; André broke her forearm with his cane as he went by. The third would have shot him, but André heard the *tap tap* of a jamming gun.

He could run on the cast, after a fashion, swinging himself along with the cane. But it wasn't pretty, and it wouldn't help him long.

Skeleton staff, Closs had said. He hoped to hell there was a ladder up to the main deck in the back of the galley. They had to bring food in somehow, right? So, logically...

He laid down two shots over his shoulder to discourage pursuit. Something crunched. It sounded like bone. “Maurice?”

“Go!” said the voice in his head, and then a burst of pain and static ended the transmission hard. He winced. Maurice might have been knocked unconscious.

But in André’s professional opinion that wasn’t the case.

And the shocking thing—as he found the damned ladder, broke the security lock, ducked a badly aimed shot, and hot-wired the box—was that it hurt.

It wasn’t supposed to hurt. Maurice wasn’t anybody. Wasn’t anybody to André, and also wasn’t anybody in particular.

And he’d died so André could get out.

Fucking waste of a man’s life, was what that was.

He paused inside the door at the top of the ladder—you called it a ladder on a ship, but it was really a flight of stairs—and listened hard. Somebody out there, yes. And noise like the outside.

Lucky breaks, bad and good. His own luck; tonight, there was nobody pulling his chain.

Waste of a man’s life, to trade it for somebody like André.

Except André had nothing to do with it, did he? He could have been a paper airplane, flying from hand to hand. All that mattered was the information written on his wings.

André zorched the lock, was ready when the door snapped open. The Rimmers on the other side were not.

André shot them both.

Nonfatally.

They were just doing their jobs.

There was no way he was getting the scoot unloaded. He was going to have to jump, and swim for it until he could hijack a small craft from somebody.

Through choppy wake-slashed seas, in the teeth of an onrushing storm. Weighed down with his walking cast.

A thump of thunder rattled his teeth, so close he felt it as a blow.

Okay, so maybe he was paying for that luck after all.

Maurice spoke; Cricket snapped the Rim ship’s breakers and sent her into darkness, drifting. And into real, immediate danger of collision with the escaping vessels on either side of her and behind. And then Cricket had to duck, hard and fast, as Rim’s security protocols found her and grabbed, hard. She dumped herself out of the system, flicked a trailing edge of code out of their grasp like a coattail, and hoped like hell they hadn’t gotten a trace on her. There was transmitted pain, buffered by dampers; someone hit him, hard, again and again and again.

“Maurice?”

Sharp silence, and nothing. He might have dropped the connect, but it felt open—open, with nothing on the other side. His absence pushed over her like a buffeting wave, knocked her under, dragged her down. Not again, not again, not again.

The tail. Oh, hell, there it was. A trace on her signal, like phosphorescence curling in a wake. She dropped channel fast, and, oh God, Maurice. Maurice!

Mouth open, she spasmed, gasped, expecting lungs full of weighty pain, blackness, and dark water. The warm night air—her own continued existence—shocked her as much as brightness would have if she’d been drowning, and somehow kicked herself into daylight again before the black water could suck her down.

She lay on the couch and gasped, chest heaving, lank hair stuck across her face. Two minutes at least before she could move, before she could think of anything more than air in, air out, heaving as if she’d beached. Then elbows against the back of the sofa, hands on the lip, shoving herself to her feet.

“Jean!” Two more breaths, sucked deep enough to hurt, a stitch in her side as if she’d been running. “Jean! Nouel!” Scrambling barefoot over rug and parawood deck. They’d come for Maurice and André. That meant, that meant—

“They’re on to us, they’re—”

She burst through the hatch yelling and drew up so short she went to her knees. Hard on the wooden decking, toes bent under. The pain washed her vision, but couldn’t eradicate what she’d seen.

Jean and Nouel lay facedown on the deck, hands on their necks, legs spread wide. A man in Charter Trade green stood over each, both four steps back with their rifles nestled to their shoulders and angled down to cover the prone men.

Cricket herself stared down the barrels of two more leveled guns.

On her knees seemed like a safe place to stay. Slowly, she raised her hands. Jean’s head was turned; he looked right at her. She didn’t meet his eyes, and saw by the flinch along his jaw that he understood why.

At least she had the comfort of knowing she’d been wrong to suspect Maurice.

Maurice.

She would have pressed her fists against her teeth if she’d dared lower her hands. No more. Please no more people dying in my head.

“Cricket Earl Murphy,” said a fifth man, who held only a handgun and who wasn’t pointing it at anyone, “you are under arrest for sedition, terrorism, conspiracy to commit murder, conspiracy to commit terrorism, data trespass—”

In a moment, she thought with outlandish slow-motion lucidity, he would order her down on her stomach and kick her legs wide to make it difficult for her to rise. Then he would either handcuff all three of them and bring them in for a show trial, or he would order his men to fire two bullets into the back of each of their heads and leave their bodies on the drifting barge. The storm would handle the cleanup; sometimes people—and boats—didn’t make it back when the city ran before a storm.

“Please lie down,” the officer said. In the silence of a cocking rifle, the salt storm-wind lifting her hair,

Cricket breathed a prayer. Along the horizon, rising clouds walked on insect legs of lightning. The crack that followed might have been gunfire, or thunder.

16

IMAGINE A SINGLE PHOTON, THE SMALLEST INDEX OF LIGHT.

The human eye is an optical instrument sensitive enough to detect that single photon. It is attuned to the subatomic level. But if we could register that sensitivity consciously, the flash and flicker, the background noise of the cosmos, would render our visual acuity useless. It would drown out more vital stimuli—such as the presence of a hungry leopard.

So our nervous systems take care of it. Neural filters prevent our conscious minds from responding to single-photon events. We can see the subatomic but we are prevented from noticing it.

There exists a classic experiment in which a point-source light projected through a pair of slits forms an interference pattern on a screen set behind them. The existence of this pattern would indicate that the light travels in a wave. Except in that it persists even when the light is emitted in single quanta, one photon at a time.

If either slit is covered, the light—whether it is projected as a beam or as individual photons—will pass through the remaining slit, and the backstop will show only a single bright peak with areas of increasing shadow on the sides, rather than the contrasting light and dark bars of the first stage of the experiment.

Even when emitted as a single particle, in other words, light also behaves as a wave. The cat is both dead and alive.

But if a detector is placed at each of the two slits, so that the experimenter is aware through which slit it has passed, then no interference pattern emerges. The bars of light and dark vanish.

Until the particle is detected, it isn't *perhaps* everywhere—it *is* everywhere. When it may pass through either slit, it passes through both. The wave propagates both ways.

But if a method exists, the wave—collapses. The universe is forced to choose.

Unlike the infamous cat in the box, this is not a thought-problem.

This is experimental fact.

The speculation arises when we consider why. According to Bohr and Heisenberg's Copenhagen interpretation of quantum theory, the individual photon passes through both slits simultaneously and produces the striped pattern by interfering with itself. In other words, it simultaneously follows both possible paths. The "many worlds" formulation additionally suggests that the particle not only travels through both slits, but that it takes every possible path to get there, and that it is detected at every possible destination—in mutually unobservable worlds. But as long as no one notices where it's going, and how it gets there—the fork heals itself again.

Until the box is opened, the cat *is* both dead and alive.

And no matter how the photon gets where it gets, in each particular instance, we see all the outcomes at once.

A bullet splashed Jean Kroc's skull open on the deck. A Rim security officer fell like a toppled tree as Jean twisted impossibly and shattered his right knee. The bullet missed; the bullet severed Jean's spine. Jean went quietly, head lowered. Jean went for the rail. Jean took a rifle-butt in the ribs. Jean ripped a weapon from the hands of the guard who stooped to handcuff him. There was no shot.

There were three.

Lightning struck the superstructure of Nouel's barge. There was no spark. Cricket lunged from a runner's crouch between the riflemen. She went down on her face and awaited the twist of the cuffs. She jumped backward and out, over the rail with a kick-slither, plunged along the side of the boat feetfirst, headfirst, executing a gainer. She tangled on the rail and dashed her brains on the lip of the deck as she fell. She slid on wet wood and hit the bay flat, broke her spine, and drowned. The water closed over her.

They cuffed her and pushed her to her feet.

The forward edge of the rain—thin still, barely misting—washed Jean's and Nouel's blood down the deck, minicurrents rippling around and over chips of bone. *Ogod, ogod, ogod.*

Jean, shoulders drawn back by the cuffs, had half a second to turn and catch her eye, lift his chin in disdain of their captors before they herded him away. Cricket, neck snapped in the fall, was drowning, her flaccid body swung against the side of the boat by the lapping waves.

Nouel ran for it. Nouel ran below. Nouel got shot trying. Nouel, wincing, on his stomach, wiped his data and prayed.

André—got lucky.

Freakishly, unnaturally lucky. There were no more Rimmers. There were two. There were four. He walked between bullets like a wire-dancer; he shot one opponent and disarmed the other with a swing of his heavy cane; he danced across the deck and lifted himself over the rail.

He slid in blood and landed hard on his casted leg.

Even luck has its limits.

And anything that can go wrong—

—already has.

He screamed; they were far enough from the disintegrating remains of Novo Haven that the storm claxon was not loud enough to cover the sound. He gritted his teeth and made no sound at all. The cane had gone flying, and so he crawled. The cane lay by his hand, and he levered himself to his feet, his knee grinding sweet agony when he tried it with his weight.

As he was dragging himself to the rail, as he was lifting himself to his feet, as he was bleeding from a wound to the chest, the thigh, the throat—

—all the ranids in the world came frothing over the rail.

Jean smacked hard and sharp into the water between barges, headfirst, dove deep. Was cut by a propeller, was broken by the fall. Knifed to the surface and kicked. Snorted water that tasted of oil, that he imagined tasted of Cricket's blood. Of course, it did not—she was not bleeding, she bled on the deck he had left, she surfaced ten feet off, she surfaced beside him and a sniper blew her white face red.

Then he tasted blood for real.

Down, down, only a few feet of water would shred a hypersonic bullet like soft cheese. Down, kick, down, die, down, live, down, swim, *swim*.

André could have shot at the frogs, but in no set of choices did he do so.

He never raised the pistol; he lowered it again; he tasted violet ranid blood thick in his mouth and gagged, his steady gun-hand shivering. He could have shot.

He could have.

He remembered Gourami and Tetra sinking their dead, remembered them searching the fallen for Caetei.

He lowered the gun, he turned it and surrendered it to the nearest ranid, he slipped it into his holster. And sometimes they killed him—what was one more strange human in the dark?—and sometimes they didn't. But he never pulled the trigger.

He walked in among them; he limped; he stumped; he helped them drag him. There followed silence; there followed screaming.

The ranids made no sound.

There was a craft—a scoot, a dinghy, a flashboat. Sometimes, corporations being what they were, its codes were still set to one of the factory standards. There was a froggie, a pair of frogs. He knew this frog, one of the frogs, knew its worried eyes and its long vague mouth, though it seemed teardrop-shaped and fat under the bandoleers. “Ziyi Zhou,” he said to Gourami, over and over again, a thousand voices, one choice. “I have to get to Zhou.”

For Timothy Closs, it was a long and shattered night. The barge drifted broadside into shipping and met an outbound ferry full of evacuees amidships; the engineers restarted the engines in time; an electrical fire started in the machine room and she burned to the waterline while the fleeing city parted around her in two floodlit streams.

The saboteurs—including Deschênes, including *Maurice*, fuck, *fuck*—were captured. They escaped. They were killed, singly or in combination. They waves broke in interference patterns, the probabilities greater or lesser, bright bars and dark, fuzzing at the edges. Some futures grew almost inescapable, some diverged on random looping paths from a single freakish chance. A barge exploded, Jefferson Greene's chopper crashed in the storm, one of the lighters overshot the landing zone in the storm and crashed through two dozen still-moored barges.

The ranid army arrived, and arrived, and arrived. All Rim's defenders fell. They drove back the boarders with few casualties. Rim held the center of the ship by force of arms; staff escaped in helicopters; staff went to ground to wait out the battle.

Sometimes, Closs was one of the ones that made it out.

There were times for subtlety and concealment. For the Jean Krocs who escaped the raid on Nouel's boat, this was not the time for either. A transfinite number tried sneaking; an insignificantly smaller transfinite number failed. The few who succeeded were too late.

But some of the Jeans chose to run, to steal fast boats moored alongside fleeing barges or knock a pilot from an idling flashboat. They put their heads down and the throttle on full; they cut the night with roaring engines and wakes that rose like shimmering curtains on either side and fell behind. They died on the bay and they died in the bayou—in collisions, in malfunctions, when their roaring boats hit snags, when they missed a turn of the narrow channel and were crushed under a somersaulting craft.

But some of them won through. And of those, some did not break a leg or an arm or their neck clambering through trees with no moonlight to aid them, as the storm sealed up the brilliant night.

Every single one that made it into the humming embrace of the hollow tree remembered to lock the door.

And then there was no choice. Because half a glance at his instruments told him that his intent—to shut the system down and hunker until nature took its course—might be a worse disaster than anything else. Here in the calm, shut away from the storm and the cascading effects of other's choices, he could think. Could even experiment, one of him risking, the others observing.

There wasn't time, he all thought, for much of that.

The world was trapped midchoice. Stuck.

Middecision. Midfork. He would have to push it through. Have to fix it, observe it, make it real. Lock down the path that the world would follow.

There was a problem with that. *He* was probably safe. He was the observer now. But he wasn't the only one who had died that night.

Or who hadn't.

He sat down in his chair. He pulled the virtual-reality helmet over his head, positioned the keyboards, worked his hands into the gloves by feel. He flexed his fingers and the interface lit up, sharp relief.

The timestreams normally ran through his interface in a smooth braided strand, like weavable water. Loops might curve off, but they arched back, and the whole had a kind of flowing inevitability.

What he saw now was a cataract. Loops and coils and rivulets bounced wildly, intersecting, splashing. Some were fatter—more probable timestreams—and some were bare hair-threads, finely shining wires.

Jean just paused for a moment and blinked, boggled. And then he took a deep breath—the VR mask pushed against his nose—and assumed his avatar.

He wore a ten-legged spider for this work. Not a biological spider, but a delicate creature of silver and cobalt glass, its legs adorned with pinchers and combs and feather-fine barbs. He scampered across the surface of the virtual timestreams, testing them with palps and toetips, the movements of the spider controlled by the fine twitches of his gloved hands.

Normally, he was meticulous and hesitant over this work. He'd dip a limb in the timestream, let it flow

over the sensing hair, sample and test and inspect weave after weave for the intersection of most advantage.

Now, he plunged and grabbed and shoved. He moved through a storm of time like a dancer dodging whirling blades, captured renegade threads that slithered, slick and willful, through his grasp. The thicker streams were muscular as snakes, the thinner sharp as wire. And they could dissolve into water, or fork into a fistful of writhing medusa strands, at a touch.

He chose the thickest one, the hardest to bend, and bestrode it. His legs darted about him, three or four shaping and sustaining that base timeline, the rest snagging any stream that wandered close and edging it back into the channel. He tried to pick—to snip the threads that ended in disaster and reinforce the ones that led to tolerable futures. But he didn't know, half the time, what he was grabbing, and there was so much—

He juggled cold silver fire. It tasted of death and diesel and explosions, of spilled blood and the salt of storm. It sang to him like flicked crystal.

He bound and wound and twisted tight, sharp, and sweet.

Winning.

And tried not to wince each time he grabbed one thread and integrated it, and watched another one snuff out, vanished to a fading afterimage of silver, and the one he'd chosen smelled of char.

André dragged himself from the cockpit of the flashboat, or he walked, or the froggies helped him up the ladder. Ziyi Zhou sometimes came out to meet him, and sometimes helped him up the ladder. André's cast was soaked and dripping, inflated plastic squishing water out the top of the boot with each pained step. Sometimes, Zhou even turned him away.

"I can't reach him," she said, or "Not in this storm," as he commended the data Maurice and Lucienne had died for into her hands. Or she raised a disapproving eyebrow at him as he retained it, unwilling to let the chit out of his hands. Or she said, "Come with me," and took his elbow, and supported him inside.

There were locks and codes and pass-pads, and a concealed space in the bow of her barge. And a small soothingly lit compartment with a plain virtual interface, just a helmet and a touchpad. Very stark, calm light on brushed steel, a screen on the wall above the panel that showed a soothing abstract seascape, moving gently.

André felt a faint misgiving as she seated herself and smoothed her hair back, or he felt nothing but the euphoria of adrenaline, or nothing but drained and tired. "Someone brought down the transfer station," some of her said. "I heard it's an alien invasion."

"Aliens." or "That can't be true." or just numb silence.

And whatever he said, some of her answered, "We have to do it on the ham radio."

And some of the Andrés that heard her answered, "Brought *down* the station? Destroyed it?"

"I don't know." Her hands moved over the touchpad; the pattern varied. "You want a concrete answer in *this*?"

Outside, worlds away, another André Deschênes died in agony when a rapid insurgent put the bolt of a

spear-gun through his abdomen. Other Andrés felt it, and winced. “Probability storm?”

Some of her laughed, some of her called him ignorant, some explained what that meant. And that those who worked with wave states called it a *correction*.

And that she’d never even heard of one like this.

The barge pitched and yawed as the wind picked up; André felt its conflicting shivers through his many feet. All the Ziyis at their consoles downloaded the chit, burned a copy of the data, and handed the original back to André. Then the current one pulled the helm on over her head and composed herself. “Calling Bryson now,” she said. “We’ll see if I get through.”

She placed her hand on the smooth dome of the touchpad, and exploded into flames.

From the inside, head and chest and the white-hot fire eating her as if her bones themselves were phosphorus, the flames tunneling through, burning to the extremities. André reached for her, somehow thinking he could yank the headset off, pull her clear. But the heat licked his fingers, and a thick column of oily grease rolled from her chair.

And André felt himself collapsing. Narrowing, narrowing, crashing in, clenching down.

The man who grabbed Ziyi Zhou’s shoulder would likely die. Unless, on some other timeline, he was already dead. Unless he were about to vanish from possibility, like a photon detected passing through the other slit.

Knees like gelatin, eyes watering from the smoke, André backed out of the hold, the data chit folded in his left hand.

Cricket—this Cricket, of all the Crickets that could have been—was still alive when she finally met Timothy Closs, in an improvised meeting room aboard an evacuation ship, running before the storm. They’d brought her in by chopper, a ride harrowing enough that she planned never to leave the surface again. She didn’t know if Closs had come in the same way, or if he’d been here all along.

Judging by the state of his hair and a tear in the sleeve of his jacket that was still repairing itself, he’d probably been in the fighting, which she knew about because she’d been eavesdropping in the helicopter.

Despite it all, though, it was morning, and the world was unsplintered, though the storm defeated any glimpse of rallying dawn. Cricket was wet to the skin. Her blouse—saturated with salt spray—had given up the ghost and hung against her body in sodden, lifeless folds. She shivered, and with her hands fixed behind her, couldn’t even hug herself for warmth.

She drew her shoulders back, though, and set herself on her heels, refusing to tilt her head and stare up at him. He wasn’t tall, but it didn’t take much to be taller than she.

He studied her for a moment, though, and didn’t step too close. He was a fit, compact, older man. He frowned, his hands clasped behind his back as if in unconscious mimicry of her own less-voluntary pose. Any minute, she thought, he’d cock his head and say something like *You’ve been a great deal of trouble*.

But what *do* you say in a situation like that, if you don’t have the scripts to fall back on?

He surprised her. A thoughtful regard, straight-on, and then he turned away. “Major?” she asked his

back, her teeth rattling.

“Get this woman a blanket,” he said. “And something hot to drink. With sugar and caffeine in it.”

They did, and eased her restraints, resealing the plastic cuffs in front of her instead of behind so she could sit and manage the cup. When she was halfway comfortable, her hair and clothes soaking the dry blanket—garish Charter Trade green—they wrapped around her shoulders, he leaned back against the edge of a table, folded his arms across his chest, and gave her another considering look.

The silence in the room let the sound of the storm seep through. Beyond the shutters, wind wailed and hail and rain slashed the sides of the vessel. She hoped they didn’t run into a waterspout. On the other hand, that wouldn’t matter much to her if they were planning an execution.

“I hope you’re proud of yourself,” he said.

The gesture of her chin included the storm, his torn sleeve, the restraints on her wrists. She cupped both hands around the mug of cocoa that warmed her palms. “I hope you don’t think I had anything to do with this.”

“Enough to go forward on,” he said. “Unless you want to tell me a little about what your plans are.”

Oh, what the hell. Either André had gotten away or he hadn’t; if he had, Ziyi had the information already. If he hadn’t, maybe she could scare Closs into doing something stupid. “We know,” she said. “We know that the omelite is the by-product of a Slide explosion; we know about the exploitation of the ranid workers; we know that Greene’s World is undergoing a major ecological catastrophe due to unregulated tanglestone mining; and we know that the ranids had a technological society and willingly relinquished it. And we’re telling the Core, Major.”

“You’re bluffing.” Calm, but that crease between his brows was deepening. “You can’t prove any of that.”

She sipped the cocoa. It was she who cocked her head. “Lucienne Spivak was a Unified Earth security agent, Closs. You killed a uniform. And André Deschênes will testify to it.” *Please, André. Please have gotten away.*

Closs was good. He didn’t flinch. He didn’t close his eyes. His fingers didn’t tighten on his biceps. She couldn’t be sure.

But then he licked dry lips, just a pink flicker, and she covered a smile. *Owned.* “It’ll spend years in court,” he said.

She finished her cocoa. “Kiss enough frogs, get a prince. Do you want to stand trial for my murder or kidnapping, too?”

“You’re not free to go,” he said. He glanced at the door; his executary must have summoned her keepers, because the panel slid back a moment later. “We have a stateroom for you, M~ Murphy. I’m afraid it’s not luxurious.”

Inside his hollowed tree, Jean was accustomed to silence. And so a teakettle moaning startled him, jerked him out of head-held exhaustion. He let his hands fall to the control panel and pushed himself up. The short cord on his VR helmet snapped him back into the chair. He bruised the backs of his thighs and cursed, too exhausted to stand again.

He concentrated, lifted his hands, and tugged the helmet forward from the bottom rim. The dimly lit chamber was bright enough to make him squint.

Helmetless, he heard the sound more clearly.

It was the wind.

The unnamed extratropical storm had made landfall, and his tree was thrashing, chafing, rasping branch on branch. Each collision shivered through the heartwood beneath his feet. When he laid his hand on the console again, it trembled against his fingertips like a racing pulse.

Two deep breaths and he forced himself shakily to his feet, clutching the crudely welded edge of the console. He used the toilet, leaning one forearm against the wall for support. There was a concealed locker full of high-calorie food; he rummaged out two logs of vitamin-enriched dried fruit and a preserved salami, which he hacked chunks off with his knife while coffee brewed.

Not dead. His left arm was numb where it didn't sting or burn or prickle. He could use it if he looked at what he was doing, but the fine motor control was almost nonexistent. He shrugged his jacket down, rolled the sleeve up, and found a stun-gun burn on his upper arm. He couldn't remember how or where he'd gotten it, or under what circumstances.

Which Jean was he? And had the others scattered, their diverse worlds irretrievably diverged, or had they all collapsed into him?

And did it, in any practical consideration, matter?

A first-aid kit lived in one of the storage cabinets. He sat down at the console again, too tired to clean the wound, and sliced off another piece of a fruit bar.

The coffee dripped from the filter. His console pinged an incoming call.

That should only come for one person. "Lucienne," he said, sliding down in his chair. "I'm alive."

"That's good," she said. "Because everybody on Greene's Station isn't. And either André didn't make it to Zhou, or something happened once he got there. No data."

"Ping him," Jean said. There was a sterile tube of condensed milk in the cabinet. If he got up, he could get coffee, add the milk. Warmth, sugar, caffeine, protein, fat. It would help.

"The Slide," Lucienne said. "It's down. I can only reach you because of your tech. Listen carefully."

The coffee was too far away. And Lucienne's voice was... coldly terrified. "I'm not doing anything else."

It still took her five minutes to make him believe—that to all appearances an alien attack force had taken down the transfer station, that the entire planet was floating in the dark, alone, unconnected. "Zhou's out of contact," Lucienne finished. "You are sitting at the only live console on Greene's World, Jean."

He slumped in the chair and regarded the backs of his hands, stiff and vaulted as dead spiders. "Shit." He could just about turn his head to look at her face on the screen. She bit her thumbnail as she studied him.

"Jean, go make yourself some coffee."

"It's made," he said, but heaved himself out of the chair. "What do you want to do?"

"Put me in touch with André. If he's alive. Have you heard from Cricket?"

“I don’t know if she’s...” Jean fixed coffee, pretending distraction. “We had one hell of a probability correction. A probability *collapse*. I saw her dead. I don’t know if she still is. She might be off connex even if she lived. I have no idea what it’s like out there; I’m pinned down under a storm. I think I forced the fork to completion, though. I think we’re split.”

“No more omelitte,” Lucienne said. “Well. That’s going to change things. Open a channel to André.”

“And if I connex this thing and they find me through it?”

“Slide to Earth. You need to take your machine down anyway, don’t you?”

He nodded. Because to keep it live was to take the risk of breaking the planet again. “*Clone* myself? I don’t have a matter transmitter here, Lucienne.”

She laced her fingers behind her neck, under the hair. It hurt to look at her; he stared down at the oily surface of the coffee. “You don’t need one. I can get one on this end. Just send the data; we’ll tune your daughterself in.” Her fingers waved beside her ear. “What, are you chicken?”

“It won’t be—”

“You aren’t you. You aren’t the you you were this morning. Your consciousness provides a semblance of continuity, but if you’ve had an exigency incident, you’ve been an infinite number of people between then and now. There is no free will. It’s all an illusion. Besides”—she smiled—“I came to you. Are you too much of a sissy to come to me?”

Rather than answer, Jean put the mug to his mouth and drank deeply, scorching his palate and tongue. When he’d had a moment, he said, “You set that up.”

“No.” Lucienne smiled, and if she’d been standing by him, she would have touched his arm. “It’s just a goddamned coincidence. Find out what you can about Cricket, Maurice, and Nouel, while you’re at it?”

17

GREENE STEPPED THROUGH THE DOORWAY, WIPED HIS forelock out of his eyes, and stood dripping on the worn-out carpet. “Nice fucking evacuation, Tim.”

Closs thought of half a dozen schoolyard taunts—*next time you start a war, check to make sure we have an army first*— and remembered himself in time not to engage. He settled for parade rest and an impassive expression. “We lost,” he said, and waited for the emotions to cross Jeff’s face.

He was only slightly disappointed. Greene attempted to counterfeit innocence, but only managed to look angry. “The hell you say.”

I should have stayed in the service. “I had a conversation with M~ Morrow while you were... wherever you went, Jeff. Core knows that the ranids are posttech, or if they don’t, they will as soon as connex is back up. We have no rights to this world. We lost. It’s all over but the jail time. Assuming we survive what looks like a fucking alien invasion, Jeff. *If* the alien ships Slide back from wherever they just Slid off to and have another go at us. Have you paused to think about that?”

The silence dragged a little. Closs expected Greene to squirm, thrash, deny. Instead, he slipped both hands into his suit pockets and pushed them forward, ruining the line as the autofit stretched cartoonishly. He bit his lower lip, and then looked up at Closs and said, “The information being out doesn’t matter if

the froggies don't exist."

"I wish you wouldn't use that word. They're ranids. What do you mean, 'don't exist'?"

"Because it's so much less racist to call them 'froggies' in Latin? I mean, I have a bioweapon, Tim. We can get rid of the little bastards for good."

"...and the aliens?"

"The aliens are ranids from the other fork, right? Well, let me tell you something else you probably haven't been paying enough attention to notice, Major. The omelite wells are pumping sludge."

"Sludge?"

"All of them." Greene waited three beats. "We're out of business. And your alien invasion? I'm willing to bet it isn't coming back."

The humen argued while Gourami struggled to understand them. Se dared not press against the glass; instead se hunkered back in the darkness, se new net-vest making an irregular outline, licked by the rain and the wind.

Se companions hadn't found the captives, or any sign, on the fleeing barge that the Company humen used as a village-heart. They had taken Caetei, and se would not leave Caetei in their dry, rough hands. So se had attached self to the humen leader's helicopter as it fled the overrun barge. And se clung there, water sloshing in se brood pouch, se hand and toefingers wrapped in a deathgrip on wet metal until bone ran with traced flame and digits cramped in claws.

Se still shook from the flight. The storm, though it tugged se and would have tumbled self from the deck of this new ship if it could, was just a storm—rain and wind, safe enough if one were far from shore. Se'd already swum through the chop to reach here. Se could not have risked being spotted hanging on the skid of the arriving helicopter, and so se had dropped into the ocean and swum aboard.

The storm was se friend. There were almost no humen on deck, and when they emerged, they did so briefly. Se could endure the pitch and surge of the ship as it rode heavy seas. A bullet would have been harder to survive, and self had no illusions how the humen would feel about a stowaway person now.

But se could not leave while the humen leaders were arguing. Not when they were arguing about people, and when they were arguing also about the Other Ones. And Gourami struggled to read their lips through the rain-streaked glass. The light-colored one seemed to be defending an idea or an argument, waving away the dark-colored one's objections. He pulled something from his pocket, a box that he opened to show one two three four five six silver tubes. He lined them up on the table and tapped the one on the end with his fingernail. They sat there, silent and small and inoffensive, frosting faintly on the outsides unless that was a smear of condensation on the glass.

Sometimes, Gourami caught the outline of words on the humen mouths. *Mortality rate. Effective. All age morphs. Unethical. Retrovirus.*

Genocide.

The dark one said that last, and Gourami, shaking, pained and frozen in brewing horror, was pierced by hope for a moment as the pale one drew back. The humen stared at each other, a contest of wills rather than support and assent. All Gourami heard was the rush of wind, the creak of the ship as it pitched and

yawed.

I'm not going to jail for a bunch of frogs, the pinkish one said. It looked down and away from the other, at an angle, and Gourami saw what its lips shaped, clearly. *We can't lose this planet, Tim. And Core won't protect us if there's no tanglestone.*

Fight him, Gourami willed, leaning one hand foolishly on the glass, the rain slashing se back like whips. As if se could press close to the human, influence him somehow. As if he would understand the words se thought at him so fiercely. As if it would matter at all.

Se was not a greatparent. Se did not have the skill of making luck.

For Christ's sake, the one called Tim said. He turned his back on the pink one, and that let Gourami see what he said clearly. *I don't want to know what you do.*

At first, Cricket tried to sleep. Her connex was damped—she'd get nothing as long as she was on this boat—and she could only play so much solitaire.

But she might as well try to fly to the moons, or swim to the bottom of the ocean, or turn back time. Actually, she thought—composed on her narrow cot, staring at the bulkhead where it curved in over her head—she'd have a better chance, statistically speaking, of any of those. She felt the ship move ponderously in the heaving ocean, its massive length and heavy keel a match for the fury of the cyclone—at least for now.

She'd left the windowless compartment lit, preferring to see anything that might come at her in the night. And because it made the creaks and shudders of the storm-tossed vessel easier to bear—if the light was on, it was just a ship being driven by the storm. In the dark, she would have been a rag tossed and shaken in the teeth of a beast.

When the door whirred open, she came to her feet. She was not expecting a crouched and shivering ranid, water pooling beneath it on the deck. “Don't come in!” she said. “The door's locked from the outside.”

The ranid—a far-swimmer, with the net-vest knotted about it like you saw on dramas, and pregnant, which they never were in the media—gestured at Cricket impatiently. She moved forward, shuffling and sore but not slow by any means, and stepped over the guard slumped against the wall. She didn't ask if he was dead or unconscious.

All the corridors were abandoned, which did not surprise Cricket. The ship seemed to be running a skeleton crew, and they'd be needed to keep her together in the face of the cyclone. The ranid led her along its own backtrail of dripped water, but paused as they entered an aft ladderway. It drew Cricket into the shelter behind the ladder with the light grip of slimy twig-fingers, and held up a child's waterproof slate. —*Cricket Murphy,* it keyed. —*Humen call me Gourami. We must destroy this ship.*

“There are people on it!” Cricket whispered, leaning forward so her face would show in the light of the screen. “The lifeboats won't make it through this.”

The ranid hesitated. Then it turned the slate away from her and bent over it, fingers moving with precise rapidity. When it raised the slate to Cricket's eye level. —*Must. ?Tim? And ?Jeff? have virus to kill ranid people. All of us. We cannot let them. Please. I need your help.*

“We stay with the ship or I die, Gourami. And—if we sink the ship, how do you keep the, the virus”—

shit, Rim is using bioweapons on the natives? Fuck me raw—“from getting into the water?”

—Fire, the frog typed impatiently, goggling up at Cricket with beseeching eyes.—Virus is sealed in tubes, in refrigerated box. Help me sabotage the ship. And then we swim. It is only a storm.

“I can’t!” Panic, tightening her throat, her heart thumping like an angry fist.

—You will hold onto my vest, Gourami typed. —I will swim for you. All you need to do is breathe. And stay warm.

Easier said than done.

Cricket swallowed acid. “It’s not easy to burn a metal ship,” she said. “I don’t suppose you packed a bomb?”

The randid shook its head, ducking apologetically. *—Must, it typed, and Cricket thought if it were a human it would have been weeping in frustration.*

How many people were on this ship? Closs and Greene. And thirty crew members? Fifty? “How do you know they have this virus? How do you know they’ll use it?”

It had to be a misunderstanding. A mistake. It was the sort of thing a villain in a brainimation might do. And Cricket held on to that self-delusion for almost a minute, until Gourami’s careful explanation and word-for-word account of what it had seen chipped away at her disbelief, and left her leaning against the bulkhead, gasping.

“He said that.”

—Yes.

“And Closs didn’t stop him.”

—Closs said he did not want to know anything about.

“Oh, fuck me running,” Cricket said. Thirty people.

Thirty.

Maybe fifty at the outside.

How many had she killed on Patience?

Was it different if you went in knowing you had made the *decision* to kill? Was it different if you did it in self-defense? In defense of another? In defense of a species?

Or was it still just murder, like what André had done to Lucienne, like what Closs had done to Maurice?

Like what Gourami had done to the guard?

“All right,” Cricket said. “If you don’t have a bomb, we have to get to the hydrogen compression tanks.”

—Cricket?

Cricket sighed exasperation. Bad enough to be here, doing this. Worse to have to stop and think about it. “Come on. Come *on.*”

The storm was going to kill him, and André thought he should probably be more upset about that than he was. But there was a certain element of justice in it, if you believed in such things, and he was pretty fucking tired. Ziyi's barge would never survive the cyclone in the confines of the harbor, and André could not run before the storm without her codes—even assuming the electrical system had survived her death. Fire systems had extinguished her corpse; belowdecks, the surfaces were covered in a mixture of greasy soot and foam. He could not contact Nouel or Cricket—or Lucienne, for that matter—and he had no means of reaching Jean. The data that Maurice had died for was in his hands, and he had no way to get it where it would do any good.

So he stood on the bridge, behind the barge's tall glass windows, and sipped liquor that Ziyi was never going to get around to drinking, and watched the green and red running lights stream away on either side. He had the stolen flashboat and nowhere to go in it.

He could run to Jean's minifab. It would be watertight. If the storm didn't wash it away. He could head for a refugee ship; there were always one or two, among the last vessels to clear the bay. They would be waiting for fishers straggling home from the bayou, for the crews of the last lighters to touch down.

Charter Trade ran the refugee ships. Charter Trade was going to be looking for André Deschênes. *If* he could make it through the rising wind, the falling rain.

The choices paralyzed him. He understood some of what had happened—the probability storm, the sharp brief moment where every choice had been made, where every potentiality had become real. But that was over now. When he chose, he was choosing. He was collapsing a wave.

And every choice could be the wrong choice. And then he'd be like Cricket—like Moon—with the blood of a world on his hands.

Or he could stay here, on this ship that had no chance of moving, and wait for the storm.

The anchor cables were already groaning, the waves breaking over the rail. It would not be long.

He finished the drink and dropped the glass on the floor. It didn't break but rolled down the pitching deck to clink against the useless navigation pane. He should have thrown it against the bulkhead. In a moment, the barge rocked, the deck slanted the other way. The glass slid instead of rolling.

André brought his heel down sharply and cracked the glass under his cast. It shattered, skipping down the deck, and he grabbed the wheel so that he would not fall.

And then his headset blinked live with an instant message, and he accepted hastily and then laughed out loud. Because it was—of all the mad possibilities—from Jean Kroc. Typed, obviously, bereft of mood or context modifiers, containing nothing but the words.

André, follow my beacon. It will bring you in.

André ran before the wind, hunkered under the flashboat's canopy, skipping across whitecaps like a spun stone. It would have been easy to get lost among the reeds and the narrow channels in the dark and the slashing rain. But Jean's beacon came with a map.

He followed it, and tried not to think of the bayou and the unburied bodies sunk in its storm-churned mire. Faster would have been better, but he was pushing his reflexes and the autopilot's, and if he ran

aground there was no one to rescue him. And now he had a reason to live—half a reason to live, anyway—because he traded messages with Jean while he traveled, and Jean told him a lot of things.

“Will you do the time?” Jean asked, outright.

The chit André carried could be whatever tiny payback he could offer for Cricket and Nouel, whether they were alive or dead. Dead, most likely; he didn’t like to fool himself with false hope and denial.

He’d made some mistakes.

It still might be all right.

“I’ll testify,” he said. And plugged Maurice’s chip into the flashboat’s playback so he could upload the data to Jean as he drove, in case he didn’t make it in.

The storm covered any sound of the flashboat’s engine as André doused the lights and motored in near-darkness to within sight of the mooring, relying on his augments to find his way. The craft Jean had liberated at Nouel’s barge wasn’t the only boat tied up by the paramangrove roots. Not surprising, given the beacon; somebody in Rim must have gotten lucky. Through the coded channel, André said, “Jean, you have company on the way, if it’s not there yet.”

“Thanks,” Jean said. “I can see them on the motes. They’re unlikely to find their way in—shit.”

“What?”

“Well,” Jean said, reluctantly. “They appear to have brought equipment. And some of it looks like it might go boom.”

“Am I going to need this boat again?” André fought it into the shelter of a paramangrove, wincing as the wind blew it hard against the roots and something crunched.

“Anything’s possible.” André waited; Jean caved. “But we’ll probably be dead. Or gone out the back door.”

“You have a back door?”

“Every good fox has a back door, André. Can you handle the company? There seem to be about six of them. No, seven.”

“And one in the boats,” André said. “Sure. I can handle that.”

He checked his pistol.

He had five bullets left.

The trees looked easy, but not with his leg in that cast. André popped the bubble on the flashboat to get a little more room and hauled himself up on the gunwale. The boat tipped somewhat, but he extended his broken leg across the beam, and it didn’t rock more than once. There was an underdash light, dim and greenish. Rain lashed his scalp and trickled down his back as he bent forward to struggle with the straps on the cast. The boat was already shipping water. He didn’t expect to see it again—but then, he didn’t really expect to come back.

The bones were at least partially healed. If it had been a less complicated break, he would have been

walking unassisted after three weeks. As he opened the clamshell halves of the cast, he told himself that his orthoped was being unnecessarily conservative.

His body heat evaporated in cool moisture, as if someone lifted a warm cloth from his skin and left only shreds of vapor behind. The flashboat had a first-aid kit; he dressed the calf in gauze where hardware broke the skin, and wound it with waterproof bandaging, trying to ignore how the shank had wasted. He'd be fine without the cast.

If the leg would hold his weight. If he could stop thinking about the fall that awaited him if he slipped, in the rain and the dark. If it wasn't for the red memory of bone and blood and incapacitating pain.

Meticulously, André removed his other shoe. He placed it beside the cast in the flashboat, then checked to be sure his gun was securely in place. He thought about programming the autopilot to rev the engines to life after a five-minute delay—as a distraction—but either he'd be dead by then or he'd be better off with the Rimmers not knowing there was anybody home but them and Jean Kroc. The beacon was enough of a clue that somebody was coming.

The boat gave one more good wobble when he stood. He stabilized it; the effort sent a spike of pure white electricity up his leg.

This wasn't going to be any fun at all.

The bark of the paramangrove was slick, but he managed to wriggle and slide into a low branch, kicking off from the spreading roots with his uninjured leg. From there, he could all but walk up the branches, though he limited himself to more of a painstaking sidle.

Before his adventure in the swamp, he would have skipped along the branches as if trotting along a sidewalk, sidling effortlessly from shadow to shadow. Now he stopped and calculated each step, lifting his good leg up first so he could heave the rest of him after, one hand always on a branch or the trunk of the paramangrove.

Good joke, that. André alone knew of three different worlds that had species called something like paramangrove, neomangrove, whatever. He guessed it didn't matter, though, if you never got off the ground.

The rain and wind shipped about him, and farther from the trunk, branches lashed. He felt the vibrations through the soles of his feet; they thundered and thumped and itched in his healing bone until he felt like the bridge of a violin. He crept along the branches hunched, trying to present as small a silhouette as possible to the wind.

The guard by the boats was just as well ignored. He couldn't spare a bullet, and the sounds of a scuffle would just alert the others. Assuming that André could win that argument in his current weakened state.

That was the most worrying question of all.

Well, he'd heal. Or he'd have more to worry about than a shattered limb.

“Jean, you still there?”

“Like a bog tick. And so are my friends by the door.”

“Do you have any weapons?”

“If they don't blow the place apart around me, I can defend myself when they enter. But if they take the

probability engine offline, then we've lost anyway. It's our only way to get to Lucienne. I sent the data on ahead."

The conversation was silent on André's end; he willed his conversation into the headset. Jean, without implants, answered verbally.

"Good. Right," André said. "Uplink me a schematic of the opposition, please?"

Jean did it, and André paused and considered. There were three on the branch, two covering, two—not counting the one at the boat—serving as a picket. And the most dangerous weapon on site wasn't his sidearm, or that of any of the Rimmers.

It was the bundle of explosives that Jean had correctly identified, and that they were affixing to the trunk of one of the largest and most stately trees. It was a small enough package that he was reasonably certain it contained one of two or three shock-resistant high explosives, which would have to be triggered by a small quantity of more volatile explosive. If they had any sense, the Rimmers wouldn't try to hook up the detonator—and the timer—to the bomb until it was secure. Then they'd place a blast shield over it, to shape the charge, and retreat.

"You don't have any booby traps?"

"What do you want, killer robot squirrels? They already disarmed the weapon I had covering the door. You distract them enough for me to get this door open without getting my face blown off, and you'll have all the help you're crying out for."

The officers had lit their work area with IR floods clamped to nearby tree limbs; these suited André's augmentations fine.

"Yeah," André said. "It'd be nice." He wanted some elevation on the Rimmers, but not too much. And with his leg fragile and the wind threatening to sweep him from his slick-wet perch with every painstaking motion, he was asking for a noisy slip. Eventually, though, he found a limb he could straddle, a lateral branch crossing it at a forty-five-degree angle about a half-meter higher. It didn't point in quite the right direction, but it would do.

The wind wasn't going to help either. The labyrinth of branches made its gusts chaotic; it blew cold down his neck and rain into his eyes. And not only would he have to watch all those flickering leaves and try to outsmart the wind, he was shooting some twenty meters with a handgun. At night, amid trees that creaked and shifted and moaned as they rubbed together, on branches that thumped branches, sending showers of fat droplets through the canopy.

It was a crazy, impossible shot.

"Jean," he said. "I need a little luck."

"That's still an extraordinarily bad idea."

"If it wasn't important—"

Jean's silence implied much. As did the slow deliberation with which he said, "By which we prove ourselves no more capable, under pressure, of picking the hard and risky path than any Charter Trade exec."

"Excuse me?"

“Never mind,” Jean said. André heard clicking. Was Jean actually using a keyboard? “It’s all right because we’re the good guys, right? Consider it done. Look, just disable the charge and get inside the door, okay? Don’t worry about anything but speed.”

Oh, the implications in that demand. André steadied his hands on the cross branch and sighted, timing the whip of leaves, the sway of branches, the movement of the officer as he finished setting the charge against the door and turned to receive the detonator from his assistant. Waiting the moment. The gale still rose, the rain stinging hard. The limb the Rimmers stood on was as broad as a sidewalk, and it would take André at least five seconds to reach it, probably another second and a half to get to the door. If nobody shot him along the way. If he didn’t rebreak his leg. If...

The moment came, a lull, a luff, as if the storm drew a breath.

André caressed the trigger.

Loud as the end of the world, loud even over the roar of the storm through the trees, the gun wrenched in his hand. One shot.

The officer who had had the detonator in his hands—

—had no hands. He toppled backward, blood trailing like strewn confetti. The other two cleared the branch so fast that André couldn’t tell if they dove aside or had been blown clear.

It didn’t matter. He moved. Clipped the pistol into its magnetic holster, dropped three meters, caught himself on rough slimed wood, and swung. His shoulder wrenched, his left hand tore. His hot, bloody palm skidded on rain-cold bark. A weapon barked, and something drew a line of fire along his hip and thigh.

Flailing, swearing, André swung and fell to the lower branch, managing to take most of the shock on his good leg. The branch didn’t even dip under his weight. Blood oozed from the gunshot wound, made treacherous footing deadly. He went to one knee.

Luck. He felt the hiss of a bullet pass him, never even heard the report. The wind that had saved him frayed the sound. Leaving handprints in blood, André scrambled forward, crouched like a froggie. There was light ahead, suddenly, an oblong shape. He dove toward it, heard this gunshot, all right, as Jean unloaded the shotgun over his head. Once, twice, three times in under two seconds. Cold rain rivuleted André’s scalp, dripped from his eyebrows. Jean might have two more rounds, or five. André couldn’t clearly see the gun.

He fell inside the door. Jean grabbed him by the collar, backing up, and hauled his feet inside.

Blood smeared everything as André pushed himself to his feet. It was dark, opaque as milk. For a moment, he stared at it, stunned. “How bad?” Jean asked.

André shook his head. “Not bad.” And then he poked the wound in his leg to be sure, and hissed. No, not bad. “Stings like a bastard. You said you had a back way out?”

Jean handed him the shotgun. “Watch the door. Stay back.”

The officers might have another detonator. André and Jean shared a look; they didn’t need to share the words. André hauled himself up. “Lucienne?”

“She’s on the VR,” Jean said. “I don’t really have screens.”

The temptation to turn and see what Jean was doing, to ogle his bizarre hand-shopped console with its scorch marks and its rainbowed, heat-discolored metal, was unbearable. André folded his hands on the shotgun and watched the door. Five minutes, seven. “Can you see what they’re doing out there?”

“Bringing up another detonator,” Jean said. “Come here, plug into this thing. We’ll download your head to Lucienne.”

“She’s already got the stuff from Maurice?” André dug inside his shirt, found it in the pocket next to his skin. “God, got a chair? My leg—”

He’d have gnawed it off, given half a reason. It couldn’t hurt more. Jean rose, silently, and gestured him into the chair. “I got it to her. She wants your hard memory, too. Anything you have on Closs.”

“It’s all wet memory.” But he could dump some of it to hard. Most of it. As he settled himself and surrendered the shotgun back to Jean, he was already transferring. A matter of microseconds, once he set the pull variables. It wouldn’t get everything. It might get enough. “There’s no back door, is there, Jean? This is my fucking testimony.”

“Would I lie?” Jean said. He glanced at the door. André couldn’t hear what was going on out there, but the Rimmers had to have brought the fresh detonator up by now. “Put the headset on.”

You’d lie and lie again, André thought. Neither he nor Jean had had the time to get the device off the outside of the door. It was still stuck there, a deadly limpet mine.

He closed the VR set over his eyes and looked into Lucienne’s. “Hello, M~ Spivak.”

“Dump,” she said.

“Dumping,” he replied. He slotted the chit, gave her the unsorted contents of his head, all the information Maurice had died for, and Cricket, probably, and Nouel. Everything that he and Jean were going to die for now.

All his secrets.

André Deschênes felt naked, and full of a numinous truth. It took under ninety seconds. He felt nothing.

Lucienne had been looking aside, perhaps conversing with someone on another connection. But she glanced back and smiled when he was done, a wide, red-lipped, flashing smile. “I won’t be able to get you a suspended sentence, André,” she said. “But this might take off some time.”

“That’s all right,” he said. “That’s not what I did it for.”

She winked and cut the connection.

The chamber door blew in.

André lifted his head in a plain white room. “I’m dead,” he said.

“No,” Jean answered. “*You’re* on Earth. Feel the gravity.”

He lifted one foot, the other. There was no wound on his hip. His leg didn’t ache. His palm wasn’t torn. Blood, fatigue, and rainwater did not blur his sight.

“How?”

Jean smiled, bristled face sparkling like mica in the unforgiving light. “Same way Cricket got to Novo Haven.” He paused, but another voice filled his silence as the door whisked aside.

“You’re dead, M~ Deschênes,” Lucienne Spivak said. She wore a butter-colored jumpsuit a little paler and more golden than her skin, her black hair dressed up and sparkling with jeweled feather-pins. “Charter Trade officers killed you on Greene’s World, approximately seventeen seconds ago. I realize this comes as something of a shock.”

André Deschênes is dead. Long live whoever the hell I am. “Cricket?”

“We haven’t heard,” she said. “There’s no connex yet. I’m sorry.”

She was talking to André, but she was looking at Jean. And Jean was looking back at her.

“I’m not him,” Jean said.

Lucienne came three more steps, leaned in, turned her head and kissed him lightly on the cheek. “I’m not her either. You’d better know that from the top.”

André turned his back and walked away. There was bound to be someone in the area who could find him a shower and cot. And he couldn’t stomach standing there and watching them stare at each other anymore.

And he wanted a nap before somebody came to arrest him.

They were well clear of the explosion by the time the hydrogen tanks that Cricket had rigged went off. They heard it through the storm, and Cricket saw the column of flame, and some of the burning wreckage when it fell. None of it came close to them, though—Gourami was already swimming strongly away, and the lights of the cruiser had already been out of sight.

Cricket, at least, was praying they’d cooked off the virus rather than releasing it into the ocean. She didn’t know if ranids prayed, and it didn’t seem like a good time to ask. Wind whipped her; rain hammered her; the tall seas tossed them both. Cricket put her whole will into her hands, knotted in Gourami’s harness, and the ranid kept her head above water. She lost feeling in her fingers; she thought she might lose use of both hands. Water blinded her. Slammed her. Spun them like flotsam, like dancers, like foam on the curve of a wave.

The ocean under the storm was warm, warm as the bayou in sunlight. If it had been cold she would have died, rattling teeth, hard shivers, and then the calm chill of sleep in the dark dark ocean.

But it was warm, and Gourami kept her head above water. And Cricket lived.

The storm passed in fifty quarters. Dehydration was the worst enemy, though Cricket got some moisture from whitefish that Gourami hunted. She missed the storm, when the sun baked her. In the storm, she’d been able to catch rainwater in her open mouth, a little. She let her hair fall over her face to protect her skin as much as possible. Gourami hid them both under festoons of algae. They floated without moving when a nessie as long as the sunken cruiser glided past, its gray back just another long gliding wave...rolling in the wrong direction.

When it was gone, Gourami ducked underwater, and croaked over and over, calling, calling again.

They drifted a day and a half before the search volunteer ranids found them, a coast guard cutter gliding behind them. Of the ship Cricket had destroyed, there were no other survivors.

There was no contact with Earth; neither Closs nor Greene were there to demand her arrest and detention. When she was released from the hospital, she went free.

Some nine months later, the first liner arrived. And with it, the capacity for communication with Rim and Core were reestablished. It would take several years to repair and reconstruct the transfer station, but there were still more ships outbound to Greene's World, and they could form the framework for a temporary system. The planet wasn't dead.

The first thing Cricket did when she had connex was call Lucienne. She was sitting in a white cane chair on the outside deck of a little bar in Landward, waiting for Nouel, nursing a seabreeze that had cost a mint. Grapefruit juice wasn't cheap, anymore.

It was meant to be a brief call; it had already been on the news that the Greene's World Charter Trade Corporation was disbanded. Lucienne said there was no need for Cricket to testify. André Deschênes and Jean Kroc had served.

"Do you want to talk to André, Cricket? He's awaiting sentencing, but I can get a call through." She smiled. "He'll do less time than Morrow. They're not letting *her* out again."

Cricket paused, and considered tangled emotions. She interlaced her fingers and rolled her neck to crack it. "Call me Fisher," she said. "It's what I go by now. And no. Not really."

Lucienne nodded. "Do you still see the ranid called Gourami?"

"Sometimes," Cricket admitted. "Se's busy parenting. Thirty-six eggings. Apparently, none of them are related. 'Gourami's family.' They were on the news."

"André said he wonders if you will take it something from him."

So Cricket knew that Lucienne had André in another chat. And that was fine; it was good to know he was doing all right.

"What sort of something?"

"Payment on a debt. A story, he says."

A story. Gourami had told her a lot of stories while they drifted. And Cricket had told Gourami a few.

And they had stayed in touch, though Gourami was a parent and a far-swimmer now, honored among se kin.

Yes. Cricket could take Gourami a story. But she wanted to know something before she said yes. "Is it a good story or a sad story? I mean, how does it end, Lucienne?"

Lucienne's eyes defocused briefly, her chin dropping. When she looked back, she shrugged. "He says he doesn't know. He's not sure yet. But he'll let you know when he finds out, if you want."

Cricket picked at the arm of the chair with a fingernail. Nouel was coming up the sidewalk, his hat cocked against the glare, a walking stick swinging in his left hand.

“He can call,” Cricket said, and waved Nouel over. When he caught her eye, she reached for her drink. He was wearing a big grin; he’d been talking to his girlfriend. “When he knows how it ends.”

About the Author

ELIZABETH BEAR was born on the same day as Frodo and Bilbo Baggins, but in a different year. This, coupled with her childhood tendency to read the dictionary for fun, has led inevitably to penury, intransigence, and the writing of speculative fiction. Her hobbies include incompetent archery, practicing guitar, and reading biographies of Elizabethan playmenders.

She is the recipient of the John W. Campbell Award for best New Writer and the author of over a dozen published or forthcoming novels, including the *Locus* Award–winning Jenny Casey trilogy and the Philip K. Dick Award–nominated *Carnival*. A native New Englander, she spent seven years near Las Vegas, but now lives in Connecticut with a presumptuous cat.