

# OWNER SPACE

*Neal Asher*

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*Born and still living in Essex, England, Neal Asher started writing at the age of sixteen but didn't explode into public print until a few years ago; a quite prolific author, he now seems to be everywhere at once. His stories have appeared in Asimov's, Interzone, The Agony Column, Hadrosaur Tales, and elsewhere, and have been collected in Runcible Tales, The Engineer, and Mason's Rats. His extremely popular novels include Gridlinked, Cowl, The Skinner, The Line of Polity, Brass Man, The Voyage of the Sable Keech, The Engineer Reconditioned, and Prador Moon: A Novel of the Polity. Coming up is a new novel, Hill diggers.*

*In the wild and pulse-pounding-suspenseful adventure that follows, he vividly demonstrates that it might be a good idea for the citizens of opposing Galactic Empires to stay well away from each other-especially when there are deep, bitter, and long-lasting grudges between them.*

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## [VERSION HISTORY]

v1.0 by the N.E.R.D's. Page numbers removed, paragraphs joined, formatted and spell checked. A full read through is required.

v1.1 Full read through complete.

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Kelly Haden worked herself into a sweat on the training machines positioned in the outer ring of the *Breznev's* spin section, the scars on her arms and chest tightening. She would have preferred to use free weights, but such were not allowed aboard ships like this, since a malfunction of the spin section or, for that matter, of the ship entire, could result in heavy lumps of iron hurtling about like chaff. There was also the matter of the weight itself, when a lightly constructed training machine like the one she was using could stand in for a few hundreds pounds of iron.

Finishing her workout, she picked up her towel and headed for the ladder leading up to the inward hatch, but the exercise had not dispelled the taut feeling of frustrated anger in her stomach. She climbed up into the sleeping quarters.

"Feeling better now, Societal Asset Haden?" enquired Long-shank from his bunk. He was reading his notescreen again-some esoteric biological text, no doubt. She glanced at him, took in his long gray hair tied back with some confection of colored beads, at his graywear deliberately altered for individuality: sleeves cut away above the elbow, red fabric from the three Collective flags they found aboard sewn around the collar and waistband. They all did this sort of thing. Kelly had been one of the lucky ones to have found an old Markovian uniform jacket, which she had altered to fit, and had cut off her graywear trousers at just below the knee. It was a form of escape—the only escape for them that seemed likely now.

"No, I don't feel much better, Societal Ass Longshank," she replied.

What had once been a humorous exchange now contained a hint of bitterness.

The inner ring of the spin section was the bridge. It was without a ceiling, and while working at any of the consoles it was possible to see one's fellows upside down overhead. Kelly, being a ship's engineer, had been quite accustomed to this sort of thing, but it had taken some getting used to for the other escapees, and the vomit vacuums had seen plenty of work.

"How are we doing?" she asked Traviss, who in the low grav sat strapped into his chair at the center of a horseshoe of navigation consoles before the projection cylinder.

Traviss was a young hyperactive man who had been in the Collective military until he showed a talent with computers and spatial calculus and was reclassified as a "societal asset." Like them all, he had resented the resultant scrutiny from the Doctrinaires. He touched a control and the projection cylinder filled with stars.

"Our slingshot around Phaeton is taking us nicely out of the system's gravity sink and we'll be able to U-jump in sixteen hours." One of the stars flashed red, and, a little way out, flashed the blue spinning-top icon of the *Breznev*. Between the two lay three icons representing the Collective pursuit vessels from Handel. They weren't the problem. The problem was a green icon accelerating out from the nearest star to Phaeton. The *Lenin*, though not as close to them as the other ships, would now easily be able to intersect their course. It was also faster, so there would be no outrunning it.

Traviss continued, "I calculate that the *Lenin* will be able to knock us back into the real in three days if we continue along our present course."

The others were gathering around now: Slome Terl, astrophysicist and their paternal figurehead; Olsen Marcos, who was a geneticist and an amateur historian, though that was a pursuit now strictly controlled in the Collective; and Elizabeth Terl, Slome's daughter and plain physicist in her own right. Of the fifty people aboard, everyone was an expert of some kind, and everyone had been reclassified as a "societal asset" and come under doctrinal scrutiny and control. To say the Collective was ruled would be to deny what it claimed to be, but it *was* ruled, by those who did all they could to skew reality to fit doctrine. The Doctrinaires knew that anyone above a certain intelligence level was a danger, yet also essential for a space-faring civilization, so such people had to be *managed*.

"Space has, by definition, three dimensions," said Slome. He was old, bald, and running to fat, and possessed a mind that sliced through problems like a microtome.

"Somewhat more than that, I would suggest," said Elizabeth, young, arrogant, and, though intelligent, more intent on displaying that intelligence than using it.

"Shut the fuck up, Liz," said Kelly distractedly.

The girl gave Kelly a superior look, then reached up to flick a lock of her bright ginger hair aside. She was pretty, too, which Kelly also found annoying.

"Our options are limited," said Traviss. He touched another control and areas of the cylinder were shaded in different colors. Their ship was within a blue hemisphere that disappeared off-cylinder-the Collective. A red area impinged from above and other discrete red areas were scattered below, with one large red hemisphere filling the lower right of the cylinder.

"If you would run through those options," said Slome, and Kelly got the suspicion that Slome and Traviss had already done so, and that a decision had already been made.

Traviss touched controls and numbers appeared in each of the colored areas. "Red signifies danger," he said needlessly. "Area One is what's left of the Grazen Empire. If we head that way, we'll either run

straight into their defenses or their wormships will catch up with us." He glanced around. "And if we're lucky, they'll blow us out of space rather than capture us." They all knew what happened to humans caught by the Grazen.

"Area Two?" Slome prompted.

"Areas Two, Three, and Five are asteroid fields," Traviss explained. "We would have to drop out of U-space to navigate them." He highlighted some stars in the Collective adjacent to Area Three. "Even if we tried to get through Three, which is the smallest, the Collective could send ships from the bases indicated and intercept us."

"Six?"

"Grazen outposts scattered in an asteroid field and extended dust cloud."

"You surprise me," said Slome.

Kelly interjected, "Collective problems at home ended that mission. In my opinion, the area wasn't worth taking-nothing there remotely human-habitable and it would have taken years at the cost of many ships. But the Doctrinaires don't let facts get in the way of ideology-there'll be another attack on it."

Slome nodded, then pointed a gnarled finger at the hemisphere of red. "And that?"

Traviss hesitated for a moment and Kelly knew precisely why. She also knew that Slome's prompting and Traviss's hesitation were just a performance. They both knew where this was leading. Kelly wondered what it was they were yet to reveal.

"That's been under Interdict since before the Markovians," Traviss replied. "I can't really find out much about it."

"But you've found something," said Slome.

"Yes," Traviss said. He appeared distinctly uncomfortable with the act. "That area is classified as Owner Space."

After a brief, almost embarrassed silence, Elizabeth laughed knowingly, then said, "The Markovians were not noted for their rationality."

Kelly felt the need to defend Traviss, despite the fact that he and Slome were playing some game. "Yes, which is why they were slaughtered by our oh-so-rational Collective."

Elizabeth shot back, "The Collective is a doomed ideology, but their rationality is superior to the myth-making and religions of the Markovians."

"Well, I can always drop you in one of the escape pods if you want to go back," said Kelly. "That's supposing the Doctrinaire aboard the *Lenin* thinks you a valuable enough asset to pick up."

Elizabeth began to bristle until Olsen interrupted heavily, "The Owner is no myth, though some people's conception of him may stray into the territory of religion."

Holding up a finger to silence his daughter, Slome turned to the geneticist and sometime historian. "I heard something about all this when I was a student under the Markovians. Perhaps you could elaborate?"

Olsen shrugged. "Highlight the Sabalist System, would you, Traviss?"

Traviss complied, picking out a star sitting just on the Grazen side of the border between the Grazen Empire and the Collective.

"Owner Space extended to here. The Owner apparently ceded the area to us in the pre-Markovian era. The Markovians lost it to the Grazen over a century ago, but we still have a lot of data and biological samples from Sabal itself. Those samples indicate a great deal of adaptation from ancient Terran forms." "That was almost certainly our work," said Elizabeth. "We aren't in that league," Olsen replied. "But perhaps we were?" Olsen shook his head.

"Though I know some of the details, this is the first I've heard about the Sabal connection," said Slome.

"It's in some very old data files—I did some research," Olsen replied. "Those same files were secured by the Collective, and I came under the scrutiny of Doctrinaires long before they invented the concept of 'societal assets.' Some of my fellows weren't so lucky."

"So we are now to believe in immortal superbeings?" enquired Elizabeth.

"We don't have to," said Kelly. They all turned to look at her.

She continued. "The Grazen avoid that place. When I was engineer aboard the *Mao*, a Grazen scoutship faced us down rather than enter there. We tore it apart. Grazen ships get destroyed if they try to enter that area, and Collective ships get flung out—their drive systems wrecked."

"This was when you were fighting for the Collective," said Elizabeth.

"This was when I was an engineer groveling in radioactive sludge below the *Mao*'s engines."

Elizabeth did not have much more to say about that—they could all see the shiny scar tissue down the side of Kelly's face, her neck, and disappearing under her jacket.

After an embarrassed silence, Slome said, "Well, as you say, Traviss, 'limited options.' But we must make a decision." He turned to Kelly. "I defer to you on this, since without you we would never have escaped the Commutank, and since you have greater experience in these matters"—Kelly knew that a "however" was due—"however, the Grazen would peel off our skins over a slow fire, while the Collective would peel our minds and we'd soon all become obedient little citizens after they fitted us with strouds." He gestured toward the viewing cylinder. "As I see it, when we drop into U-space, we should run for the edge of the Grazen outpost, where we will be in their territory only briefly before reaching the... Interdict Area."

Hints, rumors, stories—nothing clear and nothing proven—that's all Kelly had ever heard while in the Collective fleet. The whole, however, had left an impression on her, an idea that the Owner was something to be feared, something that even the *Grazen* feared. Perhaps that was just the fear of the unknown.

"We won't be able to enter there," she said—not entirely sure of her facts. "We'll get crippled and flung out, and those aboard the *Lenin* will capture us, if the Grazen don't get to us first."

Slome gave a weak smile. "Yes, that would have been true."

"*Would have* been true?"

Slome gestured to the cylinder. "Show them the message, Traviss."

Traviss cleared the cylinder. Then, after a moment, he brought up a brief text message: "Escapees from

the Collective, Owner Space is open to you. Welcome."

Traviss said, "Its source was deep inside Owner Space."

"Very well," said Kelly, her spine crawling. "Owner Space it is."

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Clinging to the handholds, Doctrinaire Shrad gazed at flecked void through the thick portholes of the *Lenin* and ground his teeth. A stupid waste of resources, he felt, specifically himself. He should have been back with the Central Committee, planning the coming attack on the Grazen Empire, not out here chasing after a few assets gone bad. It was the other Doctrinaires in the Committee who had driven him out-fools whose ideology was unsound, who did not understand precisely how things should run in the Collective. They called his leadership of the previous campaign "disastrous" and did not understand how working with the old Markovian command structures in the fleet had hindered him. Well, he would bring these assets back, strouded and subservient, then return to his place in the Committee and bring to fruition his vision of the New Deal. Meanwhile—he turned from the viewing window—he would have to see about correcting the ideological aberrations he had found aboard this vessel.

The engineer, his hands bound behind his back, was being held between two of the Guard. Shrad pushed himself over and caught hold of some of the masses of pipe work running from the reactor cylinder. Then, with an exclamation, he snatched his hand away and had to stop himself by grabbing the shoulder of one of the Guard, who, as ever, just silently maintained his position.

"Those pipes are hot, Doctrinaire Shrad," observed the engineer. "If you must grab pipes, I suggest you grab the ones painted white."

"Thank you, Citizen Rand." Shrad took hold of a white pipe and hauled himself back. "Now, Citizen, I expect you are wondering why the Guard have detained you."

"I am overcome with curiosity, Doctrinaire Shrad." Shrad could feel his rage growing but, as usual, kept it locked inside. "I am presuming you understand the ideological concept behind graywear?"

"I do: it being doctrine that all people are equal, all people must also appear so."

"Yet here you are wearing Markovian overalls!" It was an unusual contrast: a citizen of the Collective dressed in Markovian overalls, held between two of Shrad's own unit of graywear-clad Guard—men who had once been Markovians.

"I don't wear graywear when I go off-shift. Unfortunately, it is not practical in the engineering environment."

"Are you saying that Committee instructions are wrong?" "No, Doctrinaire Shrad, I am saying that in the engineering environment, I would soil and destroy my graywear, which perhaps the Committee would consider an insult, though, of course, I don't presume to know what the Committee would think. I just try to do my best for the good of the Collective."

The words were as correct as they could be under the circumstances, but Shrad could detect a note of forbidden Irony and perhaps Sarcasm. He knew that it would be necessary to modify the behavior of this man.

"Doctrinaire Shrad."

Shrad turned. "Citizen Astanger," he said, feeling an immediate increase in his annoyance. Astanger was a societal asset—a synthesist who, under the Markovians, would have been called captain of the *Lenin*.

"Is there a problem?" asked Astanger.

Shrad gazed at the man. He was gray-haired, tall and thin, possessed piercing blue eyes, and what, in another time, would have been called a noble face. Shrad had his suspicions that Astanger's ancestry was, in fact, Markovian—he possessed a similarity of facial structure to those in Shrad's Guard unit—and that his outer appearance stemmed from the genetic tweaks those rulers had made to their line. It further annoyed Shrad that though Astanger's hair and graywear were utterly correct, he always looked sartorially impeccable.

"This engineer is incorrectly dressed," said Shrad.

Astanger turned his cold gaze on the man. "Rand, why are you wearing those overalls?"

"Graywear doesn't give enough freedom of movement, Ca... Citizen."

*Ah*, thought Shrad, smirking. As he had supposed, this ship being without doctrinal supervision throughout the last five years of the conflict with the Grazen, archaic and politically incorrect behavior had flourished. Rand had nearly called Citizen Astanger *Captain*.

"Be that as it may," continued Astanger, "you knew that wearing anything other than graywear is... ideologically incorrect." Astanger turned to Shrad. "As synthesist, I suggest, Doctrinaire Shrad, that for the good of this mission, Citizen Rand be made to work 120 percent shifts on 75 percent rations."

"That will not be necessary," said Shrad. He turned to the two onetime Markovians, the two of the Guard—the only ones who wore a slightly different style of graywear in that theirs was armored. The two men were as stony-faced as ever, each of them bearing a stroud spread like a two-fingered steel hand up the side of one cheek and dividing at the temple to spread two fingers halfway along their foreheads. "Stroud him."

Citizen Rand bellowed and began to struggle but, being experienced at this sort of thing, in fact having experienced it themselves, the Guard held him, and one of them quickly slapped the stroud he had been holding into place. Rand shrieked, and now the Guard released him. For a moment, Shrad thought he saw something in the expression of the particular guard who had used the stroud—was he Evan Markovian, or one of the others? Shrad tended to get them confused now. After a moment, he dismissed the suspicion—there was hardly anything left inside their skulls of the people they had been.

Writhing like a maggot, Rand tumbled through the air, his face clenched in a rictus of agony and blood running from underneath the stroud. Then, abruptly, his face went slack, moronic. The probes, about two thousand of them in all, had found their required locations in his brain, in some of those locations killing brain matter and in others injecting certain combinations of neurochemicals. Now the recordings would be playing. The indoctrination process would take about three hours and Rand would be a good citizen afterward, if he survived—only one in three did. Satisfied, Shrad turned to gaze at Astanger.

"It was foolish of him to flout the law," said Astanger, still watching Rand and seemingly unaffected by what had happened. He now turned to Shrad. "As synthesist, I will now have to factor in that though we may have gained one good citizen, we have certainly lost one good engineer."

"Be careful what you say, Citizen Astanger."

"I am always careful, Citizen Shrad... now, perhaps you would like to come to the bridge. It would seem that the *Breznev* has now dropped into U-space and is taking a most unexpected route."

"Unexpected?"

"Well, let me say 'disconcerting'-their choices were limited."

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The ovoid, eight miles long, looked like a furry egg from a distance, but closer it revealed itself to be a loose tangle of yard-wide pipes of a white coralline substance. Yig worms dwelt in the pipes and were currently extending the perimeter of the nest since it had encompassed another asteroid for them to grind up and digest after the nest's departure from the rookery. The Mother crouched in the center of the tangle, with sensory tendrils spread half a mile all around her and engaged into yig channels, which in turn led to exterior long-range sensors. Like a giant metallized crayfish with an extended body, she crouched, protected from hard vacuum by yig-worm opalized shields, tending her domain, cataloging her additions to the yig work, and raging.

Five million of her children were dead, and the Mother's rage was a terrible thing that she knew might last her for the rest of her millennia. After the Misunderstanding, this slaughter had been the worst thing that had ever happened to her. No other Grazen had lost so much, and she felt justified in breaking away from the rest of her kind and fleeing to this outpost. But she knew, deep in her fifth heart, that in Grazen terms she was not entirely sane.

When she saw the distortion of the undersphere that signified the presence of humans, she lashed out, the yig weaving a ripple into the undersphere and directing it along the course she set, and she relished the coming opportunity for vengeance. Human neurology was a simplistic and easily manipulated thing, and it was possible to exact punishment lasting even beyond the death of the neural network that formed the being. She still had some of the murderers with her now-forever shrieking in yig channels. Only when the ripple was away did she experience a sudden dread. The distortion was so close to *his* realm that this might lead to another Misunderstanding. She waited, observed the human vessel slam up into the oversphere, then observed it continuing on under conventional drive. She felt a moment of chagrin at her impulsive reaction. The ship would be crippled and flung back out, so there was no rush—it would soon be hers.

Then the other human vessel rose into the oversphere.

The Mother observed it for a little while. She surmised that once it saw what was about to happen to the one ahead of it, it might flee into the undersphere, so she sent another ripple to render its undersphere engines inert. Then she began to consolidate a kernel nest for travel. She withdrew her tendrils to the kernel, shifted supplies and the required devices inside, selected specific yig worms, and opalized the kernel. The nest yig opened a path through the outer opalized shields to the over-sphere, and, clawing space, she shot out, wrapped in her kernel. The second human vessel, now limited to oversphere drive, was heading directly *there* too. She traveled slowly, waiting for both vessels to be expelled, and relished the prospect of revenge. Then, in horrified disbelief, she observed the two human ships enter *his* realm, unharmed!

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Wearing a spacesuit, which gave her a lot more shielding than she had ever been allowed aboard the *Mao*, Kelly clung to a handhold in the drive penny and gazed at one drive unit—a teardrop of polished alloy ten feet long. There were three of them evenly spaced around the circumference of the penny, where they had been braced on bubblemetal beams at a distance apart precise to one ten-thousandth of an inch. The penny was temperature-controlled simply to maintain this accuracy, since variation in temperature would have resulted in disastrous metal expansion. It was all irrelevant now. The drive unit she was studying obviously lay out of true with the rest, and if that wasn't enough, the smoke coiling from a blown-away inspection hatch certainly was.

"What's the problem, Kelly?" asked Slome over the suit radio.

Kelly pushed herself away from her handhold over to the central cleanlock and went through; once out the other side, she began undogging her helmet. There were three of them awaiting her in the drive annex-no room for any more: Slome, his daughter, and Olsen.

"The problem is," she replied at length, "no more U-space drive."

"What?" said Elizabeth. "You're saying you can't repair it?"

The girl was really starting to irritate Kelly now. "A U-space drive is fitted and tuned in the Gavarn station complex. It takes about eight months just to balance it, and all the processing power of the complex itself. If I took back what we've got in there"-Kelly stabbed a thumb over her shoulder-"they'd likely scrap it and start again."

"Well," said Slome, listening to his headset, "it may all be irrelevant now." He gestured to the ports over to one side, and Kelly pushed herself over, dreading that she was about to see one of those shimmering tangles of pipes that the Collective called a Grazen dreadnought, although probably that wasn't an apt description at all. The things had only appeared occasionally during the war, and not one had ever been destroyed. If the Grazen had used them properly, she reckoned, there would be no Collective by now, but that was something you weren't ever allowed to say out loud aboard the *Mao*. But the Grazen had *not* used them, just their wormships, which, though dangerous, the human ships were able to destroy. However, the sight that greeted her eyes wasn't a Grazen dreadnought, but something she had only ever seen in very hazy high-magnification pictures.

"Border post," said Olsen.

"A what?" asked Elizabeth.

*Why was she here?* Someone more senior should have been here.

"Something I read about. They were also called death posts, though since we're sailing on past it without getting killed, I suppose the description is inapt."

"Or they have been deactivated by whoever sent us that invitation," said Slome.

It certainly looked a bit like a post, though one with streamlined ovoids attached at each end. It was huge-as Kelly recollected, the high magnification scan readout put these objects at two miles high, and there were thousands of them. The Doctrinaires aboard *Mao* told everyone they were the product of the ancient Collective from Earth that had been betrayed by the humans who took control before the Markovians. No one believed that; too many of the crew had heard the rumors about the entity called the Owner, though, of course, no one said so.

"That could have been what hit us," said Elizabeth.

Kelly shook her head. "I don't think so-that felt like something the Grazen did. Usually, after a strike like that, the wormships would be all over us. Maybe they're not attacking because of our location." She didn't feel as sure as she sounded, but felt the need not to let any of Elizabeth's statements go unchallenged.

Slome was listening to his headset again, nodding to himself. After a moment, he said, "Seems the same thing just happened to the *Lenin*, and now it's heading directly toward us."

Kelly rested her head against the port. It was quite simple-they'd gambled and lost.



Slome continued. "We're on the edge of a solar system here—one with a habitable world. Under conventional drive, we could be there in eight months."

"Do we have the supplies for that?" asked Kelly.

"Water and air recycling will last that long; the food will just have to."

"Then what?"

"We land."

"I don't see what good that will do us."

"Would you rather the *Lenin* caught up with us out here? At least down on a planet there's some chance of evading the Guard."

"Yeah, right."

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The Grazen U-space weapon had knocked out the U-space drives of both the *Breznev* and the *Lenin*, and Astanger had thought they were all about to die. Owner Space would fling them out if they headed that way, and, anyway, they would never be able to flee the aliens using conventional drive through realspace. Whether they continued on their course after the *Breznev* had seemed irrelevant, but, in the end, that was what saved them from the Grazen. Owner Space flung out human ships, yet it destroyed the Grazen ones. This time it did not do the first, and fear of the second was, Astanger suspected, what was keeping the Grazen away.

However, their situation was now dire, and Shrad's insistence on pursuing those assets and punishing them seemed quite insane. With a Grazen dreadnought sitting in vacuum behind them, reversing their course would have been stupid. Taking some other course out of Owner Space would have taken years under conventional drive, and they just did not have the supplies for that. Heading straight for the same planet to which the other ship was heading seemed the best course available, but still, Shrad was as mad as a box of frogs.

Citizen Shrad—the one everyone knew was responsible for the war against the Grazen, even if Collective society doctrine had it that individual responsibility was an outmoded concept, and that there were no such things as leaders.

Shrad had ordered all of the strouded, except for the Guard, to stop eating, and, good little robots that they were, that is precisely what they had done. Now, a month into their slog insystem, some of those people were dying. Astanger felt much regret for their straits, since though the strouding process made good little robots of them, it did not relieve them of suffering—that would have been too much to ask of the Collective. However, all those who were dying were not crew but nonessential personnel, because those who were strouded did not have sufficient independence of thought to be essential. They were also, in Astanger's opinion, better off dead. At least Engineer Rand had not suffered death by slow starvation—his stroud had not taken, and he had died before they could get him to the medbay.

Everyone else was on half rations, except of course for Shrad himself, he being the most *essential* person aboard. Astanger could think of numerous people aboard who were more essential... the entire crew, for example. And as it was now seeming likely that there might be no return to the Collective—it struck him as improbable that a rescue ship would be sent, what with Shrad having been blackballed from the Committee—Astanger was attracted to the idea of depriving Shrad of his ability to eat. This was a position

he'd never imagined himself to be in when he'd received his military call-up. As a misty-eyed youth, he had known himself to be a member of an advanced and rational political system.

The Collective had taken power before he was born, and he'd grown up in a still relatively free society, for it took quite some time for the dictates applied to actually take effect. That effect was first felt on the Capital World and took some years to reach his borderland homeworld. He grew up with the changes, the indoctrination and propaganda, and the kowtowing to the Doctrinaires. He crewed on Fleet ships that were still run the old Markovian way and because of his indoctrination thought the system bankrupt. As a ship's security officer, he applied the dictates of the new Doctrinaires to each ship now acquired. This was probably what accelerated his ascent up the promotion ladder to the position of captain. Then came the war with the Grazen.

As captain, he then had a greater overview of everything that was happening, and though Shrad's propaganda talked of Grazen assaults on Collective worlds, Astanger knew otherwise. It started to nag him, the way a straightforward assault on the Grazen was by Shrad and his lackies called a "defensive maneuver." Plain aggression was couched in terms of Collective-speak, thus the bombardment of a Grazen nest was a "tactical clearance" and the incineration of a planet-based alien nursery—one of Shrad's "special projects"—was "groundwork procedure." This elicited his dislike of Shrad, the Committee, the Collective, and himself. Being older, and wiser, he began to reassess his life. But what could he do? He was but a small cog in the Collective machine. The introduction of graywear and the gradual dismantling of the Markovian command structure elicited his disgust and contempt, and the use of the strouds finally aroused in him a cold hatred. But, again, what could he do?

Five years before the end of the war, a wormship attack deprived *Lenin* of its Doctrinaire. He'd spent the rest of the war ensuring that the ship didn't get another one. The Grazen withdrew from numerous worlds, then consolidated their nests around the core of their empire—if "empire" was the correct description of their system of governance, which he frankly doubted. Supplies to fleet ships were low, resources scant. The Committee called it a "victory of political rationality over animalistic imperialism" and recalled the fleet. Seeing through to the reality, Astanger counted the cost: on the Grazen side, twenty out of tens of thousands of their nests destroyed and a nursery world burned; on the Collective side, fifteen hundred and six capital ships destroyed, numerous support vessels gone, ground assault troops exterminated in great numbers (some of them burned on the nursery world in the common kind of screwup occurring when military tactics became subject to political control). The total human cost was somewhere in the hundreds of thousands, though it was impossible to get an accurate count.

Victory indeed.

But now, here aboard the *Lenin*, he wanted to *do* something. Many of the crew agreed with him—the exceptions being new personnel who had not been aboard during those five years—but there simply weren't enough of them. The crew complement consisted of fifty-eight people, all, by Committee ruling, unarmed. Shrad had one hundred of the utterly loyal Guard with him, all of them armed with handguns and carbines, and with access to even more powerful weapons than those. It seemed hopeless, and would become more so in the months to come as his crew steadily starved.

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The Mother retreated to the nest, but could not bring herself to finally return her vessel to its structure. Only partially reconnecting her tendrils into the yig channels and thus to the nest's long-range sensors, she gazed at the two human ships as they moved beyond the barrier. No reaction, nothing. She could not believe this: every wormship sent through there had been destroyed, the posts had fried *all* the drive systems of every human ship that strayed that way and then flung them back out. Why not now?

She seethed as the two human ships made for the nearest world within *his* domain. She gazed at them throughout the months of their journey, her frustration growing at letting two such easy targets—now they had lost the ability to travel in U-space-escape. But she was also frightened: there was the Misunderstanding to consider.

Then it started again.

Through long-unused yig channels, she received the news that the humans were preparing for another attack on the Grazen. Watch stations peppered throughout the Collective reported uncontrolled industrialization and the effective rapine of worlds. They reported massive movements of supplies, ships, and human warriors. Apparently, these last were different somehow, and this, too, was a worrying development. Such an effort had been predicted as a remote possibility when the Grazen, taking a long view of things, had withdrawn to wait for the inevitable collapse of a societal experiment that seemed doomed to failure. Analysis of this new effort showed that it would bankrupt the Collective and bring about its predicted collapse early, but that would be no consolation if another nursery world was burned.

Though she had physically separated her nest from the rest of the Grazen, she could not separate herself from her kind's racial will, the purpose, the gestalt that was the Grazen. While others of her kind prepared with cold efficiency to hold the Collective at bay until it collapsed, the Mother raged. She wanted to strike out, to damage, to hurt, and the nearest humans to her were but a few weeks away through the under-sphere, then the oversphere.

The posts had not touched them, so perhaps they would not touch her? Maybe *he* was looking away, maybe *he* was gone? It was said by some that he took the form of a human, so maybe he was as short-lived as that kind and had died? While one part of her mind was so foolishly wishful, another part reasoned that something like *him* would not die and would not be caught with his guard down.

Then came the communication.

Though couched perfectly in the language of the yig channels, the Mother knew its source to be alien. Tracing back through the undersphere to its source, she felt a moment of pure dread. *Him?*

*But the Misunderstanding?* was the essence of her reply.

*He* explained, and she felt a sudden overwhelming joy.

She once again detached her consolidated kernel for over-sphere travel and fell away from her main nest. Clawing through vacuum between asteroidal debris until she found clear space, she dropped into the undersphere. Yes, she had always felt that humans must pay for the deaths of her children and the other deaths sure to come, and pay, and pay. However, this was different, this was *personal*.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kelly gazed at the images displayed in the viewing cylinder. The two probes showed the world ahead to be beautiful, warm and burgeoning with life. Bands of forest rimmed the continents, enclosing prairies and mountain ranges. Vast herds of grazing beasts, sometimes tens of miles across, were visible in flowing patterns across the prairies, cutting swathes of brown through the green. One close view showed a predator—some kind of massive reptile standing up on its hind legs-bringing down one of these grazing beasts. It was just a microcosm of the huge ebb and flow of life spread across the landmasses.

The oceans seemed equally as bountiful. Shoals of fish spumed the sea across areas as large as those landward herds. Giant cetaceans hunted and played, enormous sharks the color of polished copper cruised shorelines swamped by either basking amphibians or swimming mammals come ashore to mate

and lay eggs.

Birds and flying reptiles swirled across the sky. Tropical seas gleamed sapphire. Snowcapped peaks glistened pure white. Salmon leaped in a million miles of clean rivers. It all looked so wonderfully natural, an untouched paradise.

"Do you even begin to comprehend the kind of engineering involved in creating something like that?" enquired Olsen. "If it *is* engineered," said Elizabeth dismissively. "Tell me about the engineering," said Slome. "Think of the migratory patterns—it all has to be programmed in. Not only has life been created down there from base genetic imprints, it's been programmed to integrate into the entire artificial environment. And you know, there's things down there that went extinct back on Terra and others that simply never existed."

"Then perhaps they were here before any engineering commenced," suggested Elizabeth, playing her preferred devil's advocate role.

"No, you see, they're suited to their environment." "Precisely." Elizabeth was triumphant. Olsen shook his head at her and turned to Slome. "Everything down there is suited to that environment. Yet, unless a lot of Markovian records are wrong, that environment was a lot colder about three hundred years ago."

"Go on," said Slome, his eyes narrowing.

"This world is not where it's supposed to be—it's much closer to the sun."

Elizabeth barked a laugh. "So, this immortal superbeing is also capable of moving worlds? I think it more likely that initial Markovian studies were inaccurate and that inaccuracy was simply copied."

Olsen shrugged. "That's always possible."

Kelly continued gazing at the images and compared what she was seeing to the incompleteness of many Collective worlds, where near-Terran environments were maintained by gas extraction and fixing plants, the importation of essential minerals from elsewhere, the resowing of certain biologicals, the endless war against alien biologicals—whole industries working to prevent, in human terms, planetary ecological collapse. This world, though, seemed to function perfectly. There was no sign of atmosphere plants or any other support technology—no sign, in fact, of any technology at all... until Traviss spoke.

"I've found something," he said.

The images in the cylinder blurred for a moment, then settled on a high view of a coastline. Traviss focused in by stages, each time allowing the ship's computers to clean up the image presented. The final image was of an estuary where a river cut down into a wide blue bay. On one side of the estuary, on a blunt peninsula, it seemed evident that there was a large building of some kind. Squinting, Kelly was also sure she could make out a jetty with what appeared to be a large twin-hulled boat moored beside it, projecting from a rocky shore just beside a white sand beach.

"Someone living down there?" wondered Slome.

Kelly shivered. The *Owner!*

"I'm getting stuff in infrared and some other EMR," said Traviss. "Nothing substantial, but it does seem likely there's someone down there."

"Can you give us a closer view?" Slome asked.

"If I do, we'll lose this probe-it won't have enough fuel to pull up again."

"Do so."

They all stood watching as the probe obviously headed in a course out to sea and down, the view flicking back to the building and clarifying intermittently. The image shuddered for a little while as the probe's stabilizers failed to compensate for its decelerating burn as it curved around and headed back in. Kelly felt both a growing excitement and trepidation, but really did not know what she expected to see. The final views in the probe's life were clear, and puzzling; something so prosaic in so unusual a location. Nestled in rocky slopes scattered with gnarled trees was a large building, a house, something like the kind of place the Markovians might have used as a country retreat. It was sprawling, fashioned of the surrounding stone, with turrets and towers rising here and there, red tiles on the roofs and many baroquely shaped windows. Tracks led down from it to the shore, to some wooden buildings from which a jetty projected out into the sea. Moored next to the jetty was a large catamaran. As the probe sank down toward the sea, she was sure she could discern a figure sitting on the jetty.

"That last image," said Slome. "Can you repeat it and clean it up?"

Traviss complied, and they all gazed at a human figure—difficult to tell if it was male or female—sitting on the jetty, fishing—and waving, too. No one seemed able to say anything about that—it all just seemed too incongruous. They had arrived at a world that had been under interdict for longer than any of them had been alive because it was owned by some dangerous being... then this.

"Give us that first orbital view again," said Slome.

Once again they gazed down from upon high.

Slome pointed. "On the other side of the estuary, the forest comes nearly down to the shore. On the side where the house lies, it's hilly for a few miles back before leveling into prairie—that's one of the few areas where forest doesn't cover the land to the rear of the shore."

"No coincidence, I would suggest," said Elizabeth, now somehow subdued.

"No," said Slome. He turned and checked each face in turn. "I suggest we land on that prairie—as close to the house as we can get. Then I suggest we go and see who is living there."

"Is that a good idea?" wondered Kelly.

"I don't know. However, what I *do* know is that once this ship is down, we'll not be able to take it back up again, and I do know that the *Lenin* is not far behind us and will almost certainly land near to us. A Doctrinaire and the Guard will come looking for us. If we were to land anywhere else, our only choice would be to run, and keep on running. There"—he stabbed a finger at the projection—"some alternative might lie open to us."

"The Owner might save us," said Elizabeth flatly.

"Or we might be bringing the Guard down on an innocent lone settler," said Kelly.

Slome shook his head. "No one is innocent. Haven't you been reading your Committee dictates?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The *Breznev* headed toward the world tail first, poised on the bright flare of its main drive. Behind the half hemisphere of the thrust plate and the conglomeration of fuel tanks, reactor, lithium pellet injectors,

and ignition lasers lay the drive penny for the U-space engines. Beyond this stretched a long reinforced framework holding an access tunnel from the now stationary spin section—a cylinder eighty feet wide and a hundred feet long—inside which the escapees were being crushed into acceleration chairs. Next along from the spin section was the giant brick of the storage section and holds, capped off by the heavy reentry shield and underslung reentry plate. The ship left an ionized trail past the world's single cratered moon, the four big reaction thrusters positioned at the four corners of the frame holding the spin section belching chemical flame to force the ship into an inward curve.

Further brighter ionization in the world's disperse exosphere sketched the vessel's course around the world and deeper toward the thermosphere. When its speed reached a predetermined level, the main drive cut out and the thrusters flared again, turning the ship nose to tail to present its reentry shield to the steadily thickening air. The flip-over had its usual effect internally, and clamping down on her churning guts, Kelly knew the vomit vacuums would again be required. Explosive bolts blew, clamps detached, especially weakened structural members broke where they were supposed to, and the entire drive section detached, small steering thrusters slightly altering its course to throw it into orbit around the world. Landing with a U-space engine and fusion reactor had never been an option.

The reentry shield smoked as its layer of soft ceramic began baking hard. It soon began to emit a dull red glow. Then fire flared out and back from it, enclosing the ship, podlike. It hurtled down, planing on fire. Then the thrusters adjusted its course to bring it down on the underslung reentry plate and steadily began firing to slow the ship even further. As the ship penetrated cloud, sealed containers positioned all around the spin section opened like buds to spew parachutes. Using a combination of these and the big thrusters, the ship descended on prairie, scattering herds of buffalo, and one herd of unicorns. Grass fires ignited underneath as it finally began to settle, but they were short-lived, for this vegetation was spring green. With a final whump and a settling of parachutes all around, the *Breznev* was down.

Her fingers digging into the arms of her acceleration chair, Kelly thought about the logistics of relaunch and knew that the *Breznev* would never be leaving this world. And she vowed to become part of the earth here rather than be subject to strouding by those who would soon be coming here after them.

The gas content of the air was breathable, but it might be packed with lethal microbes and biotoxins. They had no way of analyzing the air and there weren't enough spacesuits to go around, and no one wanted to walk out there in the cumbersome things anyway. No one wanted to stay in the ship—not when seeming freedom awaited outside. Kelly was damned if she was going to wait until Slome and the others came to a decision about what to do next. While they squabbled, she collected all her stuff in a shoulder bag, including her Sancha carbine and her father's antique sidearm, and headed for the airlock leading into the storage and cargo section. "Not inclined to debate, SA Haden?"

Standing below the ladder leading up to the airlock, Kelly turned to gaze at Longshank. He was carrying a large backpack, wore some large walking boots in addition to his usual attire, and carried his notepad clipped to his belt.

"Staying inside this ship is not an option—if something out there kills me, I would rather have that happen than wait here for one of the Guard to fit me with a stroud."

"My thoughts precisely. Anyway, this Owner-constructed world seems eminently human-habitable. Maybe we'll pick up a few bugs along the way, but I doubt there's anything out there we can't handle in usual immune-response way." "You seem very confident." "No-resigned."

Kelly mounted the ladder and climbed, stepped up onto the platform, and hit the door control as Longshank stepped up behind her. They crammed into the airlock together, and after Longshank closed the first door, Kelly opened the second door leading into the forward cargo section of the ship. It opened

with a slight hiss of pressure differential. Kelly clamped her nose and blew until her ears popped.

"There's an ATV packed away in here," she said while stepping out onto the next platform. She breathed carefully, wondering if anything would affect her right away, since they were now breathing the air of this world, the cargo section being vented to the outside.

"Let's walk," suggested Longshank.

"Where?"

"Where else?"

Many of the pressure-sealed crates in the section were open, their food contents all used up during the trip here. Other crates, once containing a cargo of freeze-dried ration packs destined for a Collective space station, were also empty. Kelly felt a pang of hunger, but it quickly passed—it had been some days since she felt really hungry. They moved past other sealed crates and Kelly hit the control to lower the loading ramp. Its locks clumped open and slowly it began to descend, exposing painfully bright blue sky. It finally hit down on vivid green dotted with blue and pink flowers. The intensity of light and color hurt her eyes, but seemed to balm something behind them.

"Come on." Longshank led the way out.

To their right, the silvery material of a parachute rippled in a soft caressing breeze. Longshank pointed to where trees dotted a distant slope. "Just beyond there—a few hills, a bit of a trudge."

As they walked through the thigh-high grass, birds racketed into the sky to scold them and, on one occasion, a large flightless bird leapt up from a nest full of brown-speckled eggs and charged away hooting in indignation. On the slope, the vegetation was shorter—the grass cropped down by some animal and large areas covered by mosses or mats of low-growing vines. Kelly stared at the first squat tree they came to and recognized the green orbs it bore as walnuts. Higher on the slope, there were almond and olive trees and others she did not recognize.

Weariness soon set in, and Longshank's "bit of a trudge" became a growing struggle until the splashing of a stream attracted them to a hollow.

"Shall we?" Longshank enquired.

The water tasted delicious and afterward they ate some of the walnuts, even though they were unripe. An eagle soared above, and short-eared rabbits scattered and observed them from ridges. Eventually they hit a track, and, in dry mud, Kelly observed the impressions of the soles of boots little different from the kind she was wearing. The track wound down through a sparse scattering of trees, beyond which she could see the multiple roofs of the house they had observed from orbit, and terminated against an ironwork gate set into a hedge of copper birch. Something like a chrome spider was working along the hedge far to their right, pruning it back with multiple gleaming pincers. A simple latch admitted them to perfect lawns and rose gardens.

"Well, hello," said a man, standing up from inspecting a large red rose. "Goodness me, I haven't had any visitors here in what"—he turned to gaze at a huge gnarled oak standing within its own circular border in the middle of one of the lawns—"well, since I planted that."

"Are you the Owner," said Longshank.

The man, a stocky gray-haired individual with a deep tan and eyes like green chips of glass, gazed about himself for a moment. "I guess so... sort of."

\* \* \* \* \*

Slome gazed about himself, the tightness in his guts increasing, then peered back at the loading ramp as he heard the sound of an electric motor. The ATV-basically an aluminum box able to hold six people and some cargo, suspended on four independent rubber wheels-rolled down onto the grass. Now that it was down, the fifty escapees began unloading supplies and placing them in makeshift packs. Slome turned from the scene and peered down at the notescreeen Traviss was holding, which was displaying a map of the area. He tapped a finger against forest just back from the peninsula on this side of the estuary.

"There, I think," he said. "If they head toward the estuary they could end up trapped against it by the Guard."

"Peerkin said the same," Traviss replied, adding, "They've voted him temporary leader, what with his experience of wild environments."

"Good. They need to go deep and keep under cover-we'll update them on whatever happens at the house and warn them if they need to run."

"They'll probably run when the *Lenin* comes down anyway."

Slome nodded.

"So it'll be me, you, Elizabeth, and Olsen in the ATV. Anyone else?"

"No, we'll need the space for Haden and Longshank if we have to run."

Slome was all too aware that that might be the case. Why would this "Owner," supposing him able, want to help them anyway? He had deliberately remained out of contact with the human race for longer than living memory, and, though initially human himself, was supposedly no longer of that kind. Why had the Owner allowed them, and the *Lenin*, through? Maybe the Owner no longer existed, maybe the individual they had seen from the probe was someone who had come here in the intervening time?

"We're ready," Elizabeth called.

He glanced over and saw that the steps were now folded down from the ATV and the others were climbing aboard. Snatching up his pack, he ambled over and boarded, too, taking the seat saved for him by Elizabeth behind the driver, Traviss. They headed away, leaving the other escapees to grab up what they could and head for the hideaway in the forest. Traviss accelerated the vehicle through the tall grass and soon hit the slope, navigating fast amid the trees and obviously enjoying himself. It took them very little time to come upon a track and within sight of the house.

"Take us around to the front," said Slome upon seeing the hedge.

Traviss took them around, then down beside a stream, up through an orchard, then onto another track. Visible through the apricot trees to their left was an arch, to which they headed. This led into a stone courtyard. Traviss parked the ATV before steps leading up to a heavy wooden door. Even as they climbed out of the vehicle, the door began opening and a man stepped out.

"Hello and welcome," he said.

Slome studied the man and thought he looked just too damned ordinary to be this "Owner."

"I have some of your fellows here already," the man said. "Come in. Are you hungry?"



The others looked to Slome for guidance and, after a moment, he led the way up the steps and held out his hand. "Slome Terl. My companions"—he gestured at each in turn—"are my daughter, Elizabeth, Olsen Marcos, and Traviss Painter. Who might you be?" A rough calloused hand and a strong grip—the hand of a laborer. The Owner? It seemed unlikely.

The question seemed to puzzle the man for a moment, then he said, "Call me Mark—that would be best, I think."

"Are you the Owner?" asked Elizabeth, somewhat querulously, Slome thought.

Mark grinned. "You could say that, and you would be both right and wrong." Now he looked up. "Are these with you, too?"

Slome abruptly gazed up into cerulean sky, but for a moment he could see nothing. Then, the flare of steering thrusters.

"No," said Slome. "That is the *Lenin-a*. Collective ship containing those who intend to either kill or enslave us. Can you help? Because if you cannot, we had best start running now."

"Oh, I can help," said Mark. He looked up again. "Seems they have a shuttle."

Again, Slome could see nothing for a moment or two. Then he was able to discern a brief glint departing the position of the steering flame and the vague darkness of the *Lenin*. His eyes weren't bad—he'd recently had an optic nerve cellular stimulation and corneal cleaning—he should in fact be able to see better than anyone else here.

"You have good vision," he commented.

"Positively omniscient," Mark replied. "Do come in."

He led the way into a well-lit entry hall, floored in polished wood and surrounded by statues carved from the native stone. Slome recognized only one of them: the legendary beauty Alison Markovian. From the hall, he took them through double doors into a plushly furnished living area.

"Ancient Earth," said Olsen. "I think."

Slome's gaze fell on Haden and Longshank, who were standing by an oval table before the window, steadily working their way through bowls piled with food. On the table there were platters heaped with comestibles. As the smell reached his nostrils, his stomach immediately rumbled and his mouth started watering.

"Help yourself," said Mark.

"Thank you." Slome led the way over to the table. He wanted to say something to Haden and Longshank, but that want was secondary to his hunger. They all quickly tucked in, and when a small amount of food in Slome's shrunken stomach satisfied his hunger, he finally turned to them.

"You didn't wait for a decision," he said.

"Decision about what?" Kelly asked. "About whether or not to stay at the ship and wait for a Doctrinaire to come along and scrub our brains?"

Slome nodded, turning to glance over his shoulder and note that the man, Mark, had left the room. "What have you learned about him?"

"Very little. He's been here a long time, or so he claims, but he's equivocating about whether or not he's the Owner."

"With us, too, but he says he can help us."

"Do you think him capable of helping us?" Elizabeth interjected. "I've seen no evidence here that he can do anything about the Guard, and that shuttle will be here soon."

Slome shook his head. He didn't know what to think.

Kelly shrugged. "Despite his equivocation, I trust him. I don't know why."

"And on that basis we should risk ending up under the stroud?"

Olsen now said, "I've told you all what would be involved in creating something like this world. The Guard should be no threat to someone that capable."

\* \* \* \* \*

In the viewing cylinder, Astanger watched the shuttle descending toward the incongruous house on the planet below. Shrad had taken fifteen of the Guard with him, and, perhaps sensing Astanger's intentions, had set the rest patrolling or guarding the most critical areas of the ship—twenty of them were here on the bridge, ever watchful, their damaged minds rendered incapable of suffering boredom. Two of them stood behind each of the crew and four of them were standing watch about the weapons system controls—those consoles now abandoned by Chadrick, the weapons officer.

Now, having flown into low orbit to drop the shuttle, it was time to move the *Lenin* back out. Astanger turned to his bridge crew.

"Okay, bring us out," he instructed.

"Where to?" enquired Citizen Grade, the helmsman.

"Precisely to where Doctrinaire Shrad instructed us to wait: the Lagrange point between this world and its moon." He shot a glance at the two of the Guard standing behind him, then at the two standing behind Grade, and observed them studying the course alterations the man made. Were they even capable of knowing what he was doing? Of course they were. On many occasions, he had taken the opportunity to speak to some of them. Though devoid of any social ability or any understanding of plain conversation, they were intelligent and focused in other almost-enviable ways. They were good little robots.

And they were an atrocity.

Since Astanger had started questioning *everything*, he'd also started questioning his inculcated hatred and contempt of the Markovians. Shrad's Guard had all once been Markovians, and since Shrad had boastfully mentioned this only a little while ago, Astanger had begun to recognize the bone structure and features of those he had been taught to hate. Now he didn't hate them, just felt a huge sadness and pity, but he *did* hate Shrad. What the man had done, what the Committee had done, had nothing to do with social engineering, nothing to do with making a better world, nothing to do with *doctrine*. Shrad and his kind were rulers who were substantially less restrained about how they used their power than the Markovians had been. Astanger's disgust for Shrad and his kind was only exceeded by his self-disgust.

As his men bent to their task, Astanger, with a bitterness in his mouth, returned his attention to his controls and tried to concentrate on what he had been doing before. In the cylinder, he pulled up a view of the moon. It was a cratered monster over two thousand miles in diameter, and only after scanning the

planet below had Astanger now turned his attention to it. As yet no evidence of technology had been picked up, but there was something odd about the astrogation data that just kept on niggling at him, so, barring some opportunity to disarm the Guard aboard his ship and then incinerate Shrad's shuttle on its return journey, he focused on that sphere.

Now under drive again, the *Lenin* headed for the Lagrange still point. The Guard, Astanger noted, seemed rooted to the deck despite the sideways drag of acceleration. On his screens, he decided to call up Markovian data on this sector of space, despite the watchful eyes behind him. Very quickly, he found the first discrepancy: the world wasn't in the right place. He felt a surge of awe, then immediately told himself not to be stupid—the data were obviously wrong. Then another glaring error became evident. According to the Markovians, this world should not even have a moon. He speculated about the possibility of it being recently captured in orbit and thus also repositioning the world, but that didn't gel. If such a thing had happened between the time these data were recorded and now, there would be huge volcanic activity below and other massive damage. Nothing like that was evident. But he realized that all this had nothing to do with what was niggling him.

Astanger called up the astrogation data again and kept on going through it. He gazed at the position of the Lagrange point, and suddenly realized what was bothering him: it was too close to the moon. Now calling up data on a similar orbital setup within the Collective, he confirmed this, then began to make his own calculations. The moon, he soon realized, must mass considerably less than a sphere of rock over two thousand miles across should mass, and yet, the data they had gathered on it showed it to be precisely that.

Abruptly, he canceled out the data on his screens, then just called up prosaic stuff about their current trajectory. He leaned back and considered some possibilities. Either the scanners were malfunctioning—a not unusual occurrence under Collective rule—or that moon was definitely not what it appeared to be.

He reckoned that it was hollow. He also reckoned that Doctrinaire Shrad might be heading for a rude awakening. He smiled to himself at the prospect, which seemed the best he could hope for. Then the U-signature detection alarm wiped the smile from his face, and horror bloomed in his chest as the ship's scanners automatically redirected, and displayed the source of that signal in the viewing cylinder.

A Grazen dreadnought had just arrived.

\* \* \* \* \*

Doctrinaire Shrad crouched behind the perfectly manicured rose bed and watched his men close in on either side of the window, then, raising his thumb telescope to his eye, he observed those inside—clicking up the light amplification since the greenish yellow sun was now setting and stars were beginning to blink into view on the far horizon.

What were they doing in there, having a party? He had already seen Slome Terl standing near the window picking at a plate of food while talking to the traitor Kelly Haden. It had to be some kind of trap. They must have seen his shuttle coming in to land and known that justice was snapping at their heels. He lowered his telescope. And what about this place?

Shrad could not quite equate the massive technology of those constructs they had passed while heading into "Owner Space" with this house. He'd thought long and hard about what he had read in secret Collective records and come to some conclusions. Though it was doctrine that those structures were the product of a previous collective from ancient Earth, he was of a sufficiently high rank to know the truth. There had been an Owner who once had contact with the Markovians—though details were sketchy

since many records had been destroyed during the "transition of power"—and during the recent "victorious conflict" with Grazen, those "posts" had damaged and repelled human vessels and destroyed Grazen wormships. However, nothing had been heard about the Owner for longer than living memory. It struck him as likely that though the being had once existed, he or it did not exist now. The action of the posts? Automated systems that were obviously breaking down. He surmised that during the "transition of power," some high-ranking Markovians had fled out this way and managed to get to this world during some periodic malfunction of the posts. This residence looked distinctly Markovian—like one of those country retreats where Shrad had obtained the base material of his Guard.

Shrad smiled to himself. If he could capture some high-ranking Markovians that could be put on trial, the Committee would be much more inclined to send a rescue ship and their "resources are presently unavailable" and their "tactical requirements do not permit" would probably change. Also, his discovery about the malfunctioning of the posts opened up massive new territories to the Collective.

"We are in position," Citizen One of the Guard informed him through his earpiece.

"Commence action—I repeat: subdue and restrain them. Do not, I repeat, do not kill any of them, even in the likelihood of losing Guard strength."

Raising his thumb telescope again, he now observed one of the Guard beside the window slap something against the glass, then lower his breather mask over his face. The blast disintegrated the window, and the men to either side now tossed in flash and gas grenades. After the subsequent detonations, and while numb-smoke belched from the house, the fifteen Guard piled inside. Shrad waited for a moment, but though he heard shouting from inside, there was no shooting. He stood, and, pulling his own breather mask up into place, drew his sidearm and headed over.

Broken glass crunched underfoot. The table had been tipped to one side and food and dishes spilled across a carpet patterned with geometric shapes. Kelly Haden was still fighting, but three of the Guard had her pinned and were cuffing her hands behind her back. Slome Terl just lay there, fighting for breath. All six of the figures on the floor wore disheveled gray-wear modified in ways that would be a stroudable political offense in themselves. All six, then, were escapees—there had to be others here.

Abruptly, Shrad realized that the smoke was clearing. He glanced up to see it being drawn away into holes in the ceiling-interspersed between the inset lights that were now slowly growing brighter as it grew darker outside-then returned his attention to the captives as the Guard hauled them up onto their knees. He holstered his sidearm.

"Seven of you, search the rest of this place and bring here anyone you find—stay in contact," he instructed.

Seven departed, but the eight remaining were certainly enough to keep under control the patently subdued captives. The smoke had now all but cleared—it had a short active life anyway—so Shrad removed his mask. He sniffed at the burnt hair smell, realizing it came from where the flash grenades had seared the carpet. Then he strode forward to stand before the six kneeling figures.

"Did you think the Collective would allow its Societal Assets to escape?" he enquired.

None said anything.

"You, Kelly Haden, you betrayed the Collective, stole its property, and, as I understand it, you killed two of the Guard."

Haden shrugged and looked away. Shrad gave a muted nod to the guard standing beside her, who

stooped and drove the butt of his carbine into her stomach. She groaned and went down with her forehead on the carpet.

"It strikes me as evident that your obvious external ugliness reflects the ugliness inside you," said Shrad.

"Fuck... you... and your little robots," she managed.

Shrad nodded to himself. "Under Collective authority, I have a choice about what I should do with you. For the murder you committed, the sentence should be death, but I have the leeway to make my own decisions in this matter." He nodded to the Guard. "Stroud her."

One of the Guard hauled her up by the hair while another righted the table and placed a case on the surface, which he opened to reveal twenty strouds lying in the foam packing like a collection of steel prosthetic feet for birds. He took out one of these and placed it in a programming slate—these strouds needing to be prepared as had been the one Shrad had instructed to be placed on the *Lenin's* engineer.

"Going to help us!" spat Elizabeth Terl somewhat hysterically, gazing beyond Shrad.

Slome Terl bowed his head, a look of pain on his face. Shrad turned and saw four of his Guard returning, leading a man into the room—his hands cuffed behind his back.

"Put him with the rest," he instructed. "Is there anyone else?"

"We have found no one else yet, but there is still much to search," replied Citizen Five of the Guard.

"Very well. You four remain here." Shrad now watched as the man was brought over and forced to his knees beside Haden. "Who are you?" he finally asked.

"My name is Mark," the man replied calmly.

Shrad felt a sense of victory upon hearing the name. In the back of his mind, he had held the suspicion that his reasoning about this house might have been at fault. Now he felt sure he was right.

"Mark as in Markovian, I've no doubt," he said. "How did you come to be here?"

"Well, my mother met my father—"

Shrad gave that muted nod and a carbine butt smacked across the man's mouth. He went over, spitting blood, and remained there until hauled back up onto his knees again.

"Was there any need for that?"

"There was." Shrad turned to the guard who had now prepared the first stroud. "Go ahead."

The guard walked over as two others restrained Haden. Abruptly the man, Mark, burst out laughing.

"I fail to see the reason for your amusement," said Shrad.

"Oh, I'm just amused at the rather crude technology. Do you honestly think your Collective will survive after lobotomizing most of its citizens? Do you honestly think its economy and whole social structure could survive your coming attack on the Grazen? Though of course, that's not something you'll find out about, since the Grazen will stop playing their waiting game... just like the one that's coming here."

"Explain yourself."

"Gladly. Your social system is bankrupt and bound to fail. The Grazen withdrew to their heartlands to await that failure, since it would have been less costly to them than continuing to fight you. Now that they have seen that the Collective is about to attack again, they'll come out fighting, and this time they won't be sending those insentient and easily mass-manufactured wormships."

"How do you know all this?"

"I'm the Owner-haven't you figured that out."

The others were now looking at the man with something approaching hope. Shrad felt another sudden doubt of his earlier reasoning. Maybe this man did have some power and, if so, Shrad must clamp down on it fast. The man looked human enough, so a bullet in the brain would soon solve any problem he might cause. And there was also that "crude technology." Perhaps that was the better option-even stroued, the man could still stand trial for his crimes against the collective will. The Committee much preferred to put those before the cameras who said what they were told to say.

"You are Markovian scum and a liar. Now tell me about the Grazen coming here."

The man shrugged. "They normally keep away. We had a bit of a misunderstanding about a thousand years ago... or rather they misunderstood what I meant when I said no, keep out, these star systems are mine. I thought I put it to them quite clearly, but apparently not."

"It's a good act, Markovian, but you're on your knees with broken teeth."

"Yeah, bastard that."

"You were saying?"

"Oh yeah... well, they normally keep out, but the one whose nest you passed on the way in here lost all her children on the nursery world in the bombardment you instigated. She's not happy-especially now that the Collective is preparing to attack again. I rather think she would like to have you all screaming in her shig-ware."

"You babble."

Even so, Shrad removed his communicator from his belt and opened a channel to the shuttle uplink.

"Citizen Astanger-report."

After a short delay: "Tell your fucking Guard to let us get out of here! And tell them to let Citizen Chadrick back to his weapons console!"

"Give me your situation."

"Sitting here with our thumbs up our arses watching a Grazen dreadnought approach. It's already fired a ranging shot."

"Where would you go, given the opportunity to run?"

"Down to where you are. If we stay out here, we're dead!"

The communicator was slippery in his palm and he felt someone trying to wind his insides around a stick. This should not, could not, be happening.

"Put me on... general address," he managed.

"You're on."

"Guard-" Could this be some sort of ploy by Astanger? No, Astanger would have called him first. "Guard, allow Citizen Chadrick back to the weapons console and allow Citizen Astanger to move the *Lenin* out of danger. Astanger, I will keep this channel open-keep me informed of events."

"Oh yes, like I'm going to have time for that!"

Shrad lowered the communicator and clipped it back on his belt. This Mark had *known*, and the Markovians had never been above using additional cerebral wiring—it was from the remaining files on that technology that Collective Social Assets had managed to work out how to make strouds. What else could the man control, influence? He turned and pointed.

"Use the stroud on him! Now!"

From his knees, Mark launched himself to his feet, but the Guard brought him down.

"Keep that fucking thing away from me!" he bellowed.

Shrad smiled. He had correctly understood what was happening here; this man was not the Owner, but just some Markovian refugee. He fought, but soon the stroud was in place and he was kicking on the floor, his face clenched up in agony as blood ran from underneath the device. Shrad stepped past him.

"So, you see your all-powerful Owner." He gestured dismissively to the prostrate form. "Now, I can find them of course, but I want you to tell me where the rest of the escapees are. Obviously I don't want to waste societal assets, but I will have each of you strouded in turn if you do not tell me."

"Did your father fuck your mother up the arse to produce you?" asked Haden.

Shrad sighed, then gave the nod to the guard beside her.

Nothing happened.

He gave the nod again, but the guard seemed to not be paying attention.

"Strike her," he instructed.

The guard lifted his carbine and gazed down at it, then looked up at Shrad. Tears were pouring from the man's eyes.

Abruptly he went down on his knees and slowly bowed his head.

*What?*

A clattering, then the sound of bodies hitting the floor. Two of the Guard had collapsed. Another two went over even as he watched. Others were sinking to their knees like the first, or just suddenly finding somewhere to sit down. Some were crying, others grinning idiotically.

"It is, actually, not a crude technology at all. The Markovians obtained it from the Grazen, who, though they would not admit to it, obtained it from an excavation of some ruins left by those I called the jelly people—they were okay, but tended to be a bit impetuous. Anyway, I needed to see one of your strouds from the inside to be sure of the structure. I've U-transmitted the signal now, so that every single strouded human being in the Collective just woke up to what has been done to them or, if the damage is too severe, died."

It felt to Shrad as if ice was forming down his spine. He reached down, drew his sidearm, turned. The man, Mark, was on his feet facing him. Shrad fired once, the bullet snapping the man's skull back and blowing its contents out behind him. The head slowly swung forward again. One eye was missing.

"And that completes the deal," said Mark.

Shrad shot him four more times, the shots smashing into the man's chest and knocking him staggering back. Mark grinned. Then his legs gave way and he slumped to the floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Astanger secured his strap as the *Lenin* turned hard. The sound of the ship's guns impinged-an accelerating drone-and the power drain momentarily dimmed the lighting.

*What happened to the Guard?*

Some of them had just collapsed where they stood. One of those nearest him, a woman, was crouching beside a console, clinging with both hands, her weapon abandoned on the floor and sliding away from her. Her expression was one of horrified amazement, yet someone strouded usually didn't show emotion. Another, over near where Chadrick had taken position at the weapons console, was kneeling, his carbine propped upright before him. He seemed to be crying.

No matter. It might be that the *Lenin* would not even survive the next few minutes, so the condition of those aboard would cease to be of relevance. Again came the detonation of something that got too close before the guns took it out. The ship shuddered and smoke began crawling through the air from the bridge exit.

"It's going to be a hard reentry!" shouted Grade over the racket.

"Go to earpieces and mikes," said Astanger.

"Okay-I'm on," replied Grade.

"We've still got to drop velocity."

"Yup."

As they slowed into atmosphere, they would become a much easier target for the pursuing alien vessel, but Astanger knew that out in space the *Lenin* would end up smeared across the vacuum. Collective ships had encountered these dreadnoughts on a few occasions and been destroyed almost out of hand.

The *Lenin* began shaking, and Astanger recognized the muted but growing roar of atmosphere. Inertial forces tried to drag him out of his chair as the ship flipped nose-to-tail. He saw a member of the Guard slam into the ceiling above, then lost sight of him in smoke. Someone was shrieking, short jerky shrieks like those you might hear in an asylum, not from anyone in pain. A body slammed down with a wet crunch nearby, then smeared blood across the floor as deceleration dragged it away. Grade had gone for a full emergency landing: not dumping the drive section, but decelerating down toward the planet on the drive flame.

"Will you bring us down close to the *Breznev*?" Astanger inquired.

"Within a few miles of it-if we don't get hit on the way down," Grade replied.

"Chadrick-status?"



"It seems to be holding off, I don't know why."

*I do, thought Astanger. If it destroys the Lenin, then we all die. The Grazen wants us alive to play with. I wonder how long-*

"Captain!" Chadrick shouted.

*What now, some weapon he can't stop?* Astanger knew that Chadrick must be in considerable emotional distress to use the old politically incorrect title, even if the Guard were down.

"What is it, Chadrick," he said calmly.

"The moon... look at the moon."

What?

Astanger cleared the pursuing alien vessel from the viewing cylinder and trained the ship's scanners on the moon, and then just stared in shock, even though he had known there was something odd about that satellite. There was a line drawing across the surface, longitudinally. It flickered—an arrow-straight firestorm. On one side of the line was the surface he had earlier viewed, on the other side... on the other side was something else. He saw massive pylons, steel plains, and valleys cutting through either buildings or clustered monolithic machines, transmission or reception dishes the size of calderas, giant throats glimmering with lights and webworks of scaffold, ships bigger than anything he had ever seen gathered in frameworks like bullets in an ammunition clip. It was impossible to take in the vast complexity of it all. The moon was obviously some vast vessel or station.

Owner space?

Yeah, now he knew for certain why it remained so. Whoever had constructed this thing possessed more resources, more plain unadulterated power, than entire galactic civilizations.

But how did it affect them, right now, aboard the *Lenin*? It didn't. If they didn't get down to the surface of that planet soon, they would be dead. Moon or otherwise.

"Keep your scanners focused on the Grazen, Chadrick," said Astanger. Then switching to general address, he said, "When we're down, I want someone to break open the weapons locker. We grab what we can and we get out—that ship will be on us in minutes."

"What about... the Guard?" inquired Chadrick.

"What about them?"

"I... I don't know."

"We ignore them." Astanger took a steady breath. The G-forces were high now and it was becoming difficult to talk. "Something's got to them... through their strouds... maybe some Grazen... viral weapon."

The muted roar had now become a full-throated one. And the ship was shuddering around them. The Guard were probably irrelevant, since anyone not strapped in an acceleration chair when they began their descent was probably either dead now or suffering from multiple fractures. Maybe he and his crew should be merciful and kill them on the way out. No, they wouldn't have the time.

Blackout.

When consciousness began to fade back in, Astanger realized that the roaring he could hear now was only from the engines. He felt the pressure rapidly dropping away from him. Judging by the pull of gravity, the ship was coming down at a steep angle. This was going to be bad. The *Lenin* settled with an almighty crash and the drive cut out. Then, with an awful creaking and groaning, the ship toppled and slammed down flat on whatever it had landed on. The impact flung Astanger sideways in his chair, but the side padding absorbed most of the shock. He was now sideways to the pull of gravity. Peering down to the bottom of the spin section, he saw a tangle of bodies, blood, and some exposed broken bone where the Guard had ended up. Some of them had landed on Citizen Breen—Astrogation—but she seemed okay because she was pushing them away and unstrapping herself. She climbed through the tangled mass over to the spin-section controls and hit the step-motor button. The section shuddered and began to turn, and she walked around with it. Step by step it brought sets of acceleration chairs down to ground level, and the crew unstrapped. Astanger released himself from his chair last and eyed the bodies that had tumbled around like stones in a polisher. A few of them were still breathing. One was bubbling blood from her mouth and muttering.

"Okay, let's get out of here."

Those from Engineering had broken open the weapons locker and, when Astanger arrived, were passing out carbines, sidearms, and loading up two shoulder-held missile launchers.

"Should we get food?" enquired someone.

"No time," Astanger replied.

The loading ramp was nearly underneath the ship, but its hydraulics managed to lift the cargo section enough for them to crawl out. Outside, a pall of smoke obscured much, and the ground was blackened and in places still burning. Checking a notescreen map and positional indicator, Astanger led the way toward where the *Breznev* was down, and toward where that house lay. After a few hundred yards, light penetrated-reflected from that awesome terrible moon as it breached the horizon-then a breeze began sweeping the pall aside to reveal a nightmare perhaps a mile to their left.

The Grazen ship.

The thing possessed no aerodynamics, no recognizable engine or drive section, nothing remotely equatable with human technology. It was a loose tangle of meter-wide pipes, the color of charred bone, nearly half a mile across. Within this tangle was a nacreous and vaguely spherical core. Some of the pipes, their mouths open to the air, were moving as if questing for the scent of something. Astanger had a fair idea what they were searching for.

"No-keep moving." He slapped an engineering assistant on the back as the man raised and aimed the missile launcher at the ship. "You'll only attract its attention."

But what was "it"? Was he talking about the ship itself or what it contained? He'd seen pictures of organic fragments from destroyed nests, but there were so many different kinds of those that no Collective Societal Asset had managed to put together an entire Grazen. He had little idea of what they actually looked like, how big they were—anything, really. The Collective described them as alien maggots-but that description was politically motivated and predicated on charred evidence gathered from the bombed nursery world.

"Keep moving."

Surely their luck could not hold for much longer.

It didn't.

A sound issued from the ship—the sighing groan of caves. Astanger glanced back at it and saw some of those pipes inclining toward the ground, coming together, then leveling so that he could see straight down their throats.

"You two! Hit that!" he shouted at the two carrying the missile launchers.

Both of them turned and went down on one knee, their shoulder launchers bucking. There was something coming down the pipes as the four missiles struck. Red fire bloomed, spraying bony fragments everywhere, but out of that flame a twiggy wheel two meters across rolled at speed toward them.

"Run!"

The thing seemed to hesitate for a moment, then it made its choice. It accelerated up behind one of those with a launcher and slammed down on the man. Astanger skidded to a halt, then ran back to look down into a terrified face. Encaged in the gnarled jointed mass the man struggled. Astanger had heard about this; the man would begin to scream in a moment, for spikes would soon begin easing into his flesh. He drew his sidearm and shot the man twice through the forehead—the only mercy possible. Then, looking back toward the ship, he saw its core open and its pipe components snake across the ground toward them—the whole mass disassembling and turning into a rolling avalanche of alien technology. And within that mass, commanding it, swept along with it, controlling it, came the Grazen itself. Obeying his own command, he turned and ran just as hard as he could.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kelly guessed it didn't really matter what had happened. Though the Guard were completely out of it, the Doctrinaire still held a gun and she and her companions were still bound.

"Astanger! Report!" Shrad kept screaming into his communicator.

Any minute now, that would change. Either this Astanger would report or he wouldn't. Afterward, Doctrinaire Shrad would return his attention to his prisoners and, strouds no longer being an option, he would probably settle the matter with his gun. Kelly knew him. He represented everything she hated about the system she had tried to escape. He was also the one who had led them into the fight against the Grazen in which many of her friends had died, quite often as a result of his incompetence. She strained at her cuffs, but they were still hardened steel and unbreakable. Maybe if she could get to her feet, she could kick the weapon out of his hand. Maybe the others...

She turned and looked at the other five. Elizabeth was down on her side, her head in her father's lap. Slome looked ill, and anyway, he was old and fat and would probably be no help. That left Traviss and Longshank. Both of them were focused on the Doctrinaire. Kelly caught their attention and nodded her head toward Shrad. Longshank, who was closest, began to ease a leg forward, ready to hurl himself at the man. The sidearm abruptly whipped around, the barrel aimed straight at Longshank's forehead.

"I don't think so," said Shrad. He lowered his communicator and clipped it back on his belt. Kelly felt herself deflate.

Shrad continued. "Obviously the *Lenin* has encountered some difficulties."

*The man looks crazy, thought Kelly. No telling what he might do now.*

"But difficulties aside, you are all still criminals and betrayers of the Collective. Unfortunately, it seems that the strouds no longer function correctly." Shrad gazed around at the Guard. Not one of them

remained standing. Some were sitting, some sprawled and unmoving, some kneeling with their foreheads against the carpet. "No matter-this is easily settled." He focused his attention back on Longshank. "For your crimes against the collective will, Daniel Longshank, I now execute sentence on you."

Shrad pulled the trigger. There came a hollow thunk, and the Doctrinaire looked with puzzlement at his weapon. After a moment, puzzlement turned to shock. He yelled and flung the weapon away. Tracking its course, Kelly saw it bounce on the carpet and begin smoking, then, with a multiple crack, it exploded, flinging fragments in every direction.

Kelly began trying to get to her feet. Then she noticed something: the Guard, those of them that were not obviously dead, were all now standing. She hadn't even seen them move.

"Citizen Guard One!" said Shrad with relief.

The one he addressed shook his head. "No... I think... I was..." He gave a puzzled frown, looked to his fellows for a moment, then slowly returned his attention to Shrad. "There's holes, but he tells me I can fill them. I remember now: my name is Evan... Evan Markovian."

*Markovian.*

"Citizen Guard One!" said Shrad, backing up. "Kill the prisoners! At once!"

Kelly settled back down, the certain knowledge of what would soon ensue igniting a warm glow in her chest.

"Why should I do that?" enquired Evan-formerly Citizen Guard One.

"I order you to kill the prisoners!"

"No," said Evan. He glanced to his fellows and from them received nods of approval. After a moment, he reached up and pushed at one finger of his stroud with his thumb. The device lifted and, as if removing an irritating scab, he peeled it from his head.

"Do you know what's happening now?" Evan asked. Shrad could only shake his head mutely. Evan continued. "Tens of thousands of the Guard, all armed and ready for the new assault on the Grazen, have suddenly found themselves without strouds." He smiled. "I can see the images in my head, and they are beautiful. I see Doctrinaires being marched to the airlocks of ships and expelled into vacuum. I see them, on Capital World, being lined up and shot. Elsewhere, some have had the idea that sterilization is a better option, and flamethrowers are being used. And everywhere more personal, more painful, and more long drawn-out vengeance are being enacted." He paused contemplatively, gazing down at the stroud he held, then discarded it. "I think that last option is the one I want, Shrad." He looked up. "It's going to take you a long time to die."

Shrad turned and ran.

*Get him, get him now,* thought Kelly, but the newly awakened Evan Markovian just watched Shrad's departure with amused contempt. Almost without flunking, she brought her hands forward to push herself upright, then stopped and stared in confusion at her wrists. Where were the cuffs? Glancing back, she saw them lying in pieces on the carpet. No matter. She pushed herself to her feet, just as Longshank and Traviss were doing.

"Are you going to let him go?" she asked Evan. "Because I'm not."

The man still had that look on his face, but he was utterly motionless. Kelly walked over to him. She

prodded his chest. He swayed but showed no other reaction. The other Guards were motionless, too. What was going on here? Fuckit. She could not work this out right now. But whatever was happening, she was not going to let that fucking Doctrinaire escape. She turned, scanning about her feet, then squatted down to pick up a carbine. She checked it over—just to be sure it was in working order.

"This cannot be happening," said Longshank.

What was the man on about?

A hand squeezed her shoulder. In annoyance, she turned, and then shock took over and she found herself dragging herself backward.

"It's all right," said the man who had named himself Mark, the man whose brains were all over the carpet nearby and whom she'd subsequently seen shot four times in the chest. He turned to glance over at the others and she could see that the occiput of his head was missing, exposing a gory hole the size of her fist.

"Conflicts outside my territory are usually of no interest to me, though I keep watch on them, just to be sure they don't come to represent a danger."

Kelly stared at the back of his head, watching as the hole just filled up and closed. He turned back toward her, and she saw bright pinpricks of light flickering around him. Both his eyes were in place, and red points advanced from deep inside to fill them out, turning them into something demonic. The man Mark seemed to be fading into the background, blurring, or perhaps another background was reaching out from somewhere to grab him back. Abruptly, the figure before her came back into focus and was no longer Mark. This individual's hair was bone white over a thin face. His simple attire transformed into something more like the inside of a machine than clothing for a human being. Trying to focus on him, Kelly realized she was looking into something... else.

Around him, indefinable engines lurked at the limit of perception, gathered and poised like a planetoid moments before impact. Vast energies seemed to be focused upon this one man, like a mountain turned onto its tip.

*The Owner-Kelly* had not the slightest doubt now.

"But I don't like conflicts upon my border. I find them... disturbing." He nailed her with viper eyes. "This Collective you fled is one of the most unsavory regimes I've seen in some time. It would have died eventually, but meanwhile it was stirring up the Grazen, who represent an altogether different danger."

There was a coldness here—an indifference to human suffering. Yet, he had saved them. Why did he do that? Kelly suspected that he had done so simply because the difference between saving them and not saving them was minuscule to him. She also felt he could annihilate them in a moment, at a whim.

"How can they be a danger to you?"

He paused contemplatively, then said, "Human speech—I have to slow myself down so much for it, have to hone down a fragment of myself for its purpose. The word should not have been danger but inconvenience. They inconvenienced me once before. They call it 'the Misunderstanding.' It resulted in me losing the biosphere of one of my worlds."

"What did *they* lose?"

"Half of their race... but that was long ago, when I was more impulsive."

Had he used the right words then?

"What about them?" Kelly pointed at the Guard.

"They are healing slowly—it's better to take them offline during the process. I used them to set Shrad running, just as I am using the rest of their kind to bring down the Collective."

He talked about human beings as if they were components in a machine.

"Yes, Shrad," said Kelly pointedly, gripping her weapon with more determination, but not yet ready to turn away from this being.

He looked at her as if he did not understand; then it seemed that the penny dropped. "I see, Shrad. You want to kill him." He turned toward the shattered window. "Walk with me." Glancing at the others, he instructed, "All of you."

They stepped out of his house and began crossing the rose garden. His walking, she saw, seemed okay at a brief glance, but closer inspection revealed that his feet weren't touching the ground. Kelly strode at his side; the others attentive all around.

"My god!" Olsen suddenly exclaimed.

Kelly glanced at him and saw that he was gazing up and to her left. She glanced there, taking in the starlit darkness and the rising moon. It took a moment for what she had just seen to register, and then she looked back. That was no moon.

"My ship," stated the Owner.

*His ship. Fucking hell.*

"I don't like problems close to home," he went on. He glanced at Kelly and she thought, *He's more human now*. Perhaps he had refined *that fragment* he was using for communication.

"The Grazen are an inconvenience. A Grazen Mother who is grieving and half mad could become something more than that, especially when she positions herself right on my border."

"The one that's coming?" Kelly guessed.

"The one that is already here."

Kelly's sudden fear was muted by his presence. "Here?"

"Yes, here to find a cure for her ill, and a kind of justice."

Abruptly, Slome interjected, "Is vengeance a cure?"

The Owner gazed at him and Slome turned pale at what he saw, but the Owner nodded. "Yes, for that mind-set, and for the human mind, too, though humans would like to deny their own nature."

*Vengeance?*

Then Kelly understood.

\* \* \* \* \*

Leaning against the trunk of a gnarled olive tree, Astanger caught his breath and gazed in horror at the

thing poised on the slope below them. So this was a Grazen! He saw a giant crayfish head from which extended many wiry tendrils, many of them spearing away to connect into the writhing tangle of pipe-things, whose black-etched moon shadows now surrounded him and his crew. Unlike a crayfish, it did not seem to possess a jointed exoskeleton, but a slick and tough-looking red and brown skin. At the extremities of the multiple limbs arrayed down its long body, it possessed things like hands, or feet, with digits arrayed in rows under flat pads. Its tail was not a flat fish tail, but a long rattish thing coiled around its already coiled body. And the Grazen was the size of a space shuttle.

It had stopped, why had it stopped? Was it toying with them now?

"What do we do now?" asked one of the crew.

Astanger wanted to reply, *We die, probably very slowly*, but didn't think that would help much. He gazed down at the sidearm he clutched and wondered if it would be best to use it on himself now, or to wait until the monster sent one of those twiggy things for him.

Movement behind.

He looked upslope and saw the pipe-things withdrawing into the surrounding trees. Did it want them to run again? Had the chase thus far not been satisfying enough for it? Then he saw the figure hurtling toward them down the moon-silvered grass, and, after a moment, recognized the Doctrinaire. Obviously things had gone badly at the house—perhaps the Guard with Shrad had collapsed like those aboard the *Lenin*. Shrad must have used the tracer on Astanger's communicator and had come here because he thought he would be safe. Astanger felt like laughing, but knew it would come out hysterical.

When he saw what was awaiting beyond Astanger and the crew, Shrad came to an abrupt halt.

"Astanger! This way!" Shrad gestured imperiously.

Astanger just rested against his tree, watching the pipes moving in quietly behind the Doctrinaire. It was a small satisfaction to know that the man would be suffering a similar fate to them all.

"Come on!"

He started to gesture again, but then must have heard something. Turning, he saw one of the pipes rising up behind him, throated darkness bearing down on him. He fell back to the ground and scrambled downslope. He managed to gain his feet and break into a run. The pipe, like a confident python, came down and slowly writhed after him, then halted ten yards out from the first of the crewmen. Shrad kept running until he was up beside Astanger. Horrified, he stared downslope at the Grazen, then turned on Astanger.

"What the hell do you think you are doing, Citizen Astanger! You should've warned me! You should've run!"

Shrad's holster was empty. Astanger gazed at crewmen Breen, Chadrick, Grade, and the others who now gathered around. He read in them the contempt and hatred they felt for the Doctrinaire. Transferring his gaze to his own weapon, he swung it to one side in a leisurely motion, then brought it back hard across Shrad's face. The man went down and lay moaning, clutching at his cheek.

"He's unarmed," said Astanger to the others. "Instruct the others not to give him a weapon and not to give him a bullet when the time comes."

"Astanger!" Shrad was glaring at him from the ground.

In measured tones, Astanger said, "If you speak to me again I will shoot you in the kneecap." He returned his attention to the alien.

The Grazen seemed to be agitated—if he was interpreting correctly its jerky movements and the way it was reaching out with its insectile hands to touch the surrounding tangle. It had deliberately made a gap to let Shrad through, to get them all together in one place, so why was it not now attacking? Was it waiting for others to come this way? How likely was that? The Guard were screwed so it seemed unlikely to him that they would be coming after Shrad. Maybe the escapees, since their ship lay beyond the Grazen?

The ground shuddered and someone swore. What now? Astanger looked to where many of the crew were now gazing, as the shuddering of the ground increased. The moon was on the move, the glare of some titanic drive behind it. Slowly it shifted from its location above the horizon and grew visibly brighter. Astanger had no doubt it was moving into a position overhead.

"Please, you must listen to me, Astanger," said Shrad.

The man was crouching, desperate-looking. He hadn't even noticed what was happening in the sky—it probably didn't fit his ideology.

"Do go on," said Astanger, almost too stunned to care anymore.

"If we make a concerted attack on the creature itself, it'll lose control of... those... things. We should be able to fight our way through—get to the ship."

Astanger considered that. They'd fired eight missiles at the creature and every one of those eight missiles had impacted on opalescent shields that abruptly sprang into being. Bullets just bounced off of the thing. Missiles into the tangle of pipework had shattered it, but the pipes just discarded the shattered sections, melded back together, and carried on. Now they were all out of missiles and the rest of their ammunition was depleted. He'd seen the others passing bullets to those who had run out. The bullets weren't for the Grazen. Astanger had four bullets left in his sidearm. He could spare one. He raised his weapon and fired once. Shrad went down yelling, clutching the mess of bone and blood that had been his kneecap. Astanger returned his attention to the alien.

Why was it holding back? Did it understand that its prey would kill themselves when it made its final assault? Was it trying to figure out a way of capturing them alive?

"Captain Astanger," said Grade, no longer worried about using a politically incorrect form of address.

Astanger turned to see the man pointing upslope. Looking there he saw a group of people approaching. He recognized graywear, then, after a moment, recognized some of the escapees. There was one other with them—something odd about him. Two of the pipe things reared back and the group passed between. Now Astanger could see the other individual more clearly. He seemed to be walking in a kind of hollow in the air and around him metallic things seemed to hover on the edge of visibility. Pale, white hair, eyes that seemed to open into the Pit. Astanger knew at once who this person must be.

The group approached, the escapees glancing warily at the crewmen as they moved aside. Finally, they reached Astanger. The Owner glanced down at Shrad, then raised his gaze to Astanger.

"*Captain* Astanger," he said, then his mouth twisted in a cruel smile.

The moon now glared overhead, and the shuddering of the ground became a muted vibration, like the running of some vast engine, and one Astanger knew was shaking this whole world. That inconceivably gigantic vessel up there was *his*. Astanger was glad when the... man turned his attention toward the



Grazen.

"The Mother," the Owner intoned.

Astanger looked in that direction, too, and to his horror saw that the Grazen was lining up some of those tube mouths, and that in them could be glimpsed twiggy insectile movement. He stepped back, brought his sidearm up to his head.

"That won't be necessary, *Captain*"

Yeah, right.

One of the things spat out, rolled along the ground toward them, its pace leisurely. Astanger stepped back again, heard the sounds of weapons being cocked. The twiggy wheel slowed to a halt over Shrad, folded down into a kind of leggy cone.

"Astanger!" Shrad screamed.

It hesitated, wavering back and forth. The Owner gestured, and then the thing fell on the Doctrinaire. Shrad began yelling incoherently. Astanger gazed down at him without sympathy, then abruptly jerked his head up as the pipe that had fired the thing began to snake across the ground toward them. Now Shrad began screaming. The twig work was extruding spikes like clawed fingers and they were slowly easing into the man's flesh. He was struggling but, thus encaged, there was nowhere for him to go. Astanger noted that the wounds did not bleed. He guessed that would be too easy.

The pipe reached Shrad and fibers speared out, glimmering like spider silk in the moonlight, from the seething multi-jawed face of something inside. The fibers attached all around the cage, dragged Shrad in. His screams disappeared up inside the pipe, becoming hollow and echoey.

"He ordered the bombing of the nursery world," one of the escapees said.

Astanger glanced at her, recognized Kelly Haden. Then he understood the implication of what she was saying. *The Mother*, he realized.

But it wasn't over. The other pipe-mouths were still there, those things still inside and ready to roll. Astanger was all too aware that though he personally did not take part in the bombing of the nursery world, he was part of the fleet that did, and that if he had been ordered to take part, he would have. The things began to ease out.

"It's been the best it could be," said Grade. The man brought his carbine up underneath his chin and pulled the trigger. Nothing happened.

The Owner glanced at him. "Hasty," he said, then returned his attention to the Grazen Mother. "Must I destroy you?"

Around him the metallic objects seemed to gain a greater solidity. He held out a hand to one side almost in sad entreaty. Astanger winced. It felt almost as if he was standing too close to a fire, yet what he was feeling was not exactly heat.

"Withdraw, now," said the Owner.

Like the heads of tubeworms, the twiggy wheels abruptly retracted out of sight. Movement all around. The pipes were all pulling back toward the Grazen and she began retreating downslope. She, and all her weird technology, gathered into a rolling wave falling away from them, then it all began to clump around

her, opalescent shields flicking on in intervening spaces, gradually blotting her from sight. With a thrum that transmitted through the ground, the whole mass began to rise. Then, with a sighing groan, it shot up into the sky.

"Thank you," said Astanger.

The Owner held out a hand for silence, stillness, as he still gazed up into the sky. After about a minute, he returned his attention to them all.

"These," he gestured to the escapees, "you will not harm. Their ship is now fully functional and you will all return on it." He paused for a contemplative moment. "Your Collective is collapsing. At my request, the Grazen will not attack what remains."

"I have no love of the Collective," said Astanger.

The Owner nodded, and Astanger reckoned that he'd had no need to say that, for it was probably why he was still alive. He noted that though the... machines around the Owner were now plainly visible, he and they seemed to occupy some encystment in reality, something somehow excised.

The Owner said, "Leave now. You have one day to get beyond my border."

A star of darkness flickered within that encystment, and all it contained seemed to be stretching away. Somehow Astanger knew that it was connected to that vessel hovering above them like the steel eye of some vast god.

"Build something better this time-you have been warned," the Owner told them.

The encystment retracted into the star, disappeared.

Astanger guessed it was the best they could hope for.

"Well, Societal Assets," said Astanger to the escapees, "we'd best find the rest of your people and get out of here."

"Fuck you," said Kelly Haden. "I'm not a 'Societal Asset' and I don't take orders from you!"

Astanger held up his sidearm, reversed it, and held the butt out to her. "Then you must choose who you do take orders from, or choose to give them yourself."

Really, it was the best they could hope for.