

Theaker's Quarterly Fiction

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The primary goal of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* is to keep going.

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EDITORIAL

Good Reading in 2008

Stephen Theaker

Welcome to the first issue of our new-look *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction!* The changes are cosmetic, to be honest: it's still the same old TQF you've come to know and love, just in a single column and shaped like a book. Our approach is unchanged, although there may be fewer of my terrible illustrations, since I'm happier leaving blank spaces in a book.

The reason for the change was mainly to make for easier on-screen reading. I was putting the stories into a single-column format to proof-read, because it's tough to read three columns of text in a pdf, and I began to wonder why we put our theoretical readers to such difficulty.

Having thought about making the change, I realised that it would make typesetting each issue much easier. And it's also going to let me (and you!) build up a lovely Silver Age bookshelf: TQF is the now the same shape and size as our forthcoming range of books.

If you've been in the habit of printing TQF out to read, this smaller size might lead to a bit of wasted paper. All is not lost, though – head over to Feedbooks and you can run off a customised pdf of this issue in whatever size and shape you prefer.

Another change is that we've now put a permanent logo on the cover. I've always enjoyed playing around with the layout, but looking at back issues I couldn't help thinking that if I'd spent less time on the logo, the covers might have been substantially better overall.

There's one further change, a consequence of the others: with all the extra pages comes a rise in printing costs. We've never sold very many copies via Lulu (understandably, when we give the magazine away free on the net), so we decided not to worry too much about the price of a printed copy going up a bit. We'll be the main ones affected! So we've dropped the fixed cover price, and each issue will now be as cheap as we can make it. To balance the price rise a bit, we've lowered the prices of back issues to be as low as possible.

Now, onto the really exciting stuff, talking about the books I read last year... Don't even think about complaining! This is my magazine, and if

I can't indulge my hobby-horses here I'll have to inflict them on my family...

I really enjoyed Mark Morris's column in the latest issue of *Prism* (the BFS newsletter) on his reading habits over the last year. For one thing I was really glad to see that I'm not the only one to suffer a post-partum reading slump!

Anyway, it got me to have a look at the books I read last year, using an Excel spreadsheet of my books read downloaded from Goodreads. Get ready for thrill-power!

I found I finished 86 books during 2008, 53 of which were comics. So that's between four and five trade paperbacks and graphic novels a month. Those numbers got a big boost from realising I could get lots of them from our local library system, but that well's running dry now, so 2009's figure will probably be much lower. In total I read 13,129 pages of comics during 2008, which is pretty cool. That included over 1,500 pages of Conan, which was even cooler.

That leaves 33 regular books, so I averaged 2.75 books a month – much better than the previous year, I think.

Overall those 33 books totalled 7,016 pages, averaging about 213pp each. I do prefer short books at the moment. Five were Penguin 60s. The longest book was *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* by Michael Chabon (432pp) and the shortest was *The Homecoming* by Ray Bradbury and Dave McKean (56pp).

This doesn't include books I read but didn't finish, but it does include some books I began in previous years but didn't finish till now, so it probably evens out. So, roughly, I averaged about 19pp a day of fiction/non-fiction (which is more or less how much I read most nights before going to sleep), and about 36pp of comics.

It bugs me a bit that I can't keep track of how many short story submissions I read on Goodreads. There's no reason I'd expect to be able to – it's just a bit of a niggle that a lot of my reading doesn't count towards my "score" on there! Between TQF, *Dark Horizons* and the BFS short story competition I read somewhere between one and two hundred short stories during 2008. Going on submissions so far, and plans to make the rules on entry to the BFS competition a bit more flexible, the number this year will definitely head towards the top of that range.

I'm looking forward to it. The best thing about editing these magazines is that I get to read stories that no one (except a few other editors, perhaps) has read before. I do it because I love reading – almost as much as I love making lists of what I've read...

Contributors

Mike Schultheiss contributes an entire novel to this issue, "Operation 1848", a follow-up to "Darwin's Corridor" (TQF#22). It's the "Demon Breed" to his "Trouble Tide", and will thoroughly entertain anyone who enjoyed the previous story. He grew up in Grass Valley in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains, but is currently trapped in Davis with a B.A. in Anthropology. His interests are many and eclectic: besides natural and human history he enjoys good coffee, Japanese and German beer, Australian wine, and English gin. His all-consuming ambition is to be a full-time novelist. (I've advised him therefore to stop giving his novels away!) He is currently working on the second draft of his vampire fantasy novel *Blood Moon Queen*. Befriend or stalk him online at facebook, where he prowls under the pseudonym Torbjorn Nordhagen.

Sam Leng lives in Yorkshire, England with *Worzel Gummidge* and a biscuit barrel. Her fiction has recently been published in *Sinister Tales*, *94 Creations* and *Bloody October*. She will have more stories published in 2009, in *Twisted Dreams* and *The Mammoth Book of Best New Erotica* (Vol. 8). She publishes her own fiction and poetry magazine at www.neonbeam.org. To this issue she contributes a lengthy detective-romance-supernatural-library story about two-fisted matchmaker to the monsters Orchid Strangelove. Fingers crossed we'll see Orchid return to these pages again one day.

Cyril Simsa is a British writer/translator, currently resident in Prague. He has published articles and translations in a variety of books and magazines, plus a rather smaller number of stories in the small press. His most recent credits have been stories in *Premonitions* and *Starship Sofa*, and an longish article in *Faunus*. To this issue he contributes "Lost Futures", a Moorcockian tale of dimension-hoppers looking for purpose – or maybe it's love.

R.L. Carter (<http://vincent7995.deviantart.com/gallery/>) provided the astonishing artwork for this issue's cover. If we're not careful people are going to be tricked into thinking this is a real magazine!

Stephen Theaker is the eponymous editor of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*. He wrote all of this issue's reviews. He is also the editor of *Dark Horizons*, the journal of the British Fantasy Society. He needs to think of something else to say about himself to fill the last few lines on the page. His album of 2008 was *Third by Portishead*. TV show: *Doctor Who*. Radio show: *Adam & Joe*. Comics: *Savage Sword of Conan*, Vols. 1–2.

NEWS & COMMENT

Richard K. Lyon (1933–2008)

I'm sad to report that Richard K. Lyon passed away on 21 November 2008. Richard had great success with a trilogy of novels co-authored with Andrew J. Offutt in the late seventies and early eighties: *Demon in the Mirror*, *The Eyes of Sarsis* and *Web of the Spider*. In the years since his retirement his writing had appeared everywhere from *Analog* to our own *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*.

I didn't get to know him as well as I would have liked – I wish we had been able to work together on a longer project – but he was always extremely polite and generous, treating my suggested edits to his work with a seriousness that had hardly been earned by their source. In total we published seven of his stories over the last two years.

In early November he wrote to say, "My doctor tells me that I need to put my affairs in order. Since I've enjoyed 74 years of virtually perfect health, a very successful career as a scientist, two sons of whom I'm proud, and the love of a beautiful, kind woman for 40+ years, this is no great tragedy."

I'm sure his friends and family disagreed very strongly on that last point.

Richard K. Lyon was a research scientist, inventor and writer, with a PhD in physical chemistry from Harvard. His hobbies included collecting pulp SF magazines and writing. *Tales from the Lyonheart*, a recent collection of his stories, is available from Wild Cat Books. A selection of his previously unpublished stories will appear in TQF over the next couple of years.

Graham Joyce Writing for Doom 4

The gut response of many gamers to the news that a writer has been hired to work on Doom 4?

Quite possibly that the project's already going in the wrong direction! If there was one thing people wanted after Doom 3 it was a more convenient torch. If there was another thing they wanted, it was a bit less story.

The best stories in games are the ones created by the interactions of the player, the environment and the enemies. A video game writer's job

isn't to take their place, it's to enhance those encounters, and add depth to them. Doom 3 was a perfect example of a good game interrupted by altogether too much writing.

But when the writer in question is the UK's Graham Joyce, let's refrain from being so negative. Graham Joyce won't force us to listen to audio blogs to work out door combinations! Graham Joyce won't leave us twiddling our thumbs through cut scenes!

Well, it probably won't be up to him, but we can hope!

Dark Horizons – Issue 54

Here's what's currently planned to go into Dark Horizons 54, due out in March. As they say over at *The Believer*, "Not all contents are guaranteed, replacements will be satisfying." Fiction will include:

- "Passing Through", by Jim Steel
- "The King Below", by Andrew Knighton
- "Nanna Barrows", by Jan Edwards
- "The Putrimaniac", by Brendan Connell
- "Telemura", by Douglas Thompson
- "Everything He Touched, Burned", by Mathew F. Riley
- "Beyond the Fifth Sky", by Ross Gresham

And there will be interviews and articles too:

- "Roots of the Writer: Robert Holdstock", by Jan Edwards
- "A Man Disguised as an Ostrich, Actually", by Mike Barrett
- "Inside Clive's Covers", by Dominic Harman
- "The Hunt for Gollum: Production Diary", by Brian Lavery
- "David Gemmell: an Introduction", by Gareth Wilson

Remember, unless you join the British Fantasy Society you won't get to read any of that!

Doctor Who: We Got It Wrong!

Well, we got it wrong in our last issue: the new Doctor Who is Matt Smith. But no worries. Getting exactly what you want and expect at Christmas is nice, but it's nothing compared to getting something new, mysterious, unexpected and exciting that turns out to be brilliant!

Hopes are high for the space year 2010!

SCIENCE FICTION

Operation 1848

Mike Schultheiss

Chapter One

The lights of the harbour gleamed like gems fallen from the stars and a balmy sea breeze wafted the scent of salted spray to his nostrils as the man stared out at the view below his private balcony table. He stretched back with a sigh of contentment; it felt good to have a brief respite from the demands of running a multi-billion dollar mining corporation. At thirty-seven Petyor Mason was young for such success, and had been gifted with the sort of physique that drove women crazy and inspired envy in his peers: he was tall, clean-cut, with muscles toned from an intensive daily regimen of exercise. *Exercise the body, sharpen the mind*, he reasoned. His sun-darkened blond hair was professionally styled. His suits were tailored to his frame like a second skin.

Petyor looked out over the lush and bizarre garden of strange plants below the balcony and thought of the meeting that was to come, pondering the meteoric rise to power and success that had put him in a position to deal with and influence such men. At every turn he had taken decisive and ruthless steps to advance his career, first as a project manager for another mining firm, later accepting a job with his current firm, Refiner's Agent, and following it to the top. He made enemies when he had to and allies when he could. His first wife had divorced him after three years and his second wife when she'd found out about one of his several affairs. His third, and current, wife was a model and former call girl. His fourteen-year-old daughter didn't talk to him. *All part of the game*, he thought. He poured himself a glass of whisky and put it out of his mind. Tonight's meeting was probably the most important in his four years as CEO of Refiner's Agent. He lit a cigar and puffed: he never liked to conduct a transaction without being in the proper frame of mind.

His first contact approached, accompanied by a handful of very pro-

fessional-looking security forces. Petyor could tell the man was nervous already by the way he walked and the set of his jaw. It wasn't that different, really, from those times he'd gone out into the bush on hunting expeditions: a wary animal, powerful but unsure of its strength and intimidated by its surroundings.

Congressman Adlai Yu took a seat across from Petyor. Of average height, the Congressman had a knack for making himself seem larger than he really was by virtue of his natural charisma and effusive personality. His piercing blue eyes were almond-shaped, betraying his Anglo-Chinese Hong Kong heritage. His dark hair was beginning to show flecks of grey.

Petyor smiled. "So glad you could make it, Congressman."

"Good evening to you, Petyor." The Congressman's greeting in his clipped, almost-British tones was formal and somewhat disgruntled. "You are absolutely certain this location is secure?"

"Adlai, relax. You're as uptight as a caged tigrekraken sometimes, you know? My boys are all over this place like nobody's business. Besides, the proprietor is something of a long-standing friend of mine. He made sure we had this table out of earshot of anyone else."

"All the same." Adlai's brows furrowed in a scowl. "People will still be liable to comment on such a conspicuous and, if I might say, rather irregular trio."

Petyor shrugged. "Let them. We're doing nothing illegal. Just three fine, upstanding pillars of the community meeting for dinner and a little discussion." He smiled sardonically. "Speaking of which, here comes our third member now."

The two men rose to their feet, extending their hands. "Cardinal, welcome," Adlai said. "Glad you could make it, Cardinal." Petyor smiled.

Cardinal Agustino Cruz accepted the proffered hands. Only the clerical collar and the crucifix around his neck hinted at his avocation. The Cardinal was a silver-haired but still hale and vigorous man who moved with a leonine grace and bearing. His light-coppery skin was lined with age and darkened by sun. "I am very grateful to be here," he told them soberly, his English carrying the slightest tinge of his native Argentine Spanish. "If my work is to succeed as I wish it to, your help will be of paramount importance."

"Indeed," Petyor acknowledged cheerfully. "Now then, let's begin, shall we?" he waited for Adlai's and Cruz's affirmative nods before launching into his speech. "Gentlemen, it seems to me that where it counts the most we all want the same thing: to advance the cause of civilisation. It has been more than one hundred years since our ancestors

accomplished the unbelievable, the inconceivable, leaving Earth and crossing the stars to establish a new home here, on a planet they named Pleistonia.

“And yet a hundred years later here we are, crouching on islands while the vast resources of most of the available land remain virtually untapped! And why do they remain untapped? So that the *erectus* can keep on being *savage*! We deny them the fruits of our civilisation just as we deny ourselves the ability to reap its fruits! Gentlemen, we three are here tonight because I know you both want to change this as I do.” His smile was deep and confident. This was his element. “It is our right and duty to carry the benefits of civilisation to the savages, to rescue them from the squalor of their surroundings. We can not allow this preservationist Congress to stand in our way.”

“All very well and good, Petyor,” Adlai conceded, his keen eyes and voice evincing a shrewd interest, “But what more are you suggesting we do? I have already announced my candidacy for the upcoming presidential election with a pro-development platform.”

“As for bringing civilisation and hopefully, salvation, to them, that is the goal of the Native Missions Arm of the Pleistonian See,” Cardinal Cruz reminded Petyor. “Although our efforts have been more than a little hampered of late.”

Petyor nodded emphatically. “Then our predicament is quite clear, gentlemen: we can no longer go to the Congress, hat in hand, begging for a chance to mine much-needed minerals or bring much-needed civilisation to the *erectus*. As you are both aware, Refiner’s Agent has recently been forced to cede control of the Mission Partnership Stations that we founded to the National Guard. Furthermore, we have been forced to... let go of our indigenous personnel. For a time we still hold the contracts to the mines themselves – even the Congress knows we need metals and minerals! – but the future is very uncertain.

“And why? Because one stupid security captain at one Mission Partnership Station was too heavy-handed in his policies and set off a revolt! And a delegation that was sent to look into the whole thing got all up in arms, said this idiot captain had been massacring *erectus* savages and mistreating his workers and even...” – he paused for emphasis – “tried to kill them to shut them up!” He chuckled thinly.

“I’ve heard most of this already.” Adlai was still listening attentively, waiting for the final revelation.

Cardinal Cruz nodded. “The Native Missions Arm was investigated by both the Range Sheriff’s office for misconduct, and by the Pleistonian

See for heresy and improper decorum. Honestly, I'm not sure which was the more humiliating."

Petyor nodded. "Development efforts have failed in Congress for decades now because of an asinine desire for conservation. But if public opinion were to swing in our favour, then a figure such as yourself, Congressman, might be in a position to say, win the presidency. And you, Cardinal, would find yourself practically a saint." He had them now, their faces rapt with attention.

"Gentlemen, this is my proposal to you: I have already deployed a field agent to manage a new program of mineralogical surveys. Thanks to some... influence that I wield with certain officials of the Bureau of Mineralogical Resources I was able to obtain the permission to do so." Reaching down, he opened his briefcase and pulled out a small leather sack with drawstring. He hefted it comfortably in his palm before depositing it almost carelessly on the table. It was clearly weighty for its size. "I give you a small sample of the preliminary results."

Adlai frowned, reached out and, encouraged by Petyor, tugged the drawstring open. His eyes widened as he tugged open the mouth of the pouch before handing it to Cardinal Cruz, who made the sign of the cross and muttered something. The pouch was packed with flakes of a gleaming yellowish metal.

Petyor nodded. "Gold dust. My agents are starting to turn it up in notable quantities in the greater New Zambezi drainage. This is the metal that *made* California, gentlemen, and nothing short of a war could create more of a melee. And this is precisely what we need to happen."

Recognition dawned in Adlai's eyes. "With a gold rush in progress voter opinion would sway in favour of a development platform."

"And the Native Missions Arm would finally be able to fulfil its sacred mission of bringing civilisation and Christianity to the *erectus*, unimpeded by an unsympathetic Congress." Cardinal Cruz's smile radiated pride and satisfaction.

"Of course, the rush on the gold fields would benefit Refiner's Agent, as well," Petyor replied. "I'm sure in return for bankrolling your presidential campaign, Mr Yu," he smiled at his mock-formality, "Refiner's Agent could secure further concessions to mine. And I'm sure the Native Missions Arm, Cardinal, would be willing to take its mission to the *erectus* before the public in favour of Congressman Yu."

"Naturally," Adlai nodded.

"Of course," Cardinal Cruz agreed.

Petyor nodded with satisfaction before replying. "Then it would seem that we have reached a favourable arrangement, gentlemen. I have

dubbed this project Operation 1848, in honour of that historic year that brought a gold rush and civilisation to California. Together we represent the three most powerful social forces of any civilisation, and together we will bring civilisation to the *erectus* and to this savage new world, Pleistonia.”

The herds were returning from their calving grounds to the east, fresh crop of growing adolescents in tow. They carpeted the savannahs in every direction, a sea of tossing horns and flaring tentacles. At every direction they faced danger: predators lurked in the tall grasses and in the stands of brush and trees and even in the wide, murky waters of the New Zambezi and its many tributaries.

From atop his mount Lennik Ostrand scanned the scene below with satisfaction, binocam in hand. The migration of the herds was a time of renewal and change on the savannahs just as it was a time of dangers and deaths. It was also the most bountiful time for the species he had been tracking in the field for almost twelve years. Lennik was a tall, wiry kind of man, once-pale complexion creased, weathered and worn by the harsh tropical sun under which he had worked for so long. His dirty-blond hair was tied loosely, hanging down his back, and he sported a somewhat unruly beard. His clothes had seen better days, but they were built for a life in the field: woven den-khaki pants and a faded long-sleeved shirt that might have once been blue-grey. He wore high leather boots that looked like they had been around since the days of the wild west. A long field rifle was holstered in his saddle, within easy reach.

“How we looking there, captain?” called Prabhnoor Nanda, his fellow researcher, from her mount. Prabhnoor may have worked in the same field and for many of the same people as Lennik but did not share his rough-edged personal aesthetic. Immaculately but practically dressed, with binocam and handheld computer to hand Prabhnoor looked every inch the professional researcher. Dark-haired and coppery-complexioned, her English carried a telltale Punjabi lilt.

“Not too bad, Prabhnoor, thanks.” Lennik grinned as he scanned the teaming herds. “No sightings yet but shouldn’t be too long now.” He turned behind him. “Ready to see some more of your kind, Renna?”

Renna, the third member of the party, warbled excitedly from her seat behind Lennik, her voice a tantalisingly complex string of sounds. She was naked, her lithe, graceful form covered with a fine layer of body hair. Despite being brought up by her close evolutionary cousins she’d never acquired the unnatural habit of wearing clothes. Her large, intelligent dark eyes scanned the horizon from beneath somewhat thickset

brows and a sloping forehead. She was never too far from Lennik: the two had shared a close bond for years, since authorities had caught up with the illegal settlers who had taken her from her people.

Lennik laughed and scratched his octephand mount's rough, grainy-textured hide made of interlocking plates. "Sure you are. Good thing we're using Abbadon here to get through all this." Abbadon the octephand snorted, extending the six powerful tentacles ringing his mouth to sniff at the air. The great creatures were large, over a ton, but docile, and by virtue of their size provided safe passage through many of the dangers on the open savannahs.

"Let's get in closer if we can," Prabhnoor suggested. "There are enough of these cattle, there have to be large predators behind."

Lennik nodded. It was both a warning and a potential way to find what they were looking for: *Homo erectus* were not big-game hunters, instead relying on carrion from the kills of Pleistonia's abundant and very deadly large predators.

At Lennik and Prabhnoor's command the octephands approached the herds. Numerous species were travelling together, seeking safety in diversity and large numbers. Flighty swiftcattle, all long, bounding legs and twitching ears, backed nervously out of their way. Larger cattalo made room more easily, while the still larger herds of taurochs simply ploughed ahead without breaking formation. Long-necked, long-legged stiltoxen surveyed them placidly, slender-horned heads bobbing inquisitively. Formidable and cantankerous, herds of giant buffalo plodded forward like hoofed and horned tanks. Further back they encountered herds of wild octephands that flared their tentacles inquisitively at their semi-domesticated brethren.

"Look at all this," Lennik chuckled. "Almost reminds me of the vids from the African Serengeti and Masai Mara."

Prabhnoor looked somewhat nervous. "I just hope they don't decide to charge." She clenched her mount's reins nervously.

Lennik shook his head. "Unlikely. And if they did, no reason we couldn't get out of the way of the larger ones, and the smaller ones would just run around us."

"You really think we'll find *erectus* nearby?" Prabhnoor's voice carried a note of doubt.

"They're around here," Lennik asserted confidently. "It's that time of year, Prabhnoor, they're bound to be. They'll be congregating in denser concentrations especially for the migration of the herds. We'll run into a band soon. Right, Renna?" he leaned back to kiss her playfully.

Renna warbled happily and nipped at his neck affectionately with her strong white teeth.

“Hey – ow! Stop it, you!” Lennik laughed, then looked quickly at Prabhnoor. She looked bemused, but they had to be careful: she didn’t know their secret. Having enjoyed a close relationship for several years, a year ago Lennik and Renna had become lovers. Such liaisons were not only considered indecent, they were illegal. But Lennik had discovered, to his amazement, that they could be mutual and consensual. Over the course of the last year they had trusted in secret, Lennik trusting only a few with the truth about their relationship. Prabhnoor was not one of those few: she worked with the Bureau of Aboriginal Interests, an institution with which Lennik had a somewhat ambivalent relationship.

The herds at last thinned. Lennik and Prabhnoor instinctively tensed their grip on the reins affixed to the lowermost pair of their mounts’ tentacles, eyes scanning the tall grasses and stands of scrub and trees for threats. The edges of the herds were always the most dangerous places to be: here the weakened or incautious straggled behind, exposed to potential threats. The herds had left a trail clearly visible and easily followed: a wide swath of trampled earth and footprints across the landscape. They passed a pack of common lupokrakens, swift-running predators about the size of a large dog with grasping tentacles used for capturing and devouring prey, and their mounts snorted and lashed their tentacles warningly.

“Hey, it’s all right, Abbadon,” Lennik laughed. “They’re a little too small to hurt you. Besides, I think they’ve got other interests.”

“I’ve never liked those things,” Prabhnoor confessed. “But they’re an encouraging sign, I suppose.” *Homo erectus* and common lupokrakens sometimes fought over carrion.

Finally a faint waft of smoke told Lennik and Prabhnoor what they needed to know: there were indeed *Homo erectus* nearby. They approached warily, careful not to affright their evolutionary cousins or worse, alert some large predator to their presence. Around a low rise they came upon a stand of trees and the sound of running water. The smell of smoke grew stronger. By the bank of the stream they saw it: a small encampment of brush shelters, fires burning in open pits with spitted hanks of meat dangling over some. The twenty-odd *Homo erectus* who inhabited the camp looked up at their arrival, murmurings of suspicion and alarm quickly subsiding as they perceived the octephants. A few of the males were carving Acheulean bifaces, large “handaxes” with two edges used for a variety of purposes. Several females were making digging sticks, stripping leaves and twigs from solid lengths of wood with

strong teeth, stone edges, and dexterous fingers. Incongruously, pickaxes and simple drills and chisels used in mining were scattered throughout the camp.

“It’s Marcus and his group!” Lennik exclaimed to Prabhnoor and Renna excitedly, turning to hug the latter in his enthusiasm.

Marcus and the other *erectus* had been captive slave labourers on a so-called “Mission Partnership Station” or MPS operated by mining megacorporation Refiner’s Agent and administered by their ruthless mercenaries, the Greenpark Brigade. Taken from his home at a young age, like Renna, Marcus had developed a deep resentment toward his captors and had finally led a revolt that had damaged the MPS and left ten *sapiens* and twelve *erectus* dead. The small band of escapees had fled deep into the wilderness, resuming their traditional lifestyle. Lennik had been part of a delegation sent to investigate the events, only to discover a cover-up on the part of the Greenpark Brigade, who had been massacring local *erectus* populations and enslaving their orphaned children. The delegation had nearly lost their lives but they had at last succeeded: the Greenpark Brigade had been forced to withdraw and formal proceedings were still underway against Refiner’s Agent.

In the year since their escape Marcus’s group had done well: Marcus proved to be a natural leader, capable and fearless. In one particularly breathtaking episode Lennik witnessed Marcus and a female *erectus*, Ishtar, successfully fight off a ferocious tigrekraken after it attacked a pregnant female. Marcus still bore the scars of that heroic battle: three livid white scars on his left forearm from the tigrekraken’s scimitar-like claws. Only his lightning reflexes had saved him from losing a hand. Several of the females had given birth, and most of the infants had survived.

Prabhnoor surveyed the group with satisfaction through her binocam, zooming in to snap pictures which she uploaded automatically to her handheld. “This is phenomenal, Lennik,” she murmured in a low voice. “Look at Priya’s new baby.”

When last observed almost a month ago, the female Priya was in the advanced stages of pregnancy. Lennik in particular had been concerned: Priya was young and, like many of the other females who had escaped from the MPS, a first-time mother. But the infant seemed particularly vigorous and healthy.

Lennik zoomed in. “It’s a boy.” He smiled. “What should we name him?” They often took turns, Lennik usually selecting names from the ancient Near East while Prabhnoor preferred the names of her ancestral India.

She thought for a moment before answering. "Bhishma."

Lennik nodded, recognising the name of a great warrior whose exploits were praised in India's national epic, the Mahabharata. "Good choice. Bhishma it is."

"I'll log the birth for the Bureau's records. Looks a healthy weight, too. Kind of a pity we can't radio-tag them."

Lennik winced. This was the side of Prabhnoor he found hard to accept, and the source of the greatest disagreement between them: to him the *erectus* were very much another species of human being, and deserved especial respect and treatment above and beyond that of other species of animal. The Bureau's ban on radio-tagging them was one of its more exceptional decisions, in his estimation. For Prabhnoor, however, the *Homo erectus* of Pleistonia seemed to be just another species of rather intelligent, bipedal chimpanzees. For him the study of the *erectus* was a passion that had consumed his life since he was eight years old, while Prabhnoor's interest seemed more conventionally academic. Not, he hastened to remind himself, that there was anything wrong with that. And unlike him she actually had *faith* in the Bureau to do its job of protecting the *erectus* effectively without a lot of bureaucratic bullshit. In short, she *believed* in the Bureau and he did not – even though at present he was still on its payroll as a researcher-consultant.

"How about you write up the report and I forget to send it to them?" he grumbled half-mockingly.

Prabhnoor laughed. "You are such a stick in the mud, Lennik!" she protested. "I swear you're wilder than they are sometimes!" she pointed to the *erectus*.

Lennik grinned. "I once had a good friend, a priest, tell me I'd have done well in his profession. I'll tell you what I told him, which is that coming from you, I'll take that as a compliment."

"Well, so long as you don't take to scavenging carrion and fighting tigrekraekens in hand-to-hand combat I suppose we are all right." Prabhnoor laughed.

The *erectus* eyed their exchange, ears pricked up at the voices of *Homo sapiens*, sounds they had every reason to fear and hate: the mercenaries of the Greenpark Brigade under Captain Roy Hussler, administrator of the MPS where Marcus and the others had lived, had mistreated them harshly, even sexually exploiting some of the females. After the debacle that had brought the National Guard in to expel the Brigade and force the release of the *erectus* Captain Hussler's corpse had turned up, skull split in half by a powerful pickaxe swing: Refiner's Agent had apparently wanted to discard a liability by ensuring Hussler's execution.

They couldn't have picked a better executioner. But over the course of the past year Lennik and Renna had spent a disproportionate amount of their time tracking Marcus's group and the handful of other de-Missionised *erectus*, and gradually their mistrust and hostility had faded. Still, it paid to be careful: Lennik believed in maintaining a respectful distance in order not to startle or disquiet them.

A glint of sunlight reflected from a metal surface caught Lennik's eye. It was coming from an object lying near one of the half-butchered carcasses roasting on its crude spit over a hearth. *What the* – he zoomed in with his binocam, powerful lenses magnifying and focusing. It was a hatchet. Stainless steel head glinting in the sun, handle probably made of an aluminium-titanium alloy, light but strong, padded with synthetic rubber. A thoroughly modern implement, thoroughly *new* by the looks of it – unlike the mining implements which the *erectus* had brought with them from the MPS revolt it didn't appear to bear the marks of a year's worth of wear in the wilderness. And therefore, it was thoroughly incongruous in the camp. How had it gotten there?

"Prabhnoor," Lennik pointed to the direction of the hatchet. "Take a look at that."

She did so and frowned. "Appears to be a hatchet. But that's odd..."

"Exactly." Lennik knitted his brows in thought. "How did it get there? I've never seen them with anything like that before."

"Must have been some Range Sheriff's or National Guard's."

Lennik shook his head. "That hatchet? I doubt it. I've spent plenty of time around both of those fine organisations and I haven't seen hatchets like that. The Range Sheriff's Deputies carry perfectly fine knives but hatchets, not so much. And if they had, why would they part with them? Seems like a fairly useful thing to have."

"Some illegal prospector or hunter's, then, maybe." Prabhnoor frowned again. "Though I don't know..."

"Exactly," Lennik nodded. "Why *they* would give it up, either. And I haven't noticed or heard reports of all that many illegal prospectors and hunters out here, have you? Yes, they're out there, but this is a *huge* area, Prabhnoor. Marcus and his gang traverse a lot of land to get the food they need and to try to evade dangerous predators. So yes, maybe they could have picked it up – hell, fellow like Marcus might have killed our hypothetical illegal prospector or hunter –"

"Don't say that, Lennik, please." Prabhnoor pursed her lips.

Lennik shook his head. "I'm not saying I want it to be true, but there's the hatchet and we both know Marcus has a – very understandable and justifiable – history of using that pickaxe against humans. Or, the other

and in my off-hand opinion probably more likely option is that someone intentionally *gave* it to them.”

“Why would someone want to do that?” Prabhnoor’s frown returned, deeper this time.

Lennik shrugged exasperatedly. “I don’t know. I really have no idea, but as preposterous as it sounds my intuition tells me it’s the most likely option. How many people do you really think there are running around out here losing nice new hatchets?”

Prabhnoor shook her head but didn’t respond. She logged the presence of the hatchet in her log along with her other observations.

They completed their observations of the *erectus*, dismounting a short ways away from the camp to investigate a stand of plants known as woolly yams where the *erectus* had been foraging. *Erectus* stools were nearby and Lennik readily seized the opportunity to take a sample. Prabhnoor followed his lead somewhat more gingerly. Renna, sniffing the ground, decided to follow the example of the *erectus* who had been here and helpfully provided fresher stool samples.

“Seem to be eating well, at least,” Lennik observed wryly. He drew a large, wide-bladed knife and handed it to Renna once she was done, who accepted it with a grateful warble and began to dig woolly yams.

Prabhnoor laughed. “You two are such a pair. Has she ever, you know, shown any inclination to rejoin her kind?”

Lennik stiffened. The answer to Prabhnoor’s question was no. Because she had been taken from her people so young, perhaps seven years of age, and then raised by *Homo sapiens* through much of her adolescence before being rescued by the Range Sheriff’s Department and placed in Lennik’s care, Renna’s socialisation into the society of Pleistonian *erectus*, *Homo erectus pleistoniensis*, had never been completed. Innocuous as it was, Prabhnoor’s question highlighted a deeper source of discomfort: the true reason Renna had never taken a mate.

It was because of him. The full weight and enormity of this revelation had failed to catch up to Lennik over the years the two of them had become first patient and therapist, then friends and finally forbidden lovers. Now the realisation hit him like a ton of bricks. He looked at Renna, happily and obliviously digging woolly yams with his knife, then at Prabhnoor, looking at him questioningly and with increasing puzzlement.

“No,” he said at last, his mouth surprisingly dry and his throat feeling like it had been filled with cotton. He reached for the canteen he kept close at hand and took a quick gulp of water. “No, she hasn’t. Taken from her people so young by those illegal settlers, you know. Too much *sapi-*

ens influence.” *Too much indeed*, he thought to himself. *And at least some of it’s my fault*. How could he have missed that? Practically his entire adult life Lennik had been studying *erectus* in the field and campaigning tirelessly on their behalf against developers, miners, settlers, missionaries – whoever tried to promote an imperialistic agenda for the *erectus*. He shuddered now to think that he might have been in any way, no matter how small, contributing to the very processes he so hated.

But it’s different, he told himself stubbornly. *I didn’t ask for Renna to be taken from her people. I tried to rehabilitate her for living in her natural environs.*

But you also took her as a lover, another voice reminded him. *You didn’t have to do that.*

That was consensual! He told himself. Still wrestling with his inner demons he stored his stool samples and helped Renna gather up her woolly yams.

“Are you all right?” Prabhnoor asked. “You seem a little... worried.”

“What?” Lennik snapped himself out of his reverie. “Fine, thanks, I’m just a little bit preoccupied. Lot on my mind. We should probably head out, get back to the station.”

“Agreed,” Prabhnoor assented. “We have collected plenty of data for now.”

They mounted their octephants, who rumbled with displeasure at being disturbed from their browsing, then headed west to the New Zambezi Range Sheriff’s station.

Travelling by octephant was *the* way to see Pleistonia, Lennik had decided. Better by far than an ATV or plane, they allowed a better appreciation of one’s surroundings and a greater attention to detail than was possible when inside a moving vehicle. Additionally as large vegetarians they were familiar to the *erectus* and not viewed as a threat. About the size of an Asian water buffalo, the creatures were large but not unmanageably so and had a remarkably even temperament if raised in captivity. A part of the natural ecosystem of Pleistonia, even the captive-bred ones were wary of Pleistonia’s dangerous predators and with their size, weight and powerfully-flailing tentacles could sometimes intimidate them when humans could not. And of course when all else failed they ran surprisingly fast. Horses were also being experimented with for frontier expeditions, by the Range Sheriff’s Department in particular. Although more familiar to humans, horses were nevertheless smaller and more vulnerable to the dangers of Pleistonia than were octephants. Additionally, unlike the octephants they did not have a history of a presence on the planet. Therefore there was a concern that they might estab-

lish one, with deleterious effects for the wildlife of Pleistonia. While all the horses that the colonists had brought with them on the original First Fleet had been vaccinated for animal plague diseases or epizootics, concerns still remained about the ability of diseases to transmit themselves from domestic horses or even cattle to the wildlife of Pleistonia. Domestic cattle borne epizootics had once decimated the bison on the Great Plains of North America in the late 19th century – biologists had every reason to fear that domestic horses might do the same to the wild cattle of Pleistonia.

They passed other herds as the hours went by, all returning to the west to fresh feeding grounds. As the light began to fade, shadows lengthening as the sun descended in its roseate glory to be replaced by the gentle light of Pleistonia's three moons, the small party began to think of a place to make camp. Lennik and Renna scanned every dense stand of brush and rustling patch of grass for a possible threat. Tigrekrakens, stealthiest of Pleistonia's great predators, were more than a match for octephants and could come almost shockingly close before springing an ambush. Prabhnoor, an experienced field researcher, followed Lennik and Renna's example but with less evident concern. She was not a daughter of the bush like Renna and she had not spent the majority of her adult life in the field like Lennik, practically becoming one with the *erectus*.

Near the bank of another creek they found a campsite. To be precise, a pre-made, *abandoned* campsite. Lennik and Prabhnoor reined in their octephants, who snorted and hooted dolefully at this sudden stop. But the two researchers had ample reason to be taken aback, for despite the ash stains and discarded bones, some cracked with the heat of fire, this was clearly no abandoned *erectus* camp.

The tracks of octephants, horses, and above all, booted feet made that much plainly obvious.

The engines of the plane droned as it forced itself into the air, ponderous on the ground but surprisingly adept in the skies. Below the airstrip fell away, and with it the city of Hearth. Now the southern coast of the great island of Hearthland was visible through her window: below the waters of the South Hearthland Sea stretched to the horizon. Beyond that horizon lay her new assignment.

Jacqueline Armistead surveyed the view below with passing disinterest. She was neither impatient nor overeager to reach her destination, the biggest assignment in her career to date. She knew this because she had been told so by her boss, CEO Petyor Mason of Refiner's Agent, in per-

son. Hand-picked by him to accomplish a task vital to the future success of the company: Operation 1848. She'd sat there in front of him, smelling his heavy cologne and noting the perfect poise between mature decorum and rakishness that his well-styled hair conveyed as he'd told her of the nature of the project and her role in it. He'd looked her dead in the eyes and told her in no uncertain terms that nothing less than the potential for unimaginable future success was hanging on her performance. She'd met his gaze and nodded sombrely, then asked when she was to get started.

It was this undaunted, no-project-too-great attitude, coupled with her careful meticulousness, that had led to Petyor choosing her. At forty-three Jacqueline was a hard, survivalist woman, and it showed in every line of her face. She wore her dark hair shoulder-length, tying it back with a leather tie. Somewhat short and slightly stocky of build, she compensated for it with a quietly commanding air. Jacqueline never presumed, she simply gave commands and made it clear that she expected them to be obeyed. No natural beauty, her somewhat angular features conveyed a muted grace of their own. She looked young for her years and yet her demeanour, her bearing, her very nature made it clear that she was old beyond them. She came by it honestly enough.

Jacqueline had grown up on the New Cyprus frontier, to the south of Hearthland, her parents among the first colonists to found the city of New Melbourne. Her father, a pilot for a logging company, had died in a plane crash. Her mother, grief-stricken, had tried to work before alcoholism consumed her and reduced her to being prostituted by one boyfriend or another. Her older brother had become involved in drug-running and died in a gang war. He had been twenty-three. Young Jacqueline had surmounted her circumstances, doing well in school and winning a scholarship to study geology and mineralogy at the University of Starfall. After graduation she'd been recruited almost immediately by Refiner's Agent. Over the course of the past nearly twenty years she had helped to engineer the Mission Partnership Station or MPS program, only to watch her work suffer a severe blow the preceding year in the disastrous aftermath of the now-infamous MPS revolt and the allegations of brutality, mass killings and forced labour recruitment.

Had it been Jacqueline in charge of that particular MPS there would have been no such allegations. She was far more efficient and thorough than that. That was the result of almost twenty years of project development, first in the interior of New Cyprus island, later in the vast frontiers of Pangaea, Pleistonia's great supercontinent. In that time she had seen more than enough of the *erectus* to form an opinion about them, and that

was that there had never been a worse excuse for a roadblock to development. A bunch of ape-men using *unbelievably* primitive stone tools, incapable of so much as hafting a spear, were being allowed to impede the progress of a civilisation in the Star Age! She shook her head, chuckling to herself. It was all right for those field scientists who wore their hearts on their sleeves, pleading with the Congress to please, please allow the poor, precious, evolutionarily orphaned *erectus* to continue in their blissful way, but they weren't the ones who stood to make – and lose, if things went wrong – vast fortunes in precious minerals. No, they left it to people like her to figure out where the metals that made civilisation possible would come from.

Civilisation wasn't *supposed* to be about playing nice, Jacqueline rationalised. It was about taking, the new supplanting the old. Progress and triumph through struggle. Survival of the fittest, all that. To make history you had to make someone else *be* history. Besides, Jacqueline knew her history – hell, everyone in Pleistonia did! – *Homo erectus* only existed here because a mysterious alien race, the Visitors, had brought them here in the first place 1.4 million years ago! Hence all the cattle: the Visitors apparently intended them as a food source for the *erectus*. And *why* had the Visitors brought the *erectus* to Pleistonia? To mine, for godsakes! She shook her head in exasperation. Hence the 1.4 million-year-old mining shafts scattered across Pangaea and the adjacent island of New California! It was this history that had given her the idea of using *erectus* as mine workers at the MPSs in the first place.

She put these thoughts from her mind, catnapping lightly as the South Hearthland Sea blended into the New Mediterranean, a vast bay off the northern coasts of Pangaea. She awoke to darkness. Below them the mouth of the New Zambezi lay, a mighty torrent of water cascading into the New Mediterranean. She knew this without seeing it: her handheld located their position. She looked around, surveying her crew. An ensemble of prospectors and surveyors, geologists and mineralogists, a crack team that would be reporting to her. They would investigate the current test sites and locate others. All part of the search for gold. These were tough men and women (mostly men, she noted), but few bore the hard-bitten look of a lifetime spent on the frontier questing for the tell-tale signs of mineralisation, braving storms, sickness and wild beasts, camping at night under the stars around an open fire, traversing vast areas by ATV or even by horse (she preferred to ride bareback) for the confirming chemical analysis and the revelation of copper, tin, zinc... even silver, gold, sometimes diamonds: she'd helped to open the first diamond mines on New Cyprus.

Mining meant civilisation. Civilisations needed the stone and metals that mining supplied, and advanced mining in turn was dependent upon the organisation of labour and technology that civilisation developed. An interlocking, escalating spiral, Jacqueline thought. *Fitting*. She pulled a long knife from its sheath at her thigh, the dully-varnished firm wooden handle and glinting double-edged blade testifying to long use. She tested its edge experimentally. The blade was her constant companion in the bush, and she'd used it to harvest food plants, skin game, and even to defend herself against aggressive frontier predators – animal or human. She flipped it, caught it by the handle deftly. Several of her watching crew flinched. *They'll get the hang of things*, she told herself. Sheathing the knife, she lit herself a cigarette and took a swig of tequila from her hip flask. Across the dark landscape below, the lawless frontier that had moulded her practically all her life, lay her assignment: the key to ultimate progress and order in these wild lands. *Operation 1848*, she laughed to herself. *Nothing like human greed to move mountains*.

Move mountains, and build civilisations. Civilisations that could transform entire continents.

Chapter Two

“It's no Range Sheriff's camp,” Lennik asserted after a preliminary analysis. “Too many people – looks like men, women, even children – not to mention a number of horses and octephants. Looks like they've taken game.” He gestured to the discarded bones. “And judging by the cut marks, those were butchered with steel tools, not Acheulean bifaces and cleavers.”

Prabhnoor shook her head in bewilderment. “It doesn't make sense, though, Lennik.” Her voice carried exasperation and more than a hint of concern. “Why would families be traipsing out in the dangerous wilds of the Pleistonian frontier, hunting and carrying all their belongings on horse- and octephant-back? Illegal prospectors are usually single men, while illegal settlers –”

“Usually settle down in one spot,” Lennik finished for her. “Right. So we're dealing with a new phenomenon here.”

“Men who bring their families to Pleistonia to hunt game and move around on horses and octephants for a while?” Prabhnoor replied, her voice still laced with exasperation and frustration. “This just makes no sense, Lennik.”

“I know.” Lennik nodded soberly. “You're right. Well, whoever they

are, they're probably the answer to how our Marcus got his hands on that fine hatchet one way or another. Now would probably be a good time to prepare a report for the Bureau – I think I'll actually prepare one for once. They need to be informed about this.”

Despite the oddity of the circumstances Lennik and Prabhnoor decided to make camp at the site. Renna, intrigued by the traces left by the camp's previous occupants, sorted through its debris, poking and sniffing at various items.

“Well, whoever they were, they don't appear to be wasteful,” Lennik noted approvingly. “This whole area's clean – looks like they killed a couple of taurochs and then ate every last scrap of meat and utilised every part of the creatures they could. Reminds me of what the Native Americans of the Great Plains used to do with the bison.” He frowned. *That's odd*, he thought, *why would illegal settlers care about not being wasteful?* He sighed and put it from his mind. The Range Sheriffs would get to the bottom of things sooner or later.

They gathered wood, Renna's keen eye and know-how helping her to find the best and most even-burning. Lennik lit a fire and they roasted woolly yams on crude spits made from fresh branches with their leaves and twigs stripped away. Over the flames the hair-like growth burned away and the tubers cooked in their husks, crisp insides becoming tender and bubbling in their own juices. Finally the pressure of the heat led to the rupturing of a natural seam along one side of the husks and the tubers were done.

“Frontier delicacy,” Lennik commented, juggling the mouthfuls of piping-hot, steaming, potato-like tuber on his tongue.

Prabhnoor nodded her agreement. “I've always rather liked these. Best thing the Visitors ever did for Pleistonia's flora.” In addition to *erec-tus*, cattle, and food plants such as grasses from Earth, the Visitors had introduced their own pets, livestock such as the octepphants, and food plants. The woolly yam was one of the more ubiquitous of the lattermost and the most-savoured by the newly arrived *sapiens* colonists.

Renna, ever ready to eat the tubers raw, nevertheless found them quite good cooked as well.

They tied the octepphants to a nearby tree – the animals would be safe there until morning. If a predator approached the beasts would alert them to its presence with their hooting, bugling call. Lennik banked the fire, allowing it to smoulder through the night. The smell of smoke would keep potential predators wary at least.

“I'd really feel a lot better if we could somehow sleep off the ground.”

Prabhnoor looked about nervously. Night had fallen, and the moons glowed over savannahs and scrublands as far as the eye could see.

“Borrow the gun if you like.” Lennik laughed playfully, nodding toward the long rifle in its holster. “Prabhnoor, relax. I’ve been sleeping out in the open for twelve years and I’ve only had a dozen or so close calls.” He smiled at the mortified expression on Prabhnoor’s face, and at his own partial humour. A dozen was a bit of an exaggeration. “Look, the large predators have huge territories because they need to eat a lot of food, right? So I figure our chances of running into one when it’s hungry are pretty slim. And even if we do, there’s nothing to say it won’t be after something else.”

“Well, do as you please, Doctor Ostrand.” She smiled as he winced at the mention of his degree coupled with his last name. “But I shall remain close to the fire this evening... and I’ll take the gun.”

“You do that,” Lennik told her with a smile. “Renna and I will go find sleeping arrangements elsewhere.” *She has to suspect*, he thought guiltily.

Prabhnoor, however, had shown no suspicions about similar sleeping arrangements in the several field expeditions they had undertaken. She had never expressed any amorous interest in him, nor he in her, and he had known her on and off for several years from the University of Hearth, from which they had both earned graduate degrees and where she taught, returning to the field in the off-season. Lennik had taught at the same university before the field had consumed him.

That had been when he’d met Renna, he realised as the two of them found a comfortable place to bunk, sheltered by several trees and partially screened by brush from the campsite, giving them some privacy. They made a nest after a fashion, stripping branches from trees and the ground and intermixing leaves and grasses. Finally Lennik undressed.

It had been a year since they had first embraced. Initially a part of Lennik had found it a bizarre, exotic thrill: love-making with Renna had been unlike his several haphazard and lacklustre attempts with the female members of his own species. She had possessed a raw energy and vigour all her own. Over the course of a year that sense of the exotic had matured into a greater sense of wonder that their union could occur and persist. More than anything Lennik felt a deep sense of fulfilment: their lives had become so interconnected, this had merely been the final step.

But now even as they touched, bodies intertwining sinuously to defy the chasm placed between them by almost a million and a half years of genetic drift, Lennik was troubled by the voice inside his head that ques-

tioned whether he was not in fact a contributor in his own way to the assimilation and *sapien*-isation of the *erectus*.

As if sensing his inner doubts and reticence, Renna drew closer, warbling softly in her *erectus* voice, still such a mystery to him. But where words fail, communication can still persist. She had made her choice. That much was clear. Lennik banished his worries and consigned himself to passion's sweet surrender.

They rose early, breakfasting on some of the prepared rations from the octephants' saddlebags. The sun's rays still painted the horizon in crimsoned hues as Lennik began stamping out the fire, kicking earth over the glowing coals with his high boots. The octephants had slept standing up in the manner of their kind and now they gave low, hooting noises of eagerness to be off as the three hominids mounted.

"Let's check our bearings." Lennik consulted his compass, looked at the rising sun and nodded knowingly as he directed his octephant. "Good. Should be there by midday I'd think."

"I still say that we should have taken the risk of predators a little more seriously last night," Prabhnoor said with a reproving smile. "I don't know how you manage to be so nonchalant out here."

"I don't know," Lennik shrugged. "Still alive, aren't we? Sleep well enough last night?"

"Yes I did, thank you," she acknowledged. "But all the same, I do think we should be careful."

"Careful is my middle name." Lennik chuckled. "That's why I'm still alive." Prabhnoor shot him a dirty look, but smiled. This light banter was pleasant, and a welcome alternative from the bureaucratic headache of dealing with the Bureau of Aboriginal Interests in general.

They only had one run-in with a large predator on their way back to the Range Sheriff's station. A couple of hours out from the mysterious campsite and their octephants suddenly tensed, tentacles flaring animatedly toward a dense stand of grass. The three hominids tensed instinctively.

Renna was the first to spot it, her keen eyes discerning the almost imperceptible traces of movement in the grasses. An immense, sleek body, easily ten feet in length, covered by grainy-textured plates that moved as the creature breathed. A head with large, chillingly intelligent eyes and six immensely powerful, grasping tentacles. Powerful, long legs crouched low to the ground. It was somewhat dusky in colour, with darker stripes running crosswise down its back. A *tigrekraken*.

"Just another beautiful day in paradise," Lennik quipped. *Tigrekrakens* were more than capable of taking octephants such as the

ones they rode, and Lennik had heard stories from Range Sheriffs and illegal settlers, hunters and prospectors alike of them taking humans as prey. They were immensely powerful and effective killers. Fortunately, this one didn't seem to have its sights on them but on a small herd of cattalo grazing nearby. It sprang from hiding, accelerating with almost unbelievable speed and agility for a creature so large. The cattalo bolted but one didn't react fast enough. With a single powerful swipe of its long, razor-sharp, scimitar-like claws the tigrekraken brought down its prey.

At the tigrekraken's attack the octephants had become almost unmanageable, rearing and hooting: the tigrekraken was one of their most feared enemies. One of the largest land predators on Pleistonia, the tigrekraken attacked a wide variety of large prey animals. Renna held her cool, although she well knew the danger the tigrekraken posed. Intelligently, she perceived that it was no threat as long as it was distracted. Lennik and Prabhnoor calmed the mounts, giving them rein enough to direct them away from the kill.

The journey back held more evidence of the migrating herds: trackways of countless hooves and prints, foliage ravaged by a thousand thousand hungry mouths. Towards mid-day they passed a herd of mammoth octephants, cousins of their smaller mounts. True to their name, the creatures were comparable in size with the larger of the extinct mammoth species of Earth. They moved with a stately, imperial grace across the landscape, massive tentacles flaring to scent the air. Renna looked with wonder and interest as the two *sapiens* guided their mounts around the large animals.

"There's something you don't see everyday," Lennik observed. "At least we don't have to worry about predators with them around."

"Thank goodness for that." Prabhnoor smiled. Then, changing the subject, "I really don't know how you manage to stay in the field for so long, Lennik. Honestly, before I was posted out here with you I'd never been out in the field except by plane or ATV, and then only for short periods of time. Usually I've even stayed at a base camp. How do you manage?"

Lennik chuckled softly. "I'm duly flattered, Prabhnoor, thanks. But for me it's not a question of *managing* so much because I don't see myself as living in the *field*. To me, all this" – he gestured expansively at the wilderness around him, as far as the eye could see – "is home. I know that may sound a little trite or clichéd but it's the truth. When I was first paired up with Renna here my assignment was to get her rehabilitated enough to rejoin her kind. But just the opposite happened: I ended up out here instead." He shook his head with a rueful smile. "No, it's civilisa-

tion that I have to 'manage' with, Prabhnoor. Civilisation with its mean little rules and niceties and petty tyrannies and debilitating creature comforts. I've spent most of the last several years and much of my adult life before that out here, living off the land for the most part, pulling a few strings when I need some of the few things that civilisation still has to offer me: medical supplies, equipment, ammunition, things like that."

Prabhnoor shook her head in wonderment. "At the Bureau we always used to call you the 'Wild Man'," she guiltily confessed with a slight smile. "You've done some brilliant research, though, Lennik."

Lennik smiled but shook his head in modest dismissal. "It's nothing, really, Prabhnoor. When you've lived around them, when you've ate, drank, slept, breathed *Homo erectus pleistoniensis* as long as I have it's no great feat, really."

"Nonsense," she reproached him encouragingly. "I attended one of your lectures at the University once when I was still a grad student and I was greatly impressed."

"Like I said, no big deal." Lennik chuckled. "That the information gets out is all I care about. And I've been impressed with your research as well. It's wonderful working with someone from the Bureau who's actually been 'in the field' and is a qualified authority. It's such a refreshing change from the norm."

Prabhnoor laughed. "You really don't like the Bureau, do you, Lennik? And yet you receive a substantial salary from it..."

Lennik shrugged. "I don't like it in general, but it's better that it exists. There needs to be a way to protect the *erectus* from the devastating effects our civilisation can have on them. Although oftentimes I feel the only part of its name that has any truth to it is the 'Bureau', because it's bureaucratic as hell and much of the time I don't see how it protects the *erectus*, there's no denying it does some good. And if they're willing to pay me as a researcher, liaison and consultant – basically giving me money to do what I love and tell them about it in order to affect their policy – I'm all for that."

"I agree that the Bureau can be a bit... paternalistic at times," Prabhnoor acceded, "but at least they're trying to help. I mean, we've encountered our evolutionary cousins after a long time apart, and nothing in our history – our recent history anyway – could have prepared us for this."

"Well, at least we can enjoy the encounter, right Rennan?" Lennik tickled her ribs and she warbled gleefully, tugging at his long hair and beard playfully.

It was early afternoon when they finally reached the New Zambezi

Range Sheriff's Station. A relatively small, rustic building of adobe and timber, it sat ensconced on the bank of the wide New Zambezi River, the only representation of the long arm of the law for miles.

"Home sweet home," Lennik quipped. Renna warbled, pointing to the building with interest, pleased to be back.

Prabhnoor laughed. "Regretful to be returning so soon to civilisation, *Doctor Ostrand?*" she asked. "Renna doesn't seem to be."

Lennik smiled wickedly. "No, she knows we just have to bring a little of the wilds back with us."

They were greeted by Deputy Arjun Singh, who smiled when he saw them. "Welcome back, you three. Find anything out there?" Then to Prabhnoor in their shared Punjabi, "You actually managed to bring both of them back?"

"It wasn't too difficult," Prabhnoor replied, also in Punjabi, "he thinks he's going to bring the wilds back with him to corrupt civilisation – and that she'll help him."

Lennik shot them both a suspiciously playful glare.

"I think Commissioner Pritchard might have a few things to say about that," Singh observed, still in Punjabi.

"I think I caught the word 'Pritchard'," Lennik groused. "As in sanctimonious, condescending, doesn't-do-real-fieldwork Pritchard? That Pritchard? What's he up to now?"

"That Pritchard," Singh confirmed. "And, nothing in particular: just his usual self."

Lennik's strained relationship with the man who was, technically speaking, his boss was the source of endless amusement for his friends and associates at his expense. He laughed along, for the most part. But the two had been born to clash: Type A personalities, each opinionated and strong-willed, each convinced that they were in the right and the other was completely in error.

"How have things here been for you?" Prabhnoor asked Singh.

"Rather well, actually," Singh grinned. "Rather little to do but sight-see, really. My grandparents used to tell me stories about old India, before the British, even before the Moguls, and I can't help seeing a little of old India in this place. Oh, but a young man did come by asking for you, Dr Ostrand. He's here now."

Lennik started. Who on Pleistonia would want to find him? He took every precaution and made every effort to keep people from *wanting* to find him in the first place. "Too popular for my own good, I suppose." He shrugged.

The door opened and the man in question strode out. His complexion

was dusky, his hair jet-black, tightly curled and long, and a short beard hung from his chin. He was tall, easily six feet or more. His clothing was of leather and rough, durable fabrics, caked with dirt from long travel. His visage was pronounced, angular. Most striking of all, however, were the weapons.

Never in his twelve years traversing the wilds of Pleistonia had Lennik seen anyone carry such an abundance of weapons. By the startled look on Prabhnoor's face it was plain to see she hadn't, either. A powerful handgun was holstered at the man's side and a long, menacing hunting knife strapped to his other thigh. A crossbow hung over his back, and, most incongruously, he carried a long lance tipped with what appeared to be obsidian.

"Doctor Ostrand," he extended his hand in greeting, "And Doctor Nanda, Singh tells me? My name is Barid Khorasani."

"Lennik, please." Lennik accepted the hand. "And pleased to meet you."

"Call me Prabhnoor," Prabhnoor echoed. "The pleasure's all mine."

Barid shook his head. "No, it is I who am honoured to finally meet you, Dr. – Lennik, and you as well, Prabhnoor. Any friend of Lennik's is a friend by association."

"Duly flattered, I assure you," Lennik chuckled, trying to overcome his embarrassment. "But what, might I ask, have I done to deserve such high commendation?"

"Please, let us go inside." Barid gestured. "You three have travelled a long way, Mr Singh tells me. I will explain everything there."

"I grew up here," Barid began, somewhat obscurely.

Lennik and Prabhnoor raised their eyebrows. Deputy Singh had gone back to the control room of the station to attend to the duties of his post. They were sitting in a comfortable wood-panelled central room in the station, Lennik indulging himself in a cigar and a can of amber ale from a cooler in the corner, ignoring Prabhnoor's reproving glance. Renna was busying herself messily cracking an assortment of nuts from the station's supply, more for the fun of the exercise than for the nutrition.

"*Here* meaning?" Prabhnoor frowned, confused.

Barid gestured expansively. "Out in all of this. The wilderness. Ever since I was five, so it's been a good eighteen, nineteen years now, I guess."

"You were a settler?" Lennik asked, all ears now.

Barid shook his head distastefully. "I realise how that sounds but no, never. I am a Rangetrekker," he declared with pride. "My parents were

among the first, moved our whole family out to form the First Clan. My people, we are the Rangetrekkers, those who have forsworn civilisation, riding by horse and octephand to follow the great herds. We use modern weapons,” he nodded to the holstered gun, “only in defence. The only acceptable weapons of the hunt are the lance, crossbow and knife – old weapons.”

“Why don’t you settle down?” Prabhnoor asked. “Why do you limit yourselves?”

“Because we want to live simply, away from the taint of civilisation,” Barid explained. “We limit our numbers and our subsistence strategies to maintain nature. The founder of our movement studied the Native Americans, in particular the peoples of the Great Plains and was inspired to found our movement some thirty years ago.”

Native Americans... Great Plains... Lennik thought. *That’s it!* “I think we may have found one of your encampments, a little over half-a-day’s ride by octephand,” he said.

Barid smiled. “Yes, that sounds about right. My people passed your way but I had already split off from them to come here. I was hoping to find you.”

“But why?” Lennik asked, suspicion laced with curiosity in his voice.

“Now we get to it.” Barid’s face grew dark. “I came here because I know that you, too, Lennik, are a man like my people. You care for this planet and respect its creatures. You put your own life on the line one year ago to bring the raiders of the *erectus* and the despoilers of this planet to justice. You are a man to whom people will listen.”

“Well, I don’t know about that.” Lennik frowned. “It did take me an awfully long time to do that – and I had some great help.”

Barid shook his head. “I know all about it, Lennik. I’ve gone over the information from the ‘nets that I’ve picked up in trading posts a dozen times. You took on Refiner’s Agent, the largest and most environmentally exploitative corporation on this planet and you *won*. How many people can say that?”

“Well, not nearly as many as I’d like,” Lennik agreed.

“Exactly.” Barid nodded emphatically. “And it is because of Refiner’s Agent that I am here today: because of what they have done, and what they are trying to do.”

Lennik was on the edge of his seat in a flash. “What?” he asked, voice flat and incredulous.

“It’s true.” Barid nodded. “They’re starting to become active again in places we haven’t expected to find them. We’ve spotted several patrols

by Refiner's Agent employees in the company of small contingents of the Greenpark Brigade."

A vein in Lennik's neck was throbbing. He tried to keep his voice under control as he spoke. "I was... unaware of these... developments."

Barid nodded grimly. "I was sure that you must have been unaware, Lennik, or we'd have heard of *that* by now." He chuckled dryly. "But they're up to something big. I think they are bringing in a new leader to direct the entire operation: the communiqués that my people have overheard, with our radios or through more... *direct* means all indicate that we are observing the preliminary phases of a large and important project of some sort. And any time Refiner's Agent does something like this I can only conclude that they are up to no good."

"I can only conclude you're right," Lennik said.

"Wait a minute," Prabhnoor interjected. "I hate to be the naysayer here, but I for one have a little more faith and confidence in the abilities of the Bureau of Aboriginal Interests to protect the *erectus* through the Congressional Committee on Aboriginal Affairs." She held up a hand to forestall Lennik's protest and Barid's disbelief. "I have been working quite closely with the Bureau now for some time and have given testimony for the Committee, even. I know you don't like Commissioner Pritchard, Lennik, but for all his faults he's trying to protect the *erectus*. Remember, not so long ago Captain Hussler was in that office!"

"Refiner's Agent lost a lot of face and credibility over what happened last year with you and your friends, Lennik. They'd be utter fools to do anything even remotely shady now, especially if it involved the *erectus*. I'm sure whatever they're up to is perfectly legitimate, and that they've gone through all of the correct legal channels for their activities. Refiner's Agent CEO Petyor Mason not only publicly apologised last year, Lennik, I'll remind you he willingly turned control of the MPSs over to the National Guard, the Range Sheriff's Department, and the Bureau. He even donated a substantial grant to the Bureau in its efforts to rehabilitate the *erectus* who had suffered under Captain Hussler and those like him."

Barid's face darkened. "Mason is a man who would sit at your fire yet steal your meat. He was thwarted before but now he is coming back to finish what he started."

"First rule of cleaning up a mess: express your shock and innocence and write the prosecution a fat check." Lennik's voice carried a sceptical, jaded note. "Mason was behind the whole thing: the raids on the *erectus* villages, the forced labour, everything. He had to have been. Where the hell were Captain Hussler and the rest of the lot getting their

orders from? And when the curtain was pulled on his little mess, he did what any sensible man would do: deny any knowledge and try to go above and beyond the bounds of cooperation. Not to mention bribery.”

“It wasn’t bribery, it was a *gift*.” Prabhnoor sighed exasperatedly. “Honestly, you’re so obstinate sometimes Lennik. Why must you always persist in thinking this way? Mason has his faults but right now he’s desperate for public approval after what happened.”

Lennik snapped his fingers. “Exactly. Thank you, Prabhnoor. He’s *desperate*. And desperate people do crazy things. You know, I think I’ve heard enough to get an idea of what’s going on here. Refiner’s Agent has only ever been interested in two things: mineral riches, and land. They started out as a mining firm, in Hearthland, then New Cyprus and most recently here on Pangaea. More recently they’ve branched out into the real estate market in the developments at New Melbourne and New Ithaca in particular, but also in Hearthland. But some of the files that we recovered from the MPSs – those that weren’t scrambled in time – indicated that they were interested in going for the big one – expanding into realty right here, in Pangaea. On *erectus* lands, of course.”

“The information that we have obtained indicates that they are looking for gold.” Barid’s voice was heavy with distaste. “I have lived so long on the range that I do not feel its lure as do ‘civilised’ people, so it is difficult for me to understand why they would go to such effort for something that you can not eat or wear and that they do not need to trade for goods. They are also doing something more strange – giving gifts to the *erectus*.”

“Gold? Gifts? Of course.” Lennik gritted his teeth, stomping his boot emphatically. “It all fits: they’re trying to get the gold and improve their image in the public eye regarding the *erectus*. We found a shiny new metal hatchet in an *erectus* camp recently, Barid. Would they happen to be giving out those?”

“Hatchets, knives, blankets, grain and dried meat.” Barid nodded, listing them off.

Lennik shook his head. “Contaminating their culture *yet again* so that they’ll be docile and easy to control – either as forced labour or simply to get them out of the way.”

“Forgive me, you two, but I can’t help thinking this sounds a little paranoid,” Prabhnoor interjected. “I can’t believe that they would break the law again, after what last year’s debacle cost them.”

“I’m sure they’ve got the correct forms filled out and the right signatures on the dotted lines.” Lennik shook his head. “And that I find almost more worrisome.” He stopped, turning to face Barid with hand extended.

“Let’s get to the bottom of this. Where do we start and when can we leave?”

Barid took the proffered hand and shook it solemnly. “They’re going to be working in this area, we know that much. That means they’ll have to be in and out of Twin Mounds.”

Lennik nodded, recognising the name of the MPS where he and his friends had exposed Refiner’s Agent. “Makes sense. Twin Mounds it is then.”

Barid nodded. “As to your other question: are you ready to ride?”

Jacqueline surveyed her new post with critical approval. It was night but the light of Pleistonia’s three moons and the stars and the powerful gaze of the landing lights illuminated the facility. The complex was unprepossessing in its architecture, a collection of low adobe buildings. The control tower jutted boldly into the sky, its challenge met only by the raised spire of a church with illumined crucifix, a proverbial light in the darkness. She had spent much of her career far from any building, seeking new sources of minerals and directing the establishment of new mining facilities. The complex would make a good base for their activities.

A small delegation approached, wearing the uniforms of the National Guard.

Their leader, a rawboned Caucasian man who looked in his early thirties, spoke. “Welcome to Twin Mounds mining and administrative facility. I’m Sergeant Emmanuel Walker.”

So it’s a “mining and administrative facility” now, is it? Jacqueline noted to herself. *Interesting. Guess they had to change the name when they took the “mission” out of it.* Aloud she said: “Pleasure to meet you, Sergeant. Jacqueline Armistead, mineralogist and senior project director, Refiner’s Agent. I assume the facilities are prepared?”

“Indeed they are, ma’am. You and your crew will be staying in the central compound. We’ve plenty of room for you: the Bureau keeps a rather minimal staff and they tend to move around plenty in any case.”

“Excellent. Have the deployments from the Greenpark Brigade arrived yet?” she asked, carefully watching his face to gauge his reaction to the mention of the now much-reviled institution.

Sergeant Walker evinced no distaste as he replied, “No ma’am. We’re expecting them tomorrow, though. Don’t mind telling you it’ll be a fair sight better to have a little extra help looking after all of this.” He gestured expansively to the surrounding countryside. “Lot of range to patrol.” He nodded knowingly.

Jacqueline smiled, a brief turning-up of the corners of her thin, hard-

ened mouth. *He's receptive. That's something.* "Of course, Sergeant. I can assure you of our complete cooperation and assistance in maintaining the security of the range as we conduct our licensed activities."

Walker nodded appreciatively. "Let me show you to your quarters, then. We'll help you with your baggage."

The interior of the building adhered to a somewhat rugged aesthetic that well matched the frontier beyond its walls: wood panelling and simple, practical furniture. The central lobby contained a startling sight: the stuffed hide of a creature that stood erect on powerful hind legs, easily twelve feet tall, with curving, scimitar claws, a hide made of interlocking, grainy, scale-like plates, and six tentacles splayed menacingly around an open, beakish mouth. A dracokraken, the largest and most powerful land predator on Pleistonia.

"Trophy of the late Captain Hussler's," Walker supplied. "Bit of a unique way to greet visitors."

Jacqueline scarcely took note of the outlandish trophy, so meticulously crafted to imitate life, so spectacularly poised to suggest the maximum amount of threat. She'd encountered any number of dracokrakens and other nightmarish dangers, had had several close calls in fact. She'd survived and that was all there was to it. No real need to dramatise the fact.

The central compound was a series of interconnected living and working quarters, with larger common areas for recreation. Most of the doors were closed: it was still a few hours before dawn, after all. A few drowsy employees of either Refiner's Agent or the Bureau of Aboriginal Interests played chess or watched TV. The Bureau maintained a position of administrative power at the station, as it was responsible for monitoring the well-being of the remaining resident *erectus* and ensuring the continued stability of neighbouring populations.

Whoever had been in charge of arranging her quarters had taken her credentials seriously, Jacqueline could tell. The room was more spacious than she felt she had a right to expect for what was essentially a frontier outpost. She had her own complete bathroom adjacent to the main room, as though she hadn't squatted behind bushes, dug holes and bathed in creeks and watering holes on and off for years. A large closet ran along the far wall and a rugged-looking wooden armoire crouched inside it. An elegant desk with workspace, an actual bed (as though she hadn't been sleeping on the ground for most of her adult life – on the floor when she was back in civilisation!), and a large window completed the picture.

She'd slept on and off on the plane, but decided to take advantage of

the opportunity to catch a couple more hours of sleep before the sun rose. Kicking off her boots, she lay down on the floor and soon fell asleep.

She awoke before dawn to the pale grey of the lightening sky. She'd always been a sporadic, light sleeper. That was what frontier living did to you. She splashed water on her face, ate a quick meal of military-issue freeze-dried and canned rations, and then did her warm-up stretches. Jacqueline never liked to start the day without a good run.

She ran around the compound, doing lap after lap until her legs ached, her lungs heaved and her throat burned. Cooling herself with an easy jog, she slowed before the most distinctive and easily-recognisable building in the complex. The double doors of the church were of a dense, heavy wood yet slid easily open to her touch. She stepped inside.

The church, though humble, was elegant in its design. Fitting with the roughhewn "frontier" aesthetic of the station it was built of the same adobe as the central lodge, with a vaulted ceiling rising upward into the steeple adorned with a crucifix that she had seen the preceding night. Inside the church votive candles burned, and statues of the Madonna and Christ on the cross were also present. Rows of hard, varnished wooden pews lined the floor. Stained glass windows of various religious scenes were beginning to glow with the light of dawn.

A man sat in the front row, typing on a handheld. The aroma of aromatic smoke wafted through the air: he was smoking a clove cigarette.

"I would not have taken you for one of the fold. Have you come for an early confession?" he asked by way of wry humour, standing up and turning to face her. He was a thin, crease-worn man, his face browned and etched with lines by time and sun, his hair closely cropped to reveal a receding hairline. His features were hawk-like, his nose aquiline, and even in the early-morning light his eyes gleamed with a needle-sharp intensity.

"Father Joseph Landa." She smiled thinly. "Thought I'd find you here. Jacqueline Armistead, mineralogist and senior project developer for Refiner's Agent." She extended her hand.

He drew level with her and accepted the hand. "Yes, I've been expecting you. Cardinal Cruz has told me much about the upcoming project and I anticipate a productive and fruitful partnership endeavour." His smile was as lean and austere as the rest of him. "You are a godsend, Jacqueline: for the past year I have been forced to wait in almost interminable uselessness, with nothing more to do than hold the Mass for the handful of the mining crews that even marginally identify as Catholic when they're not drinking and whoring, while foolish polemicists have sought to undermine all that I had worked for. It pleases me very greatly

to at last return to the work to which I was called, to further the cause of civilisation and the True Faith among the wildmen.”

“You’ll have plenty of opportunity for that,” Jacqueline assured him. “But why don’t we take this outside?”

“As you wish.” Landa folded up his keyboard, put away his handheld and stubbed his cigarette out on the floor before following her outside.

“I take it, then, that Cardinal Cruz has gone over the plan in depth with you?” Jacqueline asked as they stepped out. Landa lit another cigarette, offered her one which she accepted.

“He did indeed.” Landa puffed, savouring the sweet-smelling smoke as it rolled off his tongue. “The Native Missions Arm has a dual role to play: on the one hand we have already begun distributing goods to the *erectus*, both here and in the wild, as part of our new and much-publicised Social Welfare Outreach platform. My brothers will accompany your men into the field and accustom the *erectus* to our presence and our movements. The second part of our role is at home, on New Cyprus and Hearthland, where Cardinal Cruz will promote our efforts in support of Congressman Yu’s pro-development platform.”

“Correct.” Jacqueline nodded, satisfied. “Now, your reputation precedes you, Father Landa. I know you have an exceptional record within the Native Missions Arm of distinguished service. In the fall-out from last year’s debacle at this very station you were able to walk away unscathed.”

Landa nodded, deceptively casually. “Some of us have an exceptional talent for covering our bases, thanks be to God,” he said with a hint of irony. “I was fortunate enough to land on my feet when others were not. One, in particular.”

“Captain Hussler,” Jacqueline said. “Now, the conversation that I need to have with you, Father, is an important one. I designed much of the MPS system: hell, I even thought of using *erectus* as labour because the Visitors did! What I need you to tell me is your impression of how and why the debacle occurred and how we can keep something like this from occurring again.”

Landa chuckled dryly. “As to your last question, Jacqueline, the answer is that there are two ways to protect ourselves: never do anything ever again that will upset the *erectus*-lovers from the Bureau of Aboriginal Interests, particularly Lennik Ostrand, or get Congressman Yu elected.”

“I was guessing you’d say that, although it is somewhat unfortunate.”

“As for the rest of it, well, Captain Hussler was capable and dependable enough in his own way, at least for a long time. He got the job done:

the ore shipments went out on time, the *erectus* almost always behaved and there were plenty of them on hand: the raiding saw to that. But after a time I think the Captain became over-confident in his ability. He carried out more raids than were really necessary, and with more force than was necessary. Before, the men had always tear-gassed the *erectus*, but they took to killing some of them simply for the thrill. He became more brutal in the disciplinary practices that he implemented at the station against the *erectus* workers and forced them to work longer and harder. I tried to tell him he was making mistakes but to no avail.

“And then it finally happened: one of the more aggressive and unstable young males attacked his human supervisors in a shaft and before anyone could do anything the entire shaft crew of *erectus* was rioting. The Captain wanted to cover it up, of course, but unfortunately there was nothing doing: too much property damage, too many suspicious deaths, command told him there was no way they could be discreet about this – had to package it as a riot of savage, ferocious and ungrateful *erectus* against their human handlers.”

“Makes sense,” said Jacqueline. “I take it this is where Lennik and those others come in?”

“Indeed.” Landa’s features bore disdain. “A Range Sheriff’s Deputy and a *priest* from the Pleistonian See, if you can believe that. What a trio. And that little pet *erectus* that follows the good Doctor Ostrand everywhere – practically his concubine – makes four. Legal officer because it’s a matter of the law, liaison for the Bureau because *erectus* have acted in an unexpectedly violent manner, killed and been killed, and of course a priest to investigate myself and the others to ascertain whether or not the See was following an upright policy.”

Jacqueline frowned, dragging on her cigarette. “And Captain Hussler tried to do them in?”

“They found him out,” Landa explained. “Like I said, he made mistakes and didn’t clean up after himself. He had grown incompetent through arrogance and cockiness. After several years, after watching this station rise from the ground and administering it for all that time, he’d become too good at what he did for his own good – he was messing up.” Landa flicked ash from his cigarette. “So of course he settled on trying to fix their death, make it look like an accident – might even have worked, too. But of course, they got away. And then Captain Hussler, as I’m sure you know, has the combined ineptitude and misfortune to not only not capture them but to lose twelve men – *twelve men* – trying to accomplish the deed.”

Jacqueline nodded. “I’ve heard the details. Two ambushed by a

tigrekraken – well, those things will eat anything that moves – four run down by buffalo and *six* gunned down by the party themselves. Pretty unbelievable. Don't see what he could have done, except maybe keep them closer."

"True enough," said Landa. "But as a leader I maintain that he acted irresponsibly in the situations in which he put them, as well as in his responses to the losses. Honestly, I never would have imagined that another *priest* would happen to have extensive practice with guns, but apparently this one was something of an eccentric that way. So I would have thought that those six would have been able to take them easily. But the other six – well, those are the kind of losses a commander incurs when he strings troops out on a frontier they don't have experience with. Those men were used to keeping the station running efficiently and occasionally going on hunts or raids. But the real lesson isn't one of wilderness survival, it's of the enemy he failed to conquer. That delegation was determined and they had a damning case against him."

"I suppose that leaves our path pretty clear, then," Jacqueline said. "Now, about this Doctor Ostrand: I'm concerned about him in particular. My dossiers indicate that he is still active in the area."

"He is, and you should be concerned," Landa confirmed. "Lennik, as he prefers to be called, is a radical *erectus*-rights activist. He railed against the MPS system before it was even implemented."

"The dossier said that, too."

"Since the debacle he's been working for the Bureau as a sort of consultant based out of this facility. He's hell-bent to get essentially all humans off this entire *continent*." Landa snorted derisively. "Plus New California, of course. Anywhere the precious *erectus* live. Talks a lot about the 'precedents of history' and how what we're doing is no better than what the Europeans did with colonialism, ridiculous things like that. Real character: he's been studying the *erectus* in the field for the past twelve years now, almost all of his adult life. Past several years he's taken to the wild altogether, with that pretty little *erectus* bitch of his, some pretentious idea of 'rehabilitating' her or something. He only returns to civilisation when he has to. He's a sometimes-employee, sometimes-pain-in-the-ass for the Bureau, but they keep him around. Every now and again they pull his strings hard enough and he surfaces from whatever god-forsaken corner of the wilderness he's been hiding in to speak at an event or publish some of his research. Self-sufficient, too: lives off the land. I've heard he even hunts with a crossbow, of all things."

Jacqueline chuckled dryly. "What a character. Sounds like he'll be

quite a handful. But I've been living in the wilderness for even longer than he has, and I can tell you firsthand that civilisation can't come fast enough if it brings a paycheck with my name on it. Thanks for your time, Father Landa. Want to go get something to eat? Busy day ahead."

"The conversation was my pleasure," Landa replied graciously. "And please, call me Joseph. Let's go eat, we have much to discuss."

Jacqueline surveyed her new workspace. The lab really had it all: centrifuges and various devices for separating sediments, microscopes, chemical solvents and reagents, machines for reading spectral lines in order to determine chemical composition – everything she needed to analyse samples from the field. Rows of desktop computers stood to attention. She turned to address her crew, who were filing in behind her.

"All right everyone, you know the drill. Today we plan: analyse the samples the preliminary teams have provided, look at the topography, geography, and general geology and mineralogy of the area and let's fix some regions that warrant more investigation. It shouldn't be too hard: we know gold's out there and we know some of the places where it's been found already."

They worked efficiently, Jacqueline was pleased to see. A minimum of unnecessary chatter, their movements displaying a practiced skill. A handful of samples from the preliminary expeditions needed analysing, and some of them proved to contain gold. The map of the greater New Zambezi drainage was divided by teams who proceeded to categorise the regions by likelihood to contain gold in significant deposits. Jacqueline coordinated with the various teams, and gradually a jigsaw puzzle map began to appear, with regions colour-coded by priority. At last they had finished.

"All right, everyone," said Jacqueline. "This is an enormous area and we're going to need a lot of help covering it. We'll be spending days in the field, possibly weeks, going from location to location by plane and ATV. I will designate field teams to partner together. The individual teams will work miles, even tens, scores of miles, from each other. The servicemen of the Greenpark Brigade will provide us with security, transportation and assist us in any way they can with our work."

A knock at the door and Sergeant Emmanuel Walker entered. "Ma'am?" He addressed Jacqueline. "The Brigadesmen are here."

A convoy of planes had descended on the tarmac, thruster jets positioned vertically on their wings from the descent. The planes bore the sigil of the Greenpark Brigade, a green star emblazoned upon a gilded shield. The hatches slid open and men in uniforms disembarked.

One of the soldiers, clearly the leader, approached and saluted. The

gesture was measured, slow, rather than stiff and over-formal. He was of a fair height, his short-cropped hair dark and slightly wavy. His complexion was olive-dusky. Brazilian, no doubt. He bore what Jacqueline called the "frontier look": the hard, weathered look of a visage that had seen and done many things to survive on a difficult and demanding world. His right cheek bore a white scar. It appeared to be an old knife wound.

"Captain Joachim da Cunha at your service," he said.

"Pleased to meet you, Captain." She extended her hand. "Jacqueline Armistead, mineralogist, senior project developer for Refiner's Agent. I'm glad to meet you, Captain – I've read all about your exemplary conduct in the debacle of last year. I'm glad to see that it's earned you a promotion."

"Indeed," Joachim acknowledged. "I look forward to working with you – I am sure I will find the experience rewarding: your reputation precedes you as the founder of the MPS system."

"Thank you, and your timing is impeccable, Captain," Jacqueline said. "My team has mapped out the priority zones and Joseph and I have already spoken about coordinating our efforts. Why don't you and your men get refreshed and then the three of us can talk?"

Joachim signalled to his men, who fell into step and marched to the barracks that had been built for the Brigade when the station was first constructed. He turned back to Jacqueline. "I am perfectly refreshed, thank you. I can meet with you and Landa now if you wish."

"If you're up for it," she replied. He fell in step beside her, hands clasped behind his back. His keen eyes were tranquil, placid, yet seemed to take everything in. *Everything's in place*, she thought. *We've got the priests, the soldiers and the prospectors. Now all we need is the gold. And that shouldn't be too hard to find. And when we succeed we'll make history.*

Humanity's first gold rush on another planet. She liked the sound of that.

Chapter Three

Barid had very thoughtfully brought fresh mounts for the trip back to Twin Mounds. "Well, didn't realise we'd be four instead of three, but I'm sure these octephants won't mind," he said. The two octephants he'd brought hooted in the station's newly constructed paddock as he expertly saddled them.

"You knew I'd come." Lennik shook his head admiringly.

“It was a pretty fair gamble.” Barid smiled, his teeth flashing. “But as I said, I didn’t realise you’d be accompanied by your lovely associate here.” His grin turned devilish.

Prabhnoor sighed and rolled her eyes at the man’s irascible flattery. She’d reluctantly agreed to come after failing to talk Lennik – and for that matter, Barid – out of the enterprise. “I’d better come along regardless, even if you still haven’t entirely convinced me that anything is really amiss here.”

With Lennik’s help Barid finished saddling the second octephan. The Rangetrekker holstered his lance on the saddle, placed his booted right foot in the right-hand stirrup and swung himself into the saddle with a fluid grace that clearly came from long practice. He extended a hand to Prabhnoor, who followed, seating herself behind him.

Lennik swung into the saddle of his mount and then reached for Renna. The young *erectus* had been afraid to mount an octephan initially, but over the course of the past year she had overcome her fear and reluctance remarkably well. Now she deftly slid her bare foot and grasping toes into the stirrup and manoeuvred herself into place behind Lennik.

“All ready?” Barid asked them. “Then off we go!”

The octephants were well-trained and clearly used to carrying riders. Lennik was relieved to discover that they understood the same basic commands as the mounts used by the Range Sheriff’s station. But Barid was quick to demonstrate that their training went far beyond that of those octephants, who were bred and trained by enterprising ranchers in New Cyprus and Hearthland. These were mounts attentive to their riders, mounts that could be directed entirely by simple commands delivered with the knees and heels.

“Useful in a hunt,” Barid explained. “When you’re chasing down a thundering herd of taurochs or charging giant savannah buffalo with obsidian lance or crossbow, it really pays to have a well-trained octephan that you can direct entirely with your legs. That way you can keep your arms free from the reins while you take aim with your weapon, and rather than use verbal commands you can use your voice to coordinate with your fellow members of the hunt.”

“Fascinating.” Lennik shook his head. He could understand the allure of the lifestyle, similar as it was to his own. “And you’ve lived out on the range for most of your life, doing this? You’ve been content with it?”

“Absolutely.” Barid nodded his affirmation. “I won’t deny at first I thought I hated my parents for taking me away from our life in the Hearthland urban scene – we lived in Pleistoniana – but gradually I came

to appreciate it. Ever since then my life's been about horses and octephants and the wilderness. Couldn't ask for any more than that."

"Hear hear," Lennik agreed.

"I thought I had enough to deal with from just one of you saying these sorts of things," Prabhnoor teased. "Now I'll probably end up taking to the wild myself."

"So tell me, Prabhnoor," Barid asked. "You work with the Bureau as well?"

"Yes, for a number of years, actually," she confirmed. "I also teach at the University of Hearth, Lennik's and my *alma mater*. And of course I spend time in the field when I can. I do love it, although I also love my apartment in Hearth. This past year I accepted a posting from the Bureau to Twin Mounds as a liaison and consultant on the *erectus* at the station and in the area."

"And what does the Bureau think about the *erectus*?" Barid asked. "Why are there still *erectus* at the station if Lennik and his friends exposed Refiner's Agent and the Greenpark Brigade last year?"

Prabhnoor looked to Lennik but he shook his head, giving her the go-ahead. "Because some of the *erectus* are either unable or unwilling, or both, to return to the wild," she explained. "Some were taken from their families too young, and so they never learned crucial survival skills. Others just seem to not want to leave. At the station now they are given food and shelter and allowed liberty. We've tried to rehabilitate more of them, but a number of them just don't seem to want to go."

Barid shook his head sadly. "Such a tragedy. But some of them have left?"

"Yes, they have," Lennik interjected. "A number of them at the time of the initial revolt, and then more since. We've been tracking them and many are doing well. Sadly, several have died. But the original rebel group and several others are doing outstandingly well: they're finding food, managing to handle predators for the most part, and they've even begun to have babies. So it's a mixed story but on the whole it's positive, I think."

"Good to hear," Barid said. "We've encountered a number of *erectus* bands on our trek west, across the New Zambezi, and some of them looked like they were from the mission – the tools, which I'm told are used in mining. They were very clever to hang onto them."

"Yes, they were," Lennik agreed. "I suppose in that light it's not really that surprising that they'd pick up the trade goods Refiner's Agent is dropping – although that needs to be stopped, of course."

"Don't worry," Barid reassured him. "My people will help us. They've

been gathering information from the agents Refiner's Agent has deployed already and they'll continue to do so. With any luck I'll pick up their trail by nightfall and we can stay with them, then continue on to Twin Mounds tomorrow. Fortunately for our purposes they happen to be going the same way as us."

"Thanks, Barid." Lennik shook his head gratefully. "It means more to me than I can say that you're willing to undertake this."

"Hey, what about me?" Prabhnoor goaded. "I'm the one who'll have to put up with being out in the field on these smelly octephants and unlike you two, some of us weren't born to do it!"

"Of course, Prabhnoor." Lennik chuckled. "You too. Forgive me, I didn't mean to sound ungrateful. Thank you *both*."

"No, thank you, Lennik, Prabhnoor," said Barid soberly. "This means more to me and to my people than I can express. We may not study the *erectus* but we respect and admire them. We think of them as... *family* in a way. Not beasts, just a separate kind of people."

The ride passed pleasantly, Barid's impeccable skills as an outdoorsman and tracker soon becoming evident as he guided them toward where he felt his people would be. Within a couple of hours he had picked up their trail – easily accomplished, marked as it was by the hooves of horses and the feet of octephants – and thereon followed it with skill. The octephants helped, too, scenting the way with their flared tentacles. It was almost nightfall by the time they found the encampment.

It reminded Lennik of something from a history book. It consisted of tents resembling Great Plains teepees or Mongolian yurts, the hides of tauroch and buffalo stretched over a framework of wooden poles. Men and women cooked at open fire pits and young children ran through the camp in play. Nearby the herds of horses and octephants were kept tethered.

Barid was greeted by his clan members as they approached. He dismounted and introduced Lennik and Prabhnoor. The Rangetrekkers were friendly and hospitable. Living alone as a small group, it became apparent that any friendly stranger with news from the outside world was a welcome novelty. Renna drew extra attention – few of them had seen an *erectus* at such close range. Lennik and Prabhnoor found themselves answering a multitude of eager and not impolite questions about who they were, where they were from and what they did.

Barid waved his hand for silence. "Enough!" he called. "My friends have had a very long day and right now they need food and rest."

Some of the older Rangetrekkers nodded approvingly and the babble subsided. A woman presented Barid with two bundles wrapped in leaves,

which proved to be a chunk of raw flesh and an assortment of roots and tubers.

“Your share of the hunt,” she told him. “Mustapha killed a cattalo. And a little extra.”

“Thank you, Khadija.” He explained to Lennik and Prabhnoor that when a Rangetrekker killed a large game animal, he or she (women could hunt too), distributed it among the people. “One hearth, one meat to cook it on.” It was a Rangetrekker saying.

“And the vegetables?” Prabhnoor asked.

“Mustapha’s sister married my older brother,” Barid said, as though that explained everything. Noting the puzzlement on their faces he continued, “Therefore, as my brother-in-law, Mustapha and I have a unique bond. We are, you might say, like second brothers. Last month when I took down a buffalo with my lance I gave the best cuts of meat to Mustapha. He does the same for me when he kills a buffalo or a tauroch.”

Lennik’s mind was devouring these facts about Rangetrekker society at a mile a minute. While perfectly unique in its own ways, it nevertheless was showing clear signs of social evolution along the lines of small-scale societies on Earth (the precious few that were still left): systems of exchange, kinship systems with socially-charged significance, all things that had fallen by the wayside on Earth as civilisation diffused and increased in technological profusion and complexity.

The meat sizzled on a spit over the flames while Barid filled what he told them was a dried tauroch’s stomach with water, which he proceeded to boil with hot stones from the fire before tossing the vegetables and tubers in.

“We have some pots of metal,” he explained to them. “But I prefer to do things this way. Goods from the outside are expensive and I don’t like relying on them if I can help it.”

They were enjoying Barid’s authentic frontier cooking when four riders on horseback approached, riding hard. Their faces were elaborately painted, dirty white with black patterns and streaks of red. They came to the camp and dismounted. Everyone flocked to take their horses and hear what they had to say.

Lennik and Prabhnoor made to get up, while Renna remained firmly by the fire, devouring her food. Barid stayed them.

“It’s just the raiding party we sent out earlier. I’ll find out what’s new. You finish your dinner.” He rose and made his way through the throng toward the four men.

“*Raiding* party?” Prabhnoor arched an eyebrow questioningly at Lennik.

Lennik shrugged. "Search me, this just keeps getting more and more bizarre."

Barid returned, his features set in a deep frown. "We sent those men to obtain information on the movements of Refiner's Agent and the Greenpark Brigade. Apparently last night a Refiner's Agent plane landed at Twin Mounds, and today several Greenpark Brigade planes followed. Whatever they're planning, it's really begun."

"We can not allow this preservationist, conservative Congress to interfere with our futures!" Congressman Adlai Yu's eyes flashed, his voice carrying the charisma and conviction that defined his style. "Our hopes, our dreams, our prospects for bettering ourselves, are all to be found on this magnificent and bountiful planet!"

The assembled crowd cheered. Signs bearing legends such as "Yu for President" and "Vote Yu: Vote Development" waved in the air.

Yu allowed himself an internal smile. This was it: the real deal. He had won the primary for his party, Development, just a few weeks before and now he was going for the real thing. As president he would be able to finally implement the policies for which he had argued so long in the General Congress. He would be the most powerful man on Pleistonia, more powerful even than the prime minister and Parliament.

"Will we allow our futures to be stolen by an establishment that does not care to meet our needs?"

"No!" thousands of voices cheered.

Yu smiled again. He had them in the palm of his hand. The spacious New Naples auditorium was bursting at the seams: it looked like everyone on the island of New Cyprus had shown up. The New Cypriots were a promising constituency: the settlers of the First Fleet had settled on the larger island of Hearthland to the north, and only within the past forty years had the settlements of New Naples, New Melbourne and New Ithaca been founded (in order of oldest to most recent, east to west). New Cyprus was a young, raw frontier society that had barely begun to tap its own resources, but already many were chafing for greater administrative and economic autonomy from the increasingly distant federal capital at Hearth. New Naples was the capital of the territory and the largest settlement.

"Development is life." Yu's tone was lower now, more sombre but also intense. He waited until the cheers died down to continue. "A vote for Development is a vote for new and better jobs, more industry –" Again he was forced to stop as the cheers became deafening. He finally

was able to continue. "A better quality of life. A vote for Development is a vote for all these things."

"Yu for president!" someone yelled and then the entire crowd began to chant: "Yu! Yu! Yu!" over and over.

"Why do the preservationists keep our dreams from us?" he asked them. He waited until the crowd become silent again, hanging on his every word. Adlai Yu was a consummate orator: he'd read Cicero and Demosthenes as a teenager and had never been the same again. "Why?" he repeated. "What are they afraid of? What could possibly be worth keeping the advancement of our way of life, of civilisation, at bay?" Silence. The crowd, as if a congregation or choir, knew it was not time to speak but to listen. "I'll tell you why! Because they are afraid, afraid that your hopes, your dreams, and the advancement of your standards of life will conflict with the *erectus*!"

The crowd booed theatrically on cue.

"I fail to see," Yu began. "I fail to see how wildmen with the crudest stone tools could possibly *need* all of a continent" – he allowed the audience to laugh at the absurdity of this – "and would not in fact be better *off* if we *did* live among them! Can you not imagine it? Human and *erectus* living side-by-side, the former benefiting the latter with the fruits of our knowledge and helping them to become productive members of our society!"

The audience fell silent, suitably entranced and enraptured, even, by the novelty of the thought and the sentiment behind it.

"Hundreds of years ago, ladies and gentlemen, a great man named Martin Luther King, Jr., battled racial discrimination in the United States of America. In his most famous speech he said, 'I have a dream'. His dream was for blacks and whites to co-exist in peace and equality. Am I not entitled, too, ladies and gentlemen, to have that same dream for our species and the *erectus*?" His eyes were intense, almost haunted, as he delivered his hallowed vision.

The weighty sentiment had finally sunk in on most of the audience, and the rest simply chimed in on their expected role. The cheering and hooting was immense. Yu beamed brilliantly.

"But I don't want you to think, ladies and gentlemen," he continued, "I don't want you to think that this is merely a wild vision of one man. I'd like to introduce a very special guest speaker who has directed for many years an important and influential program to better the *erectus*. Ladies and gentlemen, it is my distinct honour to present to you *my running mate* Cardinal Agustino Cruz!"

The applause was deafening as a smiling Adlai Yu warmly clasped the

hands of the Cardinal as he came on stage and took the podium. The running mate idea had been Yu's, and Cruz had readily accepted. The Pleistonian See had had its share of reservations about the whole thing but they had not forbade Cruz from accepting the position. Although irregular, clergy had begun to fill political office in several Latin American and African countries as far back as the late twenty-first century.

"We live at a unique and definitive time within human history," Cardinal Cruz began, "a time when humanity has at last answered the question of whether or not intelligent life exists on another world. Much to our surprise that intelligent life came here from our own world, and we have discovered our remotest kin after a great span of time and across the space that separates stars! It is my firm conviction that our call, our mission from God, is clear: to embrace our brothers and sisters, no matter how different they may appear, into our society!"

The crowd cheered and applauded. Cruz smiled beneficently, his fervour and conviction tempered with a fatherly wisdom of age.

"This mission is one to which I have devoted myself, with the founding of the Native Missions Arm of the Pleistonian See, in order that in our pursuit of progress we do not neglect our brothers and sisters, the Pleistonian *erectus*. It has been my pleasure to partner with Refiner's Agent in the establishment of the Mission Partnership Stations, before their untimely demise. I regret that the foolish and tyrannical actions of one man were allowed to derail the whole of what my brothers and I had laboured for over several years, but the Lord always provides a way. When one door is closed another opens, and so it was with great thanksgiving and joy that I greeted the opening of a new program approved by Congress and Parliament for the welfare of the *erectus*, a Social Welfare Outreach that will focus on bringing them the material benefits of civilisation to improve their lives. The Social Welfare Outreach program has already begun purchasing cheap grain and dried low-grade meat, perfectly fit for consumption but not in high demand, and shipping these commodities to the *erectus* at and in the vicinity of the Mission Partnership Stations to improve their lives. We have also purchased items such as blankets, hatchets and knives to help them improve their material culture. We hope through these means to bring these wayward souls to redemption and to civilisation!"

Now the crowds, who had been listening with bated breath, were released from their reverie and began to let loose in earnest. "Yu! Cruz! Yu! Cruz!" came the chants, over and over again.

Cruz smiled. "I know that many in the highest offices of the land think

it is impossible, for *erectus* and humans to live together. But with God, all things are possible! Let us never lose sight of the dream!"

Deafened by the roaring thunder of the fanatic crowd, in that moment Yu couldn't but help feel that his election to the presidency, and the success of the Development Party's agenda, were inevitable.

"Your presence is actually rather opportune." Seated casually at his large desk in the office that a year ago had been Captain Roy Hussler's, Kamyron Pritchard, Ph.D., nodded to Jacqueline, Landa and Joachim. In Hussler's day the office had been a profuse display of hunting trophies and guns, luxuriantly furnished. Now the mute witnesses to destruction and the implements by which they had met their demise were gone. In their place was the office of an academic and a government administrator: still-frames of field expeditions spanning thirty years hung mounted on the walls, together with various academic awards and honours. A magnificently-carved *erectus* Acheulean biface was mounted on black velvet behind his desk and several fire-hardened wooden-pointed *erectus* lances were interspersed throughout the walls. Casts of various skulls, human, *erectus*, and others presumably representing extinct hominids from Earth rested in display cases.

Pritchard was of middle age, with wavy salt-and-pepper hair and bushy eyebrows and a coarse but well-trimmed moustache to match. His eyes were green and glimmered intently. His face was pleasantly round, his complexion betraying the tell-tale after-effects of sunburn as well as the creases and lines of age. He had probably spent some significant time outside at one point in his life, but evidently did so much less at present. His attire was remarkably professional and neat for a frontier station: he either spent a lot of time indoors or took great care with his appearance. Jacqueline suspected both. He folded his meaty hands contemplatively. "It really has been quite the deuce to look after an area so large, not to mention devote some of our time to the *erectus* still at the station. Quite the godsend you are, I should think. Now then, what exactly can I do for you?"

"Firstly, allow me to express my gratitude for the warmness of your welcome and your willingness to make this facility open to us," Jacqueline began. "You have clearly gone far above and beyond the requirements of our mandate."

"Think nothing of it, nothing at all!" Pritchard's tone was quite jovial. "Why, there's really so very little *to* do out here, except a lot of very tedious monitoring, and there's no reason the Greenpark Brigade can't fill in for the National Guard in helping those of us in the Bureau to do *that!*"

Jacqueline smiled thinly. "Yes, well, we are certainly more than happy to do that. But the real reason I wanted to meet with you today concerns the records of this station and the employees of the Bureau. One, in particular."

Pritchard nodded attentively for her to go on.

"I'm interested in your documentation of the movements of the *erectus* in the area and at the station, and how they have reacted to human contact. I'm also interested to know anything you can tell me about your researchers – interests, specialties, work and so forth – as it would certainly help our shared interest. Specifically, though, I'm most interested in the files of Doctor Lennik Ostrand, as well as any personal opinions of him and his work that you might be willing to share."

At the mention of Lennik's name Pritchard's smile gave way to a thoughtful and somewhat dour frown, just as Jacqueline had expected. "Certainly, I can provide you with all of our relevant files, including Doctor Ostrand's. Out of curiosity, however, may I ask what your interest is in him?"

"Everything that I've heard about Lennik sounds like trouble," Jacqueline supplied simply. "He sounds like the kind of man who will do anything he can to get in the way of the work that my team and I are trying to do. There's a lot riding on our success for my company, I don't mind telling you, and I'd very much like to know anything you can tell me about who I'm up against."

"Oh dear." Pritchard worried his hands. "I've never been fond of feeding the rumour mill, but nevertheless I think there are some things I can say in all fairness. I've known him through the Bureau for a number of years now, but I didn't really get to know him all that well until this past year. Before then he was always off in the field with that young *erectus* of his, doing God-knows-what, and we wouldn't hear from him for months. Then he'd come in, fresh off the plane from Hearth airport, dirty and reeking to high heaven, to submit his field notes, write a paper or two, answer a little correspondence, usually get in an argument or two or three at the Bureau, and then he'd be gone again. Just like that, he'd storm off into the wilds, leaving most people bemused but some of us wishing he'd never return.

"He's a brilliant, passionate field researcher, Jacqueline, don't get me wrong. And I'll be the first one to tell you he's discovered a lot of things that I've missed, for the simple reason that even though I'm almost twice his age I haven't spent such extended periods of time among the *erectus*, living off the land. But he's disagreeable at times, too. He's rather obstinate when he's convinced he's right and then it can be difficult for him

to let it go. I tell you this because it's led to numerous unfortunate disputes between us over the state of affairs here at the station and how things should be run.

"The long and the short of it, Jacqueline, is that he's vehemently opposed to a lot of the policies that guide not only what you're trying to do but what the Bureau is trying to do. The Bureau sees little to no problems, in general, with your Social Welfare Outreach program coordinated by the Native Missions Arm." He nodded appreciatively to Landa. "But Lennik, along with a notable minority of our employees, takes issue with it. Congressman Yu's bold vision of human and *erectus* living together, so brilliantly articulated in his recent speech, is abhorrent to Lennik because it conflicts with his idea that humans only know how to take *erectus* lands and lifestyles." He shook his head sadly. "I've tried reasoning with him many times but to no avail. He simply refuses to see sense. He invokes historical precedents from Earth, a lot of talk about colonialism and the like, claims that what we'd be doing would be no better." He chuckled ruefully. "Thank goodness some of us see it a little differently."

"Indeed." Jacqueline nodded, mentally calibrating her image of Lennik Ostrand. Idealist, fighter, self-styled protector of the *erectus*... she knew his type. The would-be hero. *Men*... "And what can you tell me about his take on the events of last year's debacle here at the station?"

Pritchard's countenance became troubled. "I think the unfortunate events of last year only reinforced Lennik's belief in the absolute rightness of his cause. Captain Hussler was the perfect villain to fit Lennik's script: from what I've heard he was arrogant, tyrannical, utterly ruthless and remorseless."

"You heard correctly," Landa confirmed with the thinnest ghost of an ironic smile. Joachim nodded his agreement.

"In that event, what do you think his response to our presence will be? How will he try to hinder us?" Jacqueline asked.

Pritchard leaned back in his chair and sighed heavily. "He'll conceal his anger rather poorly, I'm afraid – his manners can be rather dreadful – and concentrate on observing your movements in the hope of digging up any dirt he can on you. He'll try to pull strings, and even or especially in the Bureau he's got some he can pull, to at the very least closely monitor and regulate your activities. In all probability, though, simply because you work for Refiner's Agent he'll try to put a stop to what you're doing." He tsked sadly.

"Nothing I can't deal with," Jacqueline assured him. "I've dealt with

his type before. At any rate I do thank you for your time and input, Dr Pritchard, and look forward to working with you.”

“The pleasure is entirely mine,” Pritchard beamed. “And it’s Kamyron, please.”

“Kamyron, thank you.” Jacqueline shook his hand. She left the office with Landa and Joachim in her wake, feeling a sense of measured optimism. There was nothing like a little challenge, especially one she was so entirely guaranteed to win.

Lennik rose early, trying not to wake Renna as he fumbled for his clothing in the predawn glow. She shifted in her sleep as he rose and he drew the tauroch hide that Barid had provided them over her, running his hand down the curve of her spine to smooth it. “Sleep for a little longer, princess,” he whispered as he bent to kiss her cheek. “Long day ahead.” He’d scarcely slept that night, his body refusing to relax and his brain refusing to become quiescent for sleep. The problems that faced them hammered away inside his head as he racked his brain for solutions, anything to cling to in order to make sense of the mess unfolding around him.

In such a short space of time – had it only been two days?! – he’d gone from feeling relatively secure about the state of things for the *erectus* in the area to being legitimately afraid for them. Whatever massive plans Refiner’s Agent had up its sleeve, they were not for the benefit of the *erectus*. Refiner’s Agent under Petyor Mason had already shown itself devoid of any ethical concerns whatsoever in its quest for mineral riches, and this new gold-prospecting drive, with the associated trading program with the *erectus* – and what was with that anyway? Some kind of public-relations stunt? – would doubtless prove no different.

A slight breeze rustled across the savannahs. Lennik inhaled. There was nothing quite like experiencing a sunrise in the Pleistonian wilderness, he believed. The sights, the sounds, the smells – all subtle in their individual beauty, together magnificent in the grand scope of their splendour.

A slight noise and Lennik turned and started. Barid had crept up behind him almost soundlessly. The Rangetrekker smiled knowingly. “Comes with living on the range.”

“Tell me about it.” Lennik shook his head. “You’re good, there’s not many can startle me.”

“How was your rest?” Barid asked.

“Fitful,” Lennik answered honestly. “I couldn’t stop thinking about what we’ve got to do – whatever that may be.”

Barid nodded sympathetically. "Me, either."

Lennik shook his head in disgust. "It's just so frustrating knowing that Refiner's Agent is out there, like a spider sitting at the centre of a vast corporate web of people and finances and supplies, and with a few signatures or a message on a handheld, these things can be moved and deployed with lightning speed while we're out here, not knowing anything's even wrong."

Barid frowned thoughtfully. "In that case one must pluck the threads."

"Excuse me?" Lennik asked in surprise.

Barid shrugged. "It's simple. A spider weaves a web to catch prey, no? And when an insect flies or stumbles into the web, the threads it touches vibrate and the spider comes to devour its prey. So, if we are to follow your analogy, the thing we must do is, so to speak, to pluck the threads and see from what direction the spider comes running. To understand the nature of a thing is to understand how to defeat it."

Lennik was taken aback by the powerful, robust simplicity of his own unintentional metaphor. "In order to dismantle the web and leave the spider powerless, we must understand how the spider controls the web," he said, comprehension dawning.

Barid nodded. "Of course. But that's nothing you don't already know. When you defeated Captain Hussler and exposed the Greenpark Brigade and Refiner's Agent you stumbled upon their secret – how do you say, 'struck a nerve' with them. And they responded, and that allowed you to strip them from their web."

"I'd never seen it in quite those terms." Lennik chuckled. "But I have to concede you're right. I guess the first thread we have to follow is this lead about the gold. That alone warrants serious watching."

"Agreed." Barid nodded again. "You are already thinking along the lines of a Rangetrekker."

Lennik smiled at the compliment. "Thanks, Barid."

Barid clapped his shoulder encouragingly. "Come on, let's go get some breakfast. We've got a long day of riding ahead of us."

They breakfasted, Prabhnoor still rubbing sleep from her eyes. "At least I've got my Masala chai tea." She yawned. "That's the only thing that'll keep me from sliding off the octephant."

"Be glad that I decided on octephants," Barid chastened her, "I had thought of taking horses." Prabhnoor shot him a look of horror and he laughed. "What's wrong with horses? We Rangetrekkers ride them all the time!"

"I will not take a horse," Prabhnoor declared. "As bizarre as the octephants are and as bad as they smell they're relatively even-

tempered – horses are flighty and I'm always very sore after I ride one for any length of time. And never, ever, will you get me on a horse in the morning.”

Barid laughed again. “I never!” he declared. “In that case you're lucky octephants are larger than horses, with better stamina, even if they're not as light and swift. No, we'll leave the horse-riding lessons for another day.”

“Good.” Prabhnoor shivered in a dignified manner.

Lennik's mind was elsewhere. As his two *sapiens* companions exchanged light banter and Renna happily devoured an assortment of her favourite nut, vegetable and meat foods his mind continued to process the task ahead and his conversation with Barid.

Breakfast concluded, Barid set about preparing for the trip. With Lennik's help, he saddled the octephants and took a substantial store of dried meat – buffalo, tauroch and cattalo, he told them – from within his tent and divided it between the leather saddlebags. Bags of assorted nuts and dried vegetables followed. Four leather skins filled with water followed, a pair for each octephant. The great beasts eyed their burdens resignedly.

Barid rolled a tauroch hide and tossed it to Lennik. “Catch!” he said. Following his lead Lennik placed it behind the saddle, tethering it in place with leather ties.

“Well, looks like we're about set,” Barid noted satisfactorily. He drew his knife, tested the edge and wiped the blade. Satisfied, he checked his sidearm and crossbow. “You both armed?” he asked.

Lennik drew a small sidearm. He'd carried it for years but had used it only when he had to – as a rule he hated guns. He hadn't had to use it since last year, when he, Renna and their friends had run from Captain Hussler and the mercenaries under his command. It was deceptively powerful for its size: he'd taken down men and wild beasts with it on occasion. He polished it, checked that it was properly loaded and with the safety on – ready to be used at a moment's notice but safe in its holster. He then holstered the long field rifle, ideal for hunting game, toward the front of the saddle within easy reach.

Barid eyed the guns critically before nodding. “Should be fine. You have a knife?”

Lennik nodded. “Never without one.” He drew the broad-bladed field knife from its sheath and a whetstone from his belt. He wiped the blade and sharpened it. “And I'll pick up my crossbow when we get back to the station – might need to do a little hunting while we're out, never know.”

“A man after my own heart.” Barid grinned broadly. He turned to Prabhnoor. “And how about you?” he asked.

Prabhnoor looked reluctant. “I don’t carry guns,” she answered. “I just borrow Lennik’s rifle when I need to.”

Barid shook his head. “Well, we can’t have that. Let me get you one of mine.”

“No, she can borrow one of mine,” Lennik insisted.

Prabhnoor cut them both off. “I *don’t* need to carry a *gun*,” she stated with a touch of the theatrical.

But Barid would hear none of it. He was already ducking into his tent, to reappear a moment later with a well-oiled pistol in a leather holster with attached shoulder-strap. Prabhnoor protested but he finally convinced her to put it on.

“And a knife?” Barid grinned, proffering this second implement to her as well.

“I carry that much.” She fixed him with a mock-frosty stare and drew a hunting knife from her belt.

“Then we’re ready to go,” Barid declared. He mounted the first octepphant with expert grace and then extended a hand to Prabhnoor. Lennik and Renna followed suite.

“You ready?” Lennik asked her. She nipped at his neck with her strong, white teeth in answer and trilled something. “Sure you are,” he laughed.

They rode for most of the day, the octepphants maintaining a powerful, steady lope despite their burdens. Come early afternoon they stopped by a small creek to let the octepphants quench their thirst and browse on nearby brush. The four hominids ate a light meal as well before remounting and continuing on.

Dusk was falling when at last they reached Twin Mounds. The former Mission Partnership Station was still a mine – as they rode up they could see the last shift of weary miners emerging from the shafts, conversing in snatches of English, French, Spanish, Chinese, Urdu and Kiswahili. In the aftermath of the debacle Refiner’s Agent had been forced to hire *sapiens* miners. But parked on the tarmac was something Lennik had hoped never to see at the facility again: a fleet of planes bearing the green star emblazoned on gilded shield of the Greenpark Brigade. Although he had been expecting it their entire ride from the Rangetrekker camp, only seeing the planes could allow the psychological impact to fully register with his brain. He felt *betrayed*, as though everything he’d worked for had been handed to his enemies on a silver platter.

And he hadn’t even faced his boss yet.

Prabhnoor eyed Lennik nervously. His eyes had narrowed, his jaw was set and he seemed flushed beneath the grime and dirt of days of travel without bathing. "You okay there?" she asked.

Lennik shook his head. "Not with those things sitting here, I'm not." Renna, picking up on his mood, chattered anxiously.

"Let's get the octephants stabled and get ourselves cleaned up before we do anything," Barid suggested wisely.

Lennik nodded slowly, mind too numb to protest.

"And before you tear Pritchard apart, I'd like to speak to Jacob," Prabhnoor stated. Jacob Elazar was a grad student interning for the Bureau at the station, writing his thesis under Prabhnoor's supervision with sporadic help from Lennik.

Lennik managed a half-smile. "I'm not going to tear Pritchard apart, although I'm sure he's falling over himself to accommodate our new guests. No, you're right, we'll speak with Jacob and figure out what all's going on, then I'll see what Pritchard has to say about all of this. But if I find what I think I'm going to find, that Pritchard isn't even keeping tabs on them to make sure they comply with environmental regulations and *erectus* interaction protocols..." He left the sentence hanging meaningfully.

They stabled, fed and watered the octephants before turning to the matters of their own hygiene. The clerk at the lobby looked up from her desktop computer and tried to suppress her surprise – and sense of smell – with little success.

"Welcome back, Dr Nanda, Dr Ostrand, *Renna*..." To Lennik's eternal annoyance she persisted in calling him Dr Ostrand and speaking to Renna as to a *sapiens* child. She paused, looking with uncertainty at the grimy and heavily-armed Rangetrekker who towered over her. Barid introduced himself and she hastily gave Prabhnoor and Lennik and Renna their room cards, and an extra for Barid.

Prabhnoor made her way to a bathroom and a waiting shower with a groan of pleasure. Lennik took Barid to an empty suite adjacent to the one he shared with Renna and showed him how the shower worked. Finally he slid his own card into the scanner and the door swung open.

"We're back, babe," he said wearily to Renna, who warbled in her usual way, clearly glad to be home. He chuckled. "How is it that you seem to like this place more than I do? It's not your home, little girl." *Well, it is now.* He reminded himself. *Thanks to me.* Angrily he pushed the thought from his head. *Where did that come from? Thought I'd convinced myself otherwise.* He shook his head. Why did everything have to be so hard? *It's because you're tired.* He told himself. Unloading the

guns, he oiled and wiped them down before putting them away. Renna, meanwhile, had already moved to take advantage of her favourite of civilisation's much-touted comforts, jumping into the shower. Lennik stripped, tossing his clothing into the laundry processor before joining her.

Afterwards he joined a much refreshed-looking Prabhnoor and a somewhat bemused Barid in the hallway. "You do this every day?" the Rangetrekker asked. "This shower thing? I think that is what I remember from my early years in the city of Pleistoniana."

"Oh, if only!" Prabhnoor's luxuriant dark hair was still damp and her skin glistened. "But when I'm out in the field, certain basic necessities become impossible."

Lennik snorted. "I'd be fine with just bathing in the river for the rest of my life."

"I'll page Jacob." Prabhnoor reached for her handheld.

Jacob Elazar was quick to join them. He was a studious-looking young man, in his early twenties, with sandy brown hair and dark eyes. His clothing was of the same practical, durable quality as Prabhnoor's and Lennik's but bore fewer signs of wear: it was his first season in the field.

"Hello, Doctors," he said then winced. "Sorry, Lennik. And hello Renna." He smiled as she warbled her welcome. "And I don't believe we've met—"

"Barid Khorasani." Barid extended his hand. "Friend of these three, met up with them on account of this whole mess with Refiner's Agent and the Brigade."

Jacob's countenance quickly clouded. "Oh, that. Have you spoken with Pritchard yet?" he asked worriedly, turning to Lennik and Prabhnoor.

Prabhnoor eyed Lennik as she replied. "No, we haven't. I wanted Lennik to at least *smell* presentable before he descended upon the man's office." She winked.

"Well, I spoke with him as soon as I found out about this mess," Jacob continued. "He didn't seem worried at *all*." He delivered this last in a surprised tone of voice. "He said it was all perfectly legal, they were just going to be looking for gold and the Brigade was going to help the National Guard to patrol the area to make sure everything's under control. With poachers and *illegal* prospectors, I mean."

"Doesn't surprise me, coming from Pritchard," Lennik grouched. Prabhnoor shot him a dirty look. Barid looked bemused at Lennik's comment.

"And another thing, this may sound unrelated, but did you three catch

Congressman Adlai Yu's speech the other night in New Naples?" Jacob asked.

"No, why?" Prabhnoor asked.

"Not exactly, Jacob, I try to *forget* about civilisation when I'm out," Lennik quipped. Barid laughed.

"Lennik!" Prabhnoor shot him another reproving look.

Jacob looked at the three, confused, before gamely ploughing on. "Well, it was really scary, that's all. He was talking about a 'preservationist Congress' getting in the way of everyone's hopes and dreams, that *erectus* should be integrated into human society –"

"More right-wing trash and nonsense." Lennik rolled his eyes in disgust. "If I ever caught that bastard in real life I'd shoot him and mount his head on my mantel, if I had a mantel that is."

Prabhnoor had to laugh helplessly at that one, although she dug Lennik in the ribs with her elbow. "Go on, Jacob, some of us at least are listening."

Jacob laughed at Lennik's crusty joke and continued. "He announced Cardinal Cruz as his running mate and the Cardinal –"

"*He WHAT?!*" Lennik exploded.

Jacob started, clearly surprised by the explosive outburst. "Cardinal Cruz, director of the Native Missions Association. The Cardinal came onstage and gave this speech following up for Yu, about helping the *erectus* through this thing called the Social Wellness Outreach in order to integrate them into civilisation, giving them food and trade goods and things like that. And I thought you'd like to know, especially given that Landa of course is involved with this, and they've brought in some more priests so it looks like the Brigade is helping the NMA with this Social Wellness Outreach at the same time as they're looking for gold."

"You've done well, Jacob, thank you for your information," Prabhnoor said once he had at last finished his much-interrupted and breathless diatribe. "Barid here found us, actually he was just looking for Lennik but I sort of got pulled into things too, because of all this." She smiled self-consciously. "We actually found a trade hatchet – well, Lennik found it – in an *erectus* camp, and then we met Barid who told us some of what was going on. With your information the picture is becoming much clearer."

"The greedy men want the gold, but they have to make themselves look good first." Barid nodded. "It is like a man who sits at your fire and eats your meat, but steals your horses and octephants in the night. He may speak well, he may flatter, he may bring fine gifts but his heart is full of malice."

Jacob looked askance at the tall Rangetrekker.

Lennik was pacing agitatedly. "We know they're after land and we know they're after gold."

"Lennik, *stop* pacing!" Prabhnoor begged.

Lennik ignored her, gesturing grandiosely as he thought aloud. "We know what they're after and we know they're trying to make themselves look good in the public eye by giving gifts to the *erectus*. But *now* they're upping the ante – they've got His Pompousness – I mean *Cardinal Cruz*" – he grinned wickedly – "in on this. So they're really going for the sympathy factor here. But you just said" – he pointed to Jacob – "that Congressman Yu gave a big speech about incorporating the *erectus* into human society."

"Very impassioned," Jacob supplied. "He even did a spin-off of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s 'I Have a Dream' speech."

Lennik nodded and snapped his fingers, continuing to pace as he thought out loud. "Of course he did, the bastard. Now we all know what Congressman Yu's riding the Development ticket toward the presidency."

"Lennik, will you *stop pacing!*!" Prabhnoor's patience was wearing thin.

"It all fits!" Lennik slapped his fist into his open palm and winced slightly. "By god, don't you all see? Mason couldn't get all that he wanted by underhanded techniques at the MPS system after what my friends and I did, so now he's switched tactics: work with Cruz and Yu to get the voters on his side. And they'll all be rich, of course: there must be many fortunes in gold in the New Zambezi drainage."

Prabhnoor, Jacob and Barid fell silent. Jacob stared uncomfortably over his shoulder. Renna's curious, intelligent gaze followed.

"Bravo, Dr Ostrand, bravo. Your talent for unmasking the sinister is profound indeed." A figure stepped from the shadows in the hallway. Her voice was sarcastic but bemusedly so: there was no trace of acerbity or causticity in her tone. She was somewhat short and stocky of build but of a commanding bearing. She appeared to be of early middle age but had clearly spent long years on the frontier, if her lined and hardened complexion was anything to go by. She extended a hand. "Jacqueline Armistead, mineralogist and senior project developer for Refiner's Agent. One of the *bad* guys... only I'm a gal." She winked. "Your... *reputation* very much precedes you, Dr Ostrand – or would Lennik be more preferable?"

Lennik took the hand with barely noticeable exaggerated grace. "It would indeed, Dr Armistead. Or is it Jacqueline?"

“Jacqueline will be fine, Lennik,” she told him. “Although Dr Armistead is valid as well. And these would be?” she made her introductions to the others before proceeding. “As I was saying, Lennik, your reputation very much precedes you.”

“I’m sure it does,” Lennik cracked his knuckles and steepled his fingers pensively. “Considering I was partially responsible for tearing down your little MPS system of exploitation here a year ago.”

Jacqueline chuckled. “So much unneeded suspicion, Lennik. I am not your enemy. Refiner’s Agent is immensely grateful to you for unmasking the incompetence of Captain Hussler —”

Lennik raised an eyebrow. “And the *crimes* he committed? Mass murder, forced labour, abduction? Or is that just ‘incompetence’?”

Jacqueline mentally cursed herself. This man was as sharp and wary as any wild beast – and he struck as hard as one in a fight. “Of course,” she smoothly corrected herself, deferentially gesturing with her hand. “My apologies for being unclear. As I was saying, we are immensely grateful to you for revealing the incompetence of Captain Hussler in his complete and *utterly* abhorrent failure to integrate the *erectus* into the structure of the station’s personnel in a safe and ethical manner, as was originally intended and stated specifically in the charters we received for all the MPSs.”

Lennik eyed her as if she might sprout horns and grow cloven hooves. Prabhnoor stepped into the awkward breach.

“Perhaps you could put Lennik – and myself, of course, and the others – a little more at ease by telling us about your plans in this area. You’ll pardon our suspicions, Lennik’s in particular, Jacqueline, but none of us has had particularly good experiences with your company.”

“Certainly,” Jacqueline gracefully acceded. “And let me express my deepest regrets that Lennik, in particular, has met with such an ill reception in the past. I can’t imagine anything that would turn me against a company faster than one of its employees trying to kill me.

“Our stated charter in the area is to look for sources of gold. As you know, gold is valuable not only as bullion to be bought and sold as financial bedrock and as jewellery but in electronic products as well. As we locate gold we will bring in experts, consultants from the Bureau mostly – your own Commissioner Pritchard has been extremely helpful in this area – to determine how we can operate within a given area while causing minimal stress of any sort to the *erectus* in the area. The good news seems to be that so far, our presence is hardly a bother to them. And we’re currently not looking into deep shaft mining, only sources of gold

near the surface that can be gathered by prospecting and digging a little by hand.

“Refiner’s Agent has also always believed in giving back to the community. And so we’re working with the Native Missions Arm, sponsoring their Social Welfare Outreach to the *erectus*, giving them trade goods so that our net impact upon their livelihoods is overwhelmingly *positive*, rather than negative because of any stress we’ve caused them with our equipment or by disturbing the environment even a little to get the gold.

“And to address the connection with Congressman Adlai Yu, since that came up, we’ve donated to his campaign because we believe that he shares our ultimate vision of humans and *erectus* living together and sharing the same resources.” She smiled modestly. “Well, that’s all I really have to say. I hope that answers your question, Prabhnoor, and while I’m not so naïve as to think that I’ve just allayed all of your respective suspicions, I hope that with time you’ll see that we’re not here to cause any harm.”

“Thank you, Jacqueline.” Prabhnoor smiled pleasantly. “I very much appreciate your time and your explanations.”

“Not at all, the pleasure is mine,” Jacqueline assured her. “I’m down the hall and to the left, room 134 if you ever want to talk – any of you. I mean that.”

“We will, thank you,” Prabhnoor assured her.

Lennik shot Prabhnoor a disgusted look but held his tongue.

“Well then, if you’ll excuse me, I really must be getting to bed,” Jacqueline said. “Long day today and another tomorrow.”

When she had gone Lennik turned suspiciously to Prabhnoor. “What was that all about?” he asked.

Prabhnoor shot him a significant look. “I was drawing her out, Lennik. Didn’t you catch on to that?”

“Well, sure, but –”

“Clever tactic.” Barid nodded appreciatively. He shook his head. “She is not to be underestimated, that woman.”

“I agree,” Jacob said. “Why don’t we go discuss a course of action?”

“Good idea,” Prabhnoor agreed. “But I think I might want to join Lennik first.”

Barid and Jacob looked at Lennik, who nodded soberly. “I think I’d better pay a little visit to a certain Commissioner.”

Jacqueline’s mind was preoccupied with thoughts of her first encounter with the quasi-legendary Dr Ostrand, or Lennik, as she went to her room and readied herself for bed. The man was everything she’d heard and more: incredibly intense, fierce, and potentially very danger-

ous. But if he ever underestimated her that would be the gravest mistake of his life. *The maverick renegade scientist crusading for a cause, are we, Dr Ostrand?* She thought to herself. *Well, two can play at that game, and I've been playing it a lot longer than you. Besides, I've got something on my side that you don't: great sums of money and pure, naked human greed.*

It was inevitable. They would discover gold in significant quantities, and human greed would do the rest. Voter opinion would swing like a pendulum on an ancient clock.

You can't stop the tide, Dr Ostrand. This gold rush is going to happen. And when it does, everything's going to change for good.

Chapter Four

Here it comes, Kamyron Pritchard thought with a morose internal sigh of resignation as his office door swung open and Lennik Ostrand entered, accompanied by his *erectus* Renna, Dr Nanda, Jacob Elazar, and a rugged-looking man he didn't recognise. As he'd expected, Lennik didn't look in the mood for tea and light conversation. But then, he really never did. That was a pity, really, Kamyron thought, because in his experience the best way to get your point across in almost any situation was with a certain measure of tact and diplomacy which Lennik seemed to be almost entirely without. He hadn't been stretching the truth in the least when he'd expressed his admiration for Lennik's brilliance to Jacqueline: the man really was the best at what he did. At what they all did, actually: Pritchard couldn't even *count* the number of times Lennik had saved them hours, days, even weeks or more of work and observation on the *erectus* populations both at the mission and in the field. But rather than develop a camaraderie of shared working experience, Lennik had increasingly chafed at the way that Pritchard had decided to run the Bureau program at the station. At first it had seemed like he was saying their efforts to rehabilitate the mission *erectus* into the wild were too fast; later Pritchard was sure he'd said several times that they weren't moving fast enough.

The long and the short of it was, some people just weren't meant to get along with each other. Pritchard tried to keep all these insights in focus as Lennik drew up to his desk with his friends following, reminding Pritchard of nothing so much as an oddly-cast gang of thugs from some old flick.

"Why, greetings, Dr Nanda, Elazar, Dr Ostrand..." Pritchard was one

of the few people by whom Lennik preferred to be called “Dr Ostrand”. “Renna. And I don’t believe we’ve met, I’m Kamyron Pritchard.” He extended his hand to Barid, who shook it and introduced himself. “Now then, please be seated, all. Tea, anyone?” he asked, reaching for a small pot and refilling an ornate ceramsteel cup.

Lennik ignored the request and remained standing. “No, thank you, Dr Pritchard. We need to talk about this whole Refiner’s Agent business. Specifically, what security measures you’re taking with the Bureau to ensure their conduct falls within appropriate guidelines, and why it is that a highly irregular practice like food and trade goods dumping is taking place.”

Barid folded his hands and knotted his brows in thought before answering. “Firstly, let me assure you, Lennik, that the Bureau of Aboriginal Interests was active throughout the entire proceedings of this case. A few weeks ago, my superiors requested data from this station regarding the state of the *erectus* populations in the area and their movements, to be used in predicted estimates of the impact that gold prospecting in the area would have on them. I gladly complied, as I’m sure you would have.” He extended his hands in placation.

Lennik nodded. “Indeed, if one was to engage in prospecting that makes sense.”

Pritchard continued. “I was curious, of course, and wanted to remain abreast of developments, so I asked to know more as the case progressed. Of course the applicant for prospecting permits turned out to be Refiner’s Agent. I was delighted that they were showing such responsibility, for as it turned out CEO Petyor Mason was very emphatic that he didn’t want there to be a shadow of a doubt of suspicion on their activities in *erectus* territory. He’s made it very clear that they’re here to help.”

“Pritchard,” Lennik’s voice was emphatic but not undiplomatic, “the *erectus* don’t *need help*. What they need is to be left very much alone. I’m not saying that Refiner’s Agent can’t and shouldn’t take some mineral resources out of their territory – although they’re the last ones I’d pick to do it – just that Mason’s particular brand of ‘help’ is nothing the *erectus* need.”

“Be that as it may, *Dr Ostrand*,” Pritchard tried to keep any signs of impatience or strain out of his voice, “Mason’s position – and the regnant one in the Bureau, which I happen to adhere to – is that it is neither feasible, nor indeed *charitable*, for us to deny the *erectus* the fruits of our civilisation.”

“You would have made a fine British colonialist in India, Pritchard,” Prabhnoor interjected. Her tone was not mocking but tutelary. “And I’m

sure that 'this message has been approved by Congressman Adlai Yu'." This last was delivered with a teasing smile.

Jacob laughed and Barid grinned wolfishly as Pritchard flushed. Trying to maintain his composure he continued. "The Social Welfare Outreach being coordinated by the Native Missions Arm is Cardinal Cruz's effort, with the help of workers like our own Father Landa, to this end to enact a progressive stance on *erectus* rights and interaction protocols."

"*Progressive?!?*" Lennik's brows narrowed, his face flushed and his voice raised dangerously. "Since when has colonialism been '*progressive*' for the people being colonised, Dr Pritchard? The Americas ring a bell? Australia? How about the Pacific? Asia? Africa? For the love of god, man, don't you study history?"

Before a very flustered Pritchard could regain enough of his composure to answer Prabhnoor interjected again. "Dr Pritchard, try to look at this in the big picture. Can't you see even some similarities with previous encounters between colonists and indigenous groups on Earth? Granted, those were all between *sapiens* but that only makes this case the more poignant: the odds here are so much more unequal than *any* of the cases Lennik's mentioned! We are a Star Age civilisation and they've yet to master hafted stone tools! That's a *much* greater disparity than any example in Earth's entire history that I can think of!"

"*Dr Ostrand and Dr Nanda,*" Pritchard at last managed to recover his composure and find his voice, "I am well aware of the basis of your argument and understand its saliency entirely. But the cases you speak of are centuries past, and need hardly be expected to be applicable or salient *whatsoever*..." Lennik spluttered with rage but Pritchard gamely pressed on. "*Whatsoever* to this case. Refiner's Agent, like it or believe it or not, *is* acting *with* the full support and cooperation of the Bureau to the *benefit* of the *erectus*, not their detriment. The Greenpark Brigade has been deployed here not only to assist the search for gold but to aid the NMA in their Social Welfare Outreach to positively offset any deleterious effects of a *sapiens* presence in *erectus* territory, and as a second effort to reach them with the benefits of our superior culture after the unfortunate failure of the Mission Partnership Station, which Jacqueline Armistead, the designer and developer, tells me was planned with the utmost of good intentions."

"Talk about leaving the wild beast to guard your herds," Barid chuckled. Jacob, Prabhnoor and Lennik tried to suppress their laughter.

"Well, you know what they say about the road to hell, speaking of good intentions," Lennik told Pritchard. The fire had been replaced by a

bemused cynicism in his voice. "I'm serious, though, Pritchard. You don't have to like me or believe a word I'm saying. To be frank with you, I don't give a fuck." Pritchard looked vaguely aghast at such vulgar language. Lennik continued: "But it's not about me, Pritchard, it's not about me and it's not about you. It's about *them*, the *erectus*, both of our – and Prabhnoor's and Jacob's too – charges. We owe *them* the decency to do our utmost to ensure the continuity of their way of life. And so that's why I'm telling you that it's absolutely *imperative* that you monitor their actions. Send an expedition to investigate, something, anything to make sure they're not simply allowed to police themselves."

Pritchard's smile was unpleasantly self-satisfied in a face that had now gone blotchy with his upset temper. "Their activities are perfectly legitimate and legal, Lennik. I can not and will not authorise an expedition to investigate a matter that is above suspicion. Refiner's Agent has addressed the recent debacle with a firmer hand on the Greenpark Brigade and an admirable level of transparency and self-scrutiny. This matter is closed."

Lennik shook his head and snorted derisively. "Come on, everyone, let's get out of here. I've found out what I came to find." He held the door open for everyone, ducking out last. As he did he turned his head to address Pritchard one last time. "How much are they paying you, Pritchard? What price for your integrity?" He fished in his coat pocket and pulled out a badge bearing the letters B.A.I. – Bureau of Aboriginal Affairs and his name and picture. With one clean, fluid motion he drew his knife and sliced it in half, then tossed the pieces into the room. They fluttered to the floor. "Here, you might as well have that back. I won't be needing it anymore." He shut the door with a measured but firm tug.

Pritchard didn't move a muscle as Lennik stormed out. He'd been expecting this day for some time. Too bad, really, to lose such an exceptional mind. He'd have been a fine addition to Operation 1848.

He synced his handheld to his desktop and called a number. Petyor Mason's face filled the screen. The man seemed to be bare-chested and to have had a little much to drink. In the background were the sounds of a raucous party in full swing: laughter, loud music, the occasional dramatic high-pitched scream of a woman.

"Pritchard... what's up?" Mason's voice slurred slightly. "In the middle... having a great beach party here on New Cyprus. What's... what's the matter?"

"Nothing's the matter, sir," Pritchard told him. "And I regret catching you... so ill-disposed at the moment."

A woman's manicured, painted nails descended on Petyor, pawing his

face ineffectually. "One second," the inebriated executive told him. Then, off-screen, "Give me a moment, babe, this is important." He turned his eyes back to the screen, struggling to focus.

"Dr Ostrand's been taken care of, sir," Pritchard told him. "As you requested."

"Dr... who? Oh, the crazy anthropologist."

"Yes, that's right sir, the one who did in the MPS system last year," Pritchard reiterated. "He's left the Bureau, finally."

"Left the Bureau – quit?" Mason had clearly had quite a bit to drink.

Pritchard gritted his teeth. The man was sharp as a glass knife when sober – which in his defence was the vast majority of the time. "Yes, sir, he's quit. He's out of the way, he's been marginalised, so he shouldn't constitute a threat to the Operation any more."

"Good, that's very... very good." Mason nodded emphatically. "You've done well Pritchard. We'll discuss this when I'm sober." With that he hung up.

Alone in his office, Pritchard savoured his triumph. Lennik was a better academic than he by far, but he had been beaten at a simple game of political and diplomatic manoeuvring.

His handheld beeped. His viewscreen registered an alert to his online banking account. He called it up and whistled.

Even when drunk, Mason was good as his word on business transactions.

"If the octephants weren't in need of rest and feed I'd say we leave tonight." Lennik paced his room in a foul mood. Renna followed his motions with her intelligent, searching gaze.

"I think we're *all* in need of rest, Lennik, but for once I'm entirely on your side in a dispute with Pritchard," Prabhnoor corrected and assured him.

Barid was shaking his head. "I can tell that it is already much too late to achieve anything here. We have to go and keep an eye on what they're doing out there."

Jacob shook his head. "I hate to be a downer, but they've got planes. I mean, mounts are great and all but you can't follow a plane on an octephant."

Lennik reluctantly nodded. "You're right, Jacob. Damn it, this thing is so much bigger than we'd all realised – or at least, than I'd realised, by the sound of it."

"Perhaps if we talked about this in the morning –" Prabhnoor began, but Lennik cut her off.

"Prabhnoor, I'm sorry, but some things can't wait until morning and

this is one of them. We need to reach some kind of resolution as soon as possible. This is huge – we need to get moving as soon as we can.”

The light of realisation dawned suddenly in Prabhnoor’s eyes and she smiled in triumph. “Okay,” she acceded. “We need to do something. But what? Let’s break it down into manageable pieces, Lennik.

“First, we know that everything that’s going on over here is fishy, but it’s related to some very fishy goings-on back in Hearth itself, at the very heart of the Bureau even. So we need to try to do something about both problems, no?”

“Correct,” Lennik nodded. He stopped suddenly, as if he had begun to see where Prabhnoor was headed. “You’re right. You’re absolutely right.” He shook his head admiringly.

“Can somebody please fill us in here?” Jacob asked in bewilderment.

“I think what they’ve both realised is that we’re going to have to split up to battle this on both fronts,” Barid said.

“Precisely,” Prabhnoor explained. “Lennik, Barid, you’re the most competent in the wilderness anyway – together with Renna, of course. Together you three have a much better chance of figuring out what’s going on and keeping tabs on it than either myself or Jacob. You just get around a lot better out there.

“Jacob and I, conversely, are going to Hearth. There we will work through some of my contacts in the Bureau and at the University to bring this matter before the Congressional Committee on Aboriginal Affairs. CCAA will listen, particularly as you three relay us the data you collect from the front, so to speak.”

“But wait,” Jacob interjected, “you’re sure we’re not going to get in some kind of trouble with the Bureau – especially through Pritchard – on account of this? And what about accommodations?”

Prabhnoor chuckled. “Pritchard can’t do a damn thing to stop us and he knows it. That’s part of my prerogative as a ‘liaison-consultant field reporter’ for the Bureau. The other part of my prerogative is that I have a certain amount of... leeway in securing trips out of the field to make progress reports. Given my credentials and contacts, that’ll be a fairly easy sell. You’re along for the ride, if you want to be, as my research assistant and of course as my student.”

“Count me in.” Jacob grinned.

Prabhnoor continued: “Now that still leaves the problem of transportation. Octephants will probably come in useful, of course, but you’re going to want access to a plane at least some of the time.”

Lennik frowned in thought. “Now who do I know that’s got a –” He

stopped suddenly, struck by a bolt of inspiration. "Never mind, I know someone."

"Is this person trustworthy? Can you guarantee their help for an extended period of time?" Prabhnoor asked.

Lennik laughed. "Let's just say she's crossed paths with Refiner's Agent and the Greenpark Brigade before."

Jacqueline was up even earlier than usual. As though her brain was telling her to be on the alert, wary of her contentious foes, she found herself wide awake well before dawn. With nothing better to do, she undertook her usual morning routine and, finding her crew beginning to stir, encouraged them vigorously.

"Come on, everyone, it's a new day and we've got to get out to the field," she told them. "Lot of locations to check, lot of samples to take and analyse."

With much groaning and rubbing of sleep from their eyes the prospectors roused and readied themselves for the new day. The more experienced, hardier ones were already awake and alert.

Jacqueline had paired herself with one of the more competent and distinguished mineralogists by the name of Emil Delvaux, a published academic at both the University of Starfall and the Hearthland Founder's University. A tall, handsome Kivutian whose ancestors hailed from the former Eastern Congo, he spoke English with the lilt of his ancestral country's official languages, French and Kiswahili. Seasoned from many years in the field, he greeted her brightly.

"Ah, good morning, Jacqueline." He smiled. "You are looking well today."

"Thank you, Emil, you as well." She returned the smile. "You sound ready to go."

"Indeed I am, I have had a most magnificent rest and I anticipate a productive day in the field."

They breakfasted hurriedly and went to the tarmac to join the Greenpark Brigade, who had been up since before dawn like Jacqueline. The planes stood ready to go, their jets vertically slanted to push them into the air. From the direction of the chapel came a number of priests, following Father Landa's lead.

Joachim saluted Jacqueline, then Landa in his usual measured, not-too-formal fashion. "Good morning, everyone," he began. "If we're all ready to depart, then let's do so. Pilots, you'll find directions on your planes' computers. Everyone else, you know what to do." He gestured to his Brigadesmen, who quickly divided their numbers and helped the pas-

sengers load their equipment and supplies on board the various planes before getting aboard themselves. Joachim, Jacqueline and Landa followed last of all. After a quick radio check the planes pulled up into the air.

They flew for hours, the planes scattering in all directions to reach their various destinations. The ground rolled by below, miles upon miles of open savannah, sparse forest and scrub giving way occasionally to denser stands of growth. Beneath them a vast, wild world played out the natural rhythms and dramas of life and death, unaware of the nature of the threat posed by the strange metal beasts flying above.

It was midday when Jacqueline and Emil's plane reached its destination, to the south of the station. Gold had been discovered here by one of the preliminary expeditions, on the banks of one of the many tributaries of the mighty New Zambezi river. It would be Jacqueline and Emil's job to follow up in an effort to see just how much gold might be present. Under their direction the Brigadesmen set up an assortment of machines to variously sift and sort sediments in search of gold. Some were placed in the river itself, the current powering their movements, while most were automated and had to receive a steady stream of sediments delivered by hand. They also dug nearby, in the soils of the river's bank and adjacent areas, in search of flakes or nuggets.

The day went by in a blur, one long, interminable cycle of scooping and shovelling sediments and checking an assortment of pans to determine if the all-valuable gleam would be discovered. The sun beat down remorselessly, causing Jacqueline's vision to sting with sweat. After a few hours she called a halt. They broke for a light repast before returning to the task at hand.

It was early evening when they found it. Jacqueline had just been dumping a pile of sediments into a "cradle" device that used the currents of the river to sluice the lighter sediments away, leaving heavier sediments and (hopefully) gold behind when Emil called out.

"Jacqueline, come here and see this," he said.

Little more than double the size of a grain of rice, it glinted somewhat dully in the bottom of a pan of sediments, interspersed among rocks and other heavier debris and a handful of small bewildered stream creatures. Emil pulled it out, carefully inspecting it in his palm and probing it with his thumbnail before handing it to her. "I think it's genuine," he said.

Jacqueline took it. It felt heavy for its size. Check one. The colour was about right. Check two. And... she probed it with her thumbnail, feeling the texture. The only other stone or mineral commonly mistaken as gold on Earth and sometimes Pleistonia was pyrite or fool's gold, which to a

competent mineralogist was easy enough to differentiate. Although pyrite, particularly pyrite flakes, had fooled many a would-be treasure-seeker in creek beds on Earth, pyrite was rigid and brittle, prone to shattering under pressure, while gold would only go flat.

The small nugget gave ever so slightly against her thumbnail. She held her breath. Check three. "I think you're right, Emil." She managed after a moment. "Let's perform a few tests to make sure but I'm about 99% certain you've struck gold."

When the nugget held up under various chemical tests, failing to corrode in any way, it became certain. On their first day they had achieved the unbelievable. Before night had fallen they had discovered a number of small flakes of gold dust, and a few more small nuggets. "I'd better check in with the team," Jacqueline said, shaking her head in disbelief as she accessed a satellite line through her handheld.

The various teams responded with an astonishing array of answers. While the majority had still not found anything, several other teams had. The largest nugget measured just over an inch in length. There *was* gold on Pleistonia, in ample quantities to start a gold rush. The results of the preliminary investigations had been substantiated.

Jacqueline dialled her boss. Petyor Mason's voice was cool and composed as always on the other side of the line, even when she told him the news.

"Perfect, you've done an exemplary job," he told her. "Keep at it, and I'll inform the Board of Directors." He hung up.

Jacqueline put the handheld away and addressed the crew. "Let's start making camp," she said. "We've got another long day of this tomorrow."

Within minutes after hanging up Mason had assembled the entire Board, either in person or by handheld, and was advancing his proposal. After a little less than an hour the motion carried with resounding unanimity.

The meeting adjourned, Mason paged the company's financial consultants. Within minutes Refiner's Agent had purchased serious quantities of stock in several major firearm manufacturers.

The Twin Mounds airstrip stood deserted for several hours before first one plane, then a second, descended. The first bore the image of a silver star and three stylised moons on a dark background and the legend RANGE SHERIFF. The second bore a silhouetted image of an *erectus* and the legend BUREAU OF ABORIGINAL INTERESTS.

Lennik, Renna, Barid, Jacob and Prabhnoor waited off the airstrip to greet the pilot of the first craft, who had disembarked while the second pilot remained inside, engine idling. She was Latina and looked to be in

her mid-thirties. Like Lennik she had clearly been toughened by the merciless Pleistonian frontier: her skin was creased from long hours under the sun, her hands strong and callused. A powerful handgun was holstered snugly in place at her side. Her dark hair was braided loosely down past her shoulders. She smiled when she saw Lennik and Renna.

“Lennik! Renna!” she greeted them with a warm embrace.

“Hello, Maria,” he smiled. Then, to the others, “everyone, this is my friend, Deputy Maria Cardenas of the Range Sheriff’s Department. A year ago, we escaped the clutches of Refiner’s Agent and the Greenpark Brigade together.” Introductions were quickly made.

“Well, hello and goodbye,” Prabhnoor said. “I’m afraid that our ride waits just yonder and we have many miles to go.”

“Wonderful to meet any friends of Lennik’s,” Maria said. “Safe journey to you both, and watch out for politicians and bureaucrats!” she winked wickedly.

They watched as Prabhnoor and Jacob got aboard and the second plane took off, climbing into the sky.

“You’re lucky we built that new field outpost,” Maria told them, “it’s not much, smaller even than the New Zambezi station, but that’s where I spend most of my time so I was able to come get you three sooner.”

“I can’t tell you how much this means, Maria,” Lennik said gratefully.

“Nonsense, it’ll be fun!” Maria laughed. “Just like old times, running off to take down a corporate menace and figuring out how to do it along the way. Fortunately, a deputy in my posting has a certain amount of... autonomy in how she chooses to spend her time.”

“Wonderful.” Lennik shook his head. “I feel much better about this whole thing knowing you’ve got my back.”

“Absolutely, Lennik,” Maria laughed. “Come on, somebody’s got to be the sheriff who stands up to the outlaws. This is nothing I shouldn’t be doing.”

Maria had brought stores of provisions from the outpost, and Lennik and Barid had appropriated a substantial quantity from the station as well. The plane was compact and light but powerful: ideal for Range Sheriff work. They climbed into the sky, leaving the station to grow smaller and smaller and finally be swallowed up by the landscape entirely.

“So where are we going first?” Barid asked once they were aloft.

“We’re going to make a circuit,” Maria told him. “We’ll fly over a few of their sites, watch them set up camp, etc. And we’ll definitely be checking out more than one of those horrid depots where they’re dumping trade goods.”

“Sounds good to me,” Lennik concurred. He had to hand it to Maria: the woman was tough, practical, and at no loss for a plan. She was also the most competent pilot he’d met.

Renna stirred restlessly within the confines of the plane. Flight had never been her strong suit, but she soon settled down when Lennik talked to her. “It’s all right, princess,” he said, “hang in there, we’ve got a little ways to go yet.”

“Sorry, Lennik,” Maria said, “this plane’s probably making her a bit queasy. A larger plane would be nice, but the Department only supplies these for the range – and actually, they’re better in any case: lighter, more fuel efficient.”

“Don’t worry, Maria,” Lennik replied. “She just hasn’t been on a plane for a while.”

Once it had levelled off the plane ride became noticeably better for them all. Barid expressed a fascination for the sensation of watching the ground pass them by below. “I haven’t been on a plane since I was seven,” he told them.

Maria had the first depot marked on a map on the plane’s computer. She gritted her teeth as it came in sight. “Absolutely heinous, these things,” she said with a shake of her head, adjusting the controls to allow the plane to hover. A powerful surveillance lens mounted on the outside of the plane fed images directly to the monitor screen, allowing them to zoom in and take pictures in remarkable detail.

Lennik crouched over the console, directing the sweep of the lens. He inhaled with a sharp intake of breath. Below lay sacks of grain, some ripped open with their contents variously strewn about or consumed, packaged dried meat, some of it also torn open and partially consumed, and an ensemble of trade goods. The resolution was so fine he could see footprints in the damp earth.

“Well, to state the obvious, they’re not the only ones that are getting into all of this,” he stated after a few moments. “I think I see footprints of a number of different animals of various sizes.”

Barid furrowed his brows broodingly. “Not good,” he said. “This site is becoming an unnatural magnet for wildlife, making them dependent upon humans.”

“And the larger predators will kill some of the smaller predators and the herbivores that come for the grain,” Lennik said in a flash of realisation, “and the *erectus* will learn that they can get *fresh* meat to scavenge here as well, making them more prone to come here.”

“And they and the wildlife will become unwary at the approach of our species, making them easy prey,” Barid supplied gravely.

A flash of horrifying realisation struck Lennik. "Easy prey – *that's it!* They're going to try to round the *erectus* up!"

"What?" Maria turned, perplexed, from her controls. Even Barid looked slightly nonplussed.

"Think about it," Lennik began, "say you're Refiner's Agent. You want to scoop gold and real estate, but the *erectus* are in the way. So you devise a scheme to sell the populace in Hearthland, New Cyprus etc, on this idea of incorporating them into civilisation, blah blah blah, all that stuff Pritchard's bought lock, stock, and barrel for the price of his soul. But if you're going to do any of that with the *erectus*, who are wary by nature, you'd better get them used to *sapiens* contact first so you can place them within easy reach. Then at the right time all you'd have to do is round them up at the locations that have become magnets for them!"

"That's certainly an interesting – and unsettling – theory, Lennik," Maria said thoughtfully. "But how do we know it's not just some PR stunt?"

Lennik sighed. "I don't, Maria, and that's what's making me even more worried right now, if such a thing is possible."

"Why don't we fly around for a bit and see if we can't find any *erectus* in the area?" Barid suggested. "Then we can obtain firsthand data on how they're doing. I don't see any down there right this second but they've got to be in the area."

"Good thinking, Barid," Lennik said approvingly, "let's do that."

Barid's prediction was soon proved correct. Circling the plane above the area Maria was able to locate an *erectus* encampment in practically no time. The *erectus* had at least exercised the good sense to make camp away from the depot, Lennik was pleased to see, instinctively recognising the risks of predation the area carried. He zoomed in until he could see individual features of the *erectus*.

"Maria, can you land this thing?" he asked. "I'd like to check this group out."

"That's the definition of a 'range plane', Lennik," Maria told him with a grin, "it's easy to set it down and get it off the ground again." Expertly she set the plane down a good distance away from the *erectus* so as not to startle them, and the four approached on foot.

The *erectus* group were a local band that he and Prabhnoor had observed over the course of the past eight months or so. Led by a powerful male he had dubbed Balthazar, they had picked their way north after the end of the Greenpark Brigade's depredations on the *erectus* populations in the vicinity of the MPSs.

Their approach was greeted, much to Lennik's relief, by an alarm call

from the group: clearly they hadn't become docile before their evolutionary cousins yet. Balthazar and several of the other males picked up long, wooden spears and the trade hatchets and knives and stood defiantly, emitting a warbling, polyphonic warning call. Several of the females joined them, although most grabbed small children and shielded them defensively.

Balthazar was not exceptionally tall for a Pleistonian *erectus*: he stood perhaps just over six feet. But he was exceptionally muscled and clearly seasoned in combat against the several predators that had at least the more vulnerable members of his species on their menus. Now, as he faced them with thrusting fire-hardened lance and incongruously-brandished steel hatchet Lennik felt some of his earlier fears begin to subside slightly. He knew the *erectus* leader was unlikely to attack them: the species seldom fought even with their own. As long as they showed no sign of threat they'd be safe. Slowly, carefully, Lennik directed his small group to back up in a manner that didn't arouse the ire of Balthazar.

A call of distress caused *sapiens* and *erectus* alike to start. It came from the direction of the depot. It was followed by several more. A nearby stand of brush rustled and parted as two female *erectus* and several adolescents burst through, skin slicked with sweat and strewn with bits of broken plant matter. Renna warble-trilled in alarm.

In a trice the attack had begun: out of nowhere burst a pack of platehided, tentacle-bearing predators with large, roving eyes. About the size of an African lion, they were powerfully built for stalking and running down large prey. Along the ridge of their powerfully-curved necks and hulking shoulders ran a long crest. As they ran the creatures hooted and bugled to each other sporadically.

"Oh, god..." Maria began.

Lennik shook his head grimly. "Everyone get ready to run." They all knew what the predators were: great crested lupokrakens, perhaps the most ferocious and voracious carnivores on the surface of Pleistonia. In large enough packs, there was absolutely nothing that could stop them. The *erectus* that had strayed from their group were all but doomed.

SUTTER, Petyor Mason's cryptic text read. Congressman Adlai Yu excused himself from the formal lunch he was attending with his girlfriend to call his confederate.

Mason's irritatingly handsome, composed visage dominated the screen with languor, a magnificent lion confident of his own supremacy. "Hello there, Adlai," he said, irking the congressman by using his first name, "I see you have received my message."

Yu choked back his annoyance at Mason's casual manner. "Did it ever occur to you that this line might be tapped?" He kept his tone only mildly grating.

Mason chuckled and blew smoke from a hitherto-unseen cigar at the screen, obscuring it momentarily. "Not that it's *terribly* likely to be, my dear fellow – I do pay for some of the most excellent security available on the planet, you know – but in any event, that's where code words come in useful."

"So it's a go, then?"

"Of course it is. Jacqueline sent word to me last night that the preliminaries had a remarkably high success rate. We've already leaked the word – actually I authorised the leak as soon as I'd made some rather particular *acquisitions* – and the word's begun to drift around the nets by now, I promise you that. It's already begun to snowball, rumours fuelling more rumours and speculation. Address it now, go public with the news, and it'll become a maelstrom."

"Just like that?" Adlai's tone was wary, suspicious.

Mason chuckled again. "You really are a wary bastard, Yu! I should take you on a hunting trip to the continent sometime, you'd get such a kick out of it and I daresay you'd be fantastic – you'd beat the quarry at their own game. Yes, Yu, just like that. That's how these things work. You're a nice, decent, upstanding man, and when you go public to lend credence to the wild rumours and half-baked speculation the fantasies will become real – and of course the crowds will love it, too."

"Hmm," Yu smiled thinly, "in that case, when this is all over I might have to take you up on that hunting trip. I think we'll need a little something to celebrate our success."

"Indeed we will, Yu, indeed we will," Mason agreed. "Now, you really should get back to whatever social function I've interrupted that I seem to recall from the schedule you gave me – and give my best, as well as my apologies for stealing you, to that delectable angel of yours."

Yu suppressed a shudder. His Egypto-Dutch girlfriend was a striking beauty and a full fifteen years younger than him. He was more than a little jealously protective of her, and Mason, who had spent time with the both of them on numerous occasions, never missed an opportunity to make him feel uncomfortable. Whether it was intentional or not he had no way to be sure. Out loud he said, "I'll give Johanna your regards, thank you."

"I look forward to your upcoming address, Congressman," Mason said with a cunning half-grin as he switched off.

Yu returned to the luncheon trying not to shiver. Despite the warm day

in Starfall, a city of subtropical to Mediterranean climate, he felt cold. The worst part of it was Mason's easy command of the encounter. Of any of their encounters. Adlai Yu was a consummate, passionate orator, a wily politician and a skilled administrator. He was the favoured son of his party, groomed for the presidency over the past five years at least. He had toppled many of his rivals, both within the Development Party and without. For whatever reason, however, Mason had the uncanny effect of setting all of his skills and achievements at naught. Yu knew that here was a man far more incredibly, calculatedly ruthless than he could ever think of becoming. Indeed, than he would ever *want* to become. Mason was the only person he had ever known who had taken the failures of his personal life and turned them into weapons: he often boasted of his two failed marriages and estranged fourteen-year old daughter as evidence of his ruthlessness and will to succeed in the business world.

Sitting down at the table he apologised to the guests and Johanna. "Sorry, dear," he said, kissing her cheek.

Johanna laughed. "Oh, no need to apologise, Adlai, you funny man," she told him endearingly. "I was just telling the guests all my most embarrassing stories about you." Everyone laughed and Yu joined in. She patted his shoulder. "No, I was just telling them about our magnificent vacation to the rainforests of New Javaland last year and about your plan to start plantations of rubber and sugarcane and other crops there."

As she went on about the suitability of New Javaland for the growth of valuable cash crops, engaging the interest of the guests as only she could, Yu felt himself return to normal. He'd never been much of a religious man, but he gave thanks to whatever god or power might govern the fates of humanity for Johanna. She was a spectacular hostess and regularly entertained guests, translating fluently between the Dutch and German she had learned from her mother, the Arabic and Farsi she had learned from her father and the French and English she had learned from both of them. She was the fulcrum upon which their social world rested.

"So what can you tell us about tonight's debate, Congressman?" Eduardo Jansen, a Party member and head of a powerful contracting firm, asked.

Yu grinned knowingly. "Let's just say that I have an explosive piece of good news to deliver that will shock a lot of people."

This was it. The big one. Yu dug his toes a little further into his shoes, bracing himself to unleash a barrage of devastatingly powerful arguments in favour of the Development Party. One, in particular.

The candidates of the various parties were assembled in their assorted garb, ranging from simpler linens and cottons to more elaborate leathers,

silks, and even furs and feathers. At a central podium the debate monitor was fielding questions and guiding exchanges between the candidates.

“So what you’re saying, Congressman Zheng, is that it is imperative for the Parliament to take a more active role in working with the Congress to uphold the Constitution, particularly on contentious issues of corporate rights and practice.”

“In essence, yes.” The afore-named Congressman nodded. “We have a unique blend of the British Parliamentary system and the American Constitutional one – a document that is the final word in the land and an elected body that is the highest authority in the land, rivalled only by the president. This is a delicate system but it can work. And issues involving the actions of corporations are where this cooperation is needed most of all.”

The ever-delusional Constitutional Party, Yu laughed to himself. *What’s needed in government is a stronger hand*. He forced himself to focus. This was it. The big one.

“Now, to you, Congressman Yu. In the past you’ve expressed criticism of the hybrid Parliamentary-Constitutional system and argued for the ‘supreme right’ of the presidency over both the Parliament and the prime minister. More recently you’ve talked about a ‘preservationist Congress’ that has impeded your efforts for the Development Party. If elected as president of the Pleistonian Union, what would be your policies regarding issues such as corporate expansion and the regulation of the market?”

Yu smiled. “First of all, let me start at the end. I don’t believe in the ‘regulation of the market’.” He stopped to let his first sentence sink in. “That has been the policy of every failed socialist and Communist regime that Earth saw in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Look at the precedents set by the now centuries-old NAFTA, CAFTA that followed it in Central America, and the sterling examples of the European Union and the African Union, and the slightly more recent South Asian Union and Middle Eastern Union. If we allow big businesses to do what they do best, to efficiently grow and develop, they will move streams of capital and jobs and better wages will follow.

“My grievance with a number of my esteemed colleagues of the General Congress is their failure to recognise this. I’ve been called a ruthless and imperialistic corporatist and told that I’m facilitating the ‘rape of Pleistonia’ just as mercantile quests for natural riches have devastated lands and peoples in various locales at various times.” He waved his hand dismissively. “But what I have steadfastly maintained is that we can and have learned from many of our past mistakes. Today corpora-

tions are bound by laws and charters that were virtually unthinkable to most people until well into the twenty-first century.

“The president isn’t simply the head of the nation, he – or she – is also the commander of its armed forces, the head of his or her party, and, I believe, the chief protector of the nation’s economic wellbeing. If elected as president of the Pleistonian Union I will do everything in my power to advance that wellbeing. Taking this from the realm of the hypothetical, of vague pronouncements, let me give a more concrete example.

“By now a number of you may have heard the rumours, although no doubt for many of you this will be a surprise.” He paused to survey the crowd, who waited attentively to hear his next words. He cleared his throat before going on. “Sources close to me have recently revealed that gold has been discovered in significant quantities on the Pangaeian mainland.”

Murmurs and chatter rippled through the crowd. Many simply stared in stunned disbelief.

“It’s true.” Yu nodded his head. “And as a citizen of this nation I feel that it is my responsibility to speak of what I know, and to make a guarantee that if I am elected president, the people of the Pleistonian Union will benefit from the rich rewards of the soil of our planet!”

Clapping began, sporadically, then gathered momentum as it spread through the crowd. Cheers went up. Yu beamed. The word was out. Gold had been discovered at Sutter’s mill. It was 1848.

Supervisor Jeffri Owens was up at the crack of dawn, as usual. He piously genuflected to the Madonna and Child enshrined in improbably florid splendour on the bare walls of his room before hydrating and heating his military-grade processed rations. Shaving in the ancient manner, with a brush and blade razor (he didn’t care for those micro-depilating automated razors, thank you very much), he cheerfully grabbed his package of cigarettes, lit one, then selected more of the military food and shoved it into his pack.

Jeffri was a meticulous man, with an eye for detail, something he’d acquired in the underworld dealing the most potent drugs that were still illegal: meth, neuroin, heroin, anything there’d been a market for. But in prison he’d become a devout Catholic and left all that behind him, thanks be to the Saviour. He often praised God for delivering him from the wilderness of spiritual darkness that had been his life before he had been arrested in the sting that had landed him a hefty prison sentence. His good behaviour had commuted much of that sentence, and in his late thirties, a newly-released Jeffri had sought a new career.

Mining was difficult, hard, dangerous work, but Jeffri considered himself to have died already on the streets of Hearth and Starfall. Then he'd died again, washed by the blood of the Redeemer, and been reborn. That was twice he'd died, Jeffri joked, what more could a third time do to him? His body had been hardened from a life on the streets and in prison; coupled with his indefatigable spirits he'd proven himself competent and Refiner's Agent had rewarded him.

He'd taken night classes, learned about the specialised machinery that was used to pulverise, grind, smash and sort ore taken from beneath tons of overhanging rock and earth and darkness to extract the coveted metals inside. God had blessed him in his job over time, and he'd been rewarded with several promotions, culminating in a posting to the influential and important post of mine supervisor. As mine supervisor Jeffri was responsible for the whole of the mining operation at Twin Mounds. He'd been transferred here just a year ago, after the Holy Church's noble effort to bring the Gospel to the savages had failed. His crew were able enough fellows, and they came from all around – different languages and everything. It had been a right shame to find that the Catholics among them were often no better, and sometimes a sight worse, than the handful of Protestants, even the Muslims and others. He'd spoken with Father Landa on a number of occasions about looking after that, but the good Father had had little success.

Reverently checking to make sure the crucifix around his neck was straight, he went into the main common area where the first shift of miners ate breakfast before heading off to work.

The room was empty. The cupboards and pantries had been thrown open in frenzied haste for a horde of plundering hands to empty *every last bit* of edible food from them. The floor was dirty from scores, hundreds, of dirty, booted feet scuffling across it with no care for the mess they left, no concern for anything at all except to empty every last corner of the room.

Alarmed, Jeffri ran to the quarters where the first shift slept. The doors hung haphazardly open, the rooms in utter disarray. The miners had evidently taken their personal possessions and left in a great hurry.

Merciful Lord, what could this be? He crossed himself worriedly. What could have caused his entire first crew to run off?

The quarters of the second and third shifts were the same, deserted and plundered-looking. Jeffri ran from room to room, trying desperately to find some clue, anything as to why Twin Mounds had been stripped of its miners.

Bolting outside, Jeffri raced to the sheds where the tools and equip-

ment were kept. The locks had been forced and the doors swung open. An array of mining implements had been taken: picks, shovels, drills, but strangely, none of the more valuable electric or electronic equipment. It was almost as if... he stopped, startled at his sudden insight. Almost as if they had taken off for the surrounding countryside to mine. But that was absurd, wasn't it? All the copper and tin that was being mined in this area was deep underground, and hardly worth such a mad dash. Unless, he realised with a second flash of inspiration, they were after something more valuable and easier to obtain.

It was only when he turned on his handheld and called the office that he found both of his hunches to be well-founded.

"Congressman Adlai Yu gave a speech last night, something about there being gold out there." Jeffri's supervisor gave a snort of disgust. "Nothing you could have done, Jeffri, and personally, I wouldn't have wanted you to get in the way of a bunch of yahoos with gold fever. Let them go, if they don't burn themselves out and come to their senses in a few days to a week the company's better off without them. We'll send you a fresh batch of workers in a few days. Meanwhile, I'll see about getting you out of there for a few. Might as well give you a few days back in civilisation while we're figuring this out, right?"

"That would be swell, thank you, sir," Jeffri told him, grateful for an answer to the bizarre circumstances that had turned his world upside down in a single night.

Already miles away, the miners of Twin Mounds had scattered into smaller groups along ethnic-linguistic lines, armed only with their (questionable) wits, some stolen provisions and tools and their strong backs. That, and their insatiable thirst for a metal that had transformed entire civilisations.

Chapter Five

The Bureau pilot didn't talk much on the flight out, leaving Prabhnor and Jacob plenty of time to discuss their plans. Jacob took the opportunity to catch Prabhnor up on the status of the *erectus* population still at the mission. Over the course of the preceding year their numbers had dwindled slowly but steadily as, guided by Lennik and Prabhnor with the help of Jacob and others, a number of them had been guided back to their natural environs. The transition had been a difficult one, and for some it had meant the adoption or re-adoption of a lifestyle that they had hardly known. For others, uprooted more recently by Captain Hussler's

depredations, it had meant the struggle to reconstitute a new society in the absence of familiar kin.

“Their numbers are down notably from even five months ago, which is good,” Jacob told her, “but they’re starting to hold steady because the more reluctant of the *erectus* to leave the station are breeding and producing young. They’ve shown little to no disposition towards making handaxes, cleavers, picks, digging sticks and fire-hardened wooden lances. They’re still admirably non-picky eaters, and so they take the traditional foods such as wild plants, small game, and carrion that they’re being provided, but they enjoy any and all handouts from the kitchen and routinely scavenge the trash for scraps and leftovers at every opportunity. The station cooks complain about them being pests and nuisances.” He shook his head. “I have to tell you, it’s pretty worrisome. They just don’t seem to have a drive to succeed without our help.”

Prabhnoor pursed her lips in thought. “Have you noticed other, more fundamental changes in their behaviour and society? How about their hygiene, are they falling victim to diseases at higher rates?”

Jacob shook his head. “They’re healthy for the most part because they’re still being vaccinated for all the major diseases, and as many of the minor ones as possible. Of course there are issues with the fact that they weren’t meant to live in one place for an extended period of time: they’ve become sedentary, so cleaning up after them is quite the task, I have to tell you. Keeping their drinking water clean requires some effort, and it’s not a task we can hope to perfect: there are too many sources of open water for them to contaminate with their wastes and then bathe in or drink out of. They’re also being given preventative medicine for parasites: we’ve had a higher frequency of bristle-worm and band-worm than the naturally occurring populations seem to have. Of course, we *sapiens* have been getting those too, so it may partly be a function of our living together in the same area.

“As far as their social behaviour, well, it’s a little different from what I’ve observed. For the most part they try to re-establish the roles they have naturally – small groups under a nominal leader, all that bit – but of course that’s a little hard to do when so many of them were taken from different groups, often at quite young ages, and thrown together. So what’s happened is that the older ones, even though they might have originally been from different groups, have gravitated into two or three loosely-defined groups that the younger ones attach themselves to as they’re able. And now that the adult females are starting to give birth again in significant numbers, we might be looking at the next stage here, whatever that is.”

Prabhnoor frowned in thought. She'd been spending enough time with Lennik monitoring the state of the neighbouring *erectus* populations that a fair bit of this was news to her. She'd known that the station had had a few births over the course of the past year, but she'd thought that most of the new mothers had left, along with many of the other reproductive-age females and males, to form new groups in the wild. Apparently many of them had but some number had stayed close to the place that had become the only home they knew.

"Well, that's certainly data we can present to CCAA," she said. "I'm sure they'll want to know about the effects of long-term *sapien*-isation on the *erectus* at Twin Mounds."

"But that's not going to be enough to stop Refiner's Agent, or at least make sure they're properly supervised." Jacob shook his head. "We need to present compelling data that these horrid depots are a bad idea."

"If Lennik's theory is right, maybe we won't need any more data than that," Prabhnoor pondered. "But at any rate I have supporters at the University of Hearth – friends, colleagues that will gladly sign on to this. Then together we'll meet with CCAA and see if we can't get some hard truths through some hard Committee heads."

The flight was long and uneventful: the interminable miles of New Zambeziland fell away below them as they flew north, toward the island-encircled New Mediterranean, and then beyond, to the large island of Hearthland and the capital of the Pleistonian Union, Hearth. They had a brief layover for refuelling and a change of pilots at New Naples, on the island of New Cyprus, before heading north again. It had fallen dark when they arrived.

In the more than one hundred years since its founding by the colonists of the First Fleet, the city of Hearth had grown from a nascent colonial settlement to a stately, sprawling metropolis. Flanked by Starfall to the west and Pleistoniana to the north, it was the capital and greatest city of the Pleistonian Union. Jacob smiled in relief to be back on the familiar streets of the city he knew so well, as a lifelong resident and graduate student at the University of Hearth. Prabhnoor, who had also grown up and studied in Hearth, felt a curious sense of ambivalence. She had felt it before: Lennik had somewhat scathingly called it "city sickness" ("because after being out in the field for so long, the city makes you disoriented and sick in a hurry"), but never this strongly. After all, she was returning to urban civilisation for the *first time* in almost a *year* since her posting to Twin Mounds, she realised.

A Bureau taxi was waiting for them off the airfield. They sped through the streets of Hearth, past lighted windows belonging to an assortment of

businesses. The crowds on the sidewalks were chattering in the multitude of languages their forebears had brought with them across the stars. The strains of festive salsa music wafted through the air. One thing about Hearth: the city was always up. It didn't matter what hour of the day or night, people were always on the move.

The driver helped them unload their bags at the hotel and checked them in. After the bellhop had helped carry their luggage into their rooms and closed the door Prabhnoor turned to Jacob.

"You see," she said, "the Bureau *does* know how to take care of its own. Now, get some rest. Tomorrow we've got to meet with a colleague of mine in the Bureau to investigate the climate in CCAA right now."

"Will do," Jacob agreed. "I'm impressed by how fast you've managed to move things along here, Prabhnoor, it's quite something."

Prabhnoor gave a knowing chuckle. "When you've been around in the circles that I have it becomes almost second nature."

Prabhnoor slept comfortably in the luxury suite, a feat that somewhat surprised even her: after being so long at Twin Mounds she would have thought she'd find it impossible to settle down. She awoke to a rainy day: Hearth did have quite a few of those this time of the year, she recalled. Fortunately Hearth had a mild climate: somewhat humid year-round, a warmer, drier summer and a somewhat cooler and wetter winter. Right now it was spring, and the city was fairly warm and wet. Sipping her chai tea as she gazed out the window, she felt there could be no finer city on Pleistonia or indeed, even on Earth. The disorientation of being freshly back from the field was beginning to fade.

After Jacob awoke and they had breakfasted they met their driver for the ride to the Bureau's central headquarters in the city. The headquarters were in a stately brick building in the heart of the city, near various other government offices and buildings. Outside stood an idealised, Neoclassical cast-bronze statue of an *erectus* couple, male and female. The general promiscuity and polyamory of *erectus* populations was a fact that the caster had evidently not cared to dwell on. The base of the statue bore the legend:

*let this noble goal be here enshrined:
to protect these sojourners,
native daughters and sons of our planet,
in their ways of life upon pleistonia*

"Bit pretentious, but it's the thought that counts," Prabhnoor quipped, glancing at the statue as they passed it and entered the building. The

receptionist buzzed the office of her colleague, who told them to come right up.

“Prabhnoor, so good to see you again!” The man who greeted them looked to be in his mid-fifties, his dark hair receding but only mildly greying. He sported a neatly-trimmed beard and moustache. He spoke English with an American accent – probably West Coast, but a hundred years of Pleistonia made it hard to tell. His full, pleasant features did nothing to detract from the air of competence and intelligence that he exuded. He extended a hand to Jacob. “Ah, and this must be the young man Prabhnoor’s been telling me about! Pleased to meet you, son, I’m Aleron Schreiber.”

“Jacob Elazar, Ph.D. candidate, University of Hearth,” Jacob introduced himself, “pleased to meet you, sir.”

“So, what can I do for you two? Sit down!” Aleron gestured to two comfortably padded chairs. “Can I get you anything? Tea, maybe, or coffee?”

“No, thank you, Aleron,” Prabhnoor began, “I’ve come to you because I’m very concerned about the activities of Refiner’s Agent and the NMA in the Pangaeian interior.”

Aleron’s sunny countenance clouded. “That horrid prospecting drive and dumping program by that horrid company and those misguided simpletons?” he shook his head in disgust. “Tell me about it. I’ve been arguing against those bastards since – well, before the MPS system even, I guess.”

“Aleron,” Prabhnoor continued, “they’re up to something really big this time. You don’t just go into *erectus* territory on an innocuous little search for gold and bring them gifts. Not if you’re a mega-corporation like Refiner’s Agent with designs on *erectus* land and a proven history of unethical treatment of the *erectus*. We need to go before CCAA with a solid, compelling case against them to get them to stop what they’re doing with those trade goods at the very least and get any other activities monitored like hawks.”

Aleron’s brow furrowed in thought. “That’s going to be the problem, isn’t it, building that case? Refiner’s Agent is a very wily foe, or to be more precise, Petyor Mason is.”

“Have you investigated the link between Congressman Yu, the NMA and Refiner’s Agent?” Jacob asked. “I mean, we know the NMA is dealing with both Yu and Refiner’s Agent. But why? Is it just coincidence, because they really want to offload cheap trade goods and missionisation on the *erectus*? Or is it something deeper?”

Aleron sat up in his chair. “That’s an interesting angle, Jacob. You

know, Congressman Yu gave a speech just last night and announced the discovery of gold on the Pangaeian mainland – one can only presume by Refiner's Agent, they're the only really large company that's been looking for gold in a serious way of late – and said that if elected president, he would see to it that the people would benefit from the riches of their planet, all the usual populist crock."

"So we've got a possible three-way alliance between Yu, who wants the presidency and is appealing to a clear constituency to get it, Cardinal Cruz and his NMA, who want influence and probably funding, and last but probably the most important, Petyor Mason and Refiner's Agent, and their agenda has been pretty obvious for a long time," Prabhnoor said thoughtfully. "Definitely a good place to investigate."

"I'll get some of my research assistants on it," said Aleron. "Excellent. We'll check the backgrounds of all three of these individuals and their respective organisations, where applicable. Oh, and speaking of Cardinal Cruz reminds me," he snapped his fingers, "that there's another call I need to make. A year ago, when the debacle broke, there was a priest who went on record as openly denouncing the NMA: he charged them with flagrantly flouting basic ethical guidelines and opportunistically exploiting the *erectus* and strongly recommended that the organisation be disbanded. Although this last suggestion was not adopted, the investigations, legal and ecclesiastical, of their activities forced them to discontinue their program. I met with this priest – actually, several of us in the Bureau did – and he specifically asked us to keep his contact information on hand for future reference, if we needed him to testify against the NMA or anything like that. Let me see if I can't find that number here somewhere." He sorted through various files on his handheld. "Ah, here we go." The line rang several times before being answered. "Hello, Father Nigel Obsanjo? My name is Aleron Schreiber, agent with the Bureau of Aboriginal Interests. We spoke last year during and after the Twin Mounds trials, you may remember. Yes, yes, that's right. Listen, I'm calling you because I'd very much like to talk about what's currently going on with the NMA and Cardinal Cruz's status as Congressman Yu's running mate... you would? Oh, terrific... yes, that would be wonderful... yes, of course... all right, I look forward to it." He hung up.

"So he'll do it?" Jacob asked.

Aleron smiled. "He's in. I forgot to tell you both that a year ago he was part of that delegation, the one with your co-worker Lennik and that Range Sheriff, Maria, that blew the whistle at Twin Mounds."

"When do we meet with him?" Prabhnoor asked.

Aleron chuckled. "He's invited us over for dinner tonight."

The great crested lupokrakens were astonishingly swift and intelligent hunters, Lennik thought. Even though he'd watched them in action many times, usually against the larger of the many cattalo species as well as taurochs, buffalo and octephants, they never failed to impress. There was no doubt in his mind that they were the most intelligent of the large predators on Pleistonia: they stalked and pursued their quarry with remarkable cunning and persistence. Although smaller by far than the other two very large predators on Pleistonia, the tigrekraken and the dracokraken, by virtue of their numbers and cunning they were in many ways the most dangerous. And when they attacked, it was with ground-eating speed, incredible strength and utter ruthlessness. They were by far the greatest challenge and danger to the Pleistonian *erectus* other than *sapiens* – they sometimes attacked even groups of *erectus* in broad daylight, although such incidents were relatively rare.

Lennik gritted his teeth. As much as he loved the *erectus* of Pleistonia, as dedicated as he was to their preservation, he'd decided long ago that he would not intervene with their ways of life in the field, even if that meant watching an *erectus* die by another of its own kind or a predator. It had been hard: in so many ways they were so much like his own species, but on some level he had always felt that nature should be allowed to take its course. Sometimes he cursed himself for being a hypocrite: after he'd watched a young *erectus* gathering plant tubers be stalked, attacked, savagely mauled and carried off by a tigrekraken he'd been almost unable to eat or sleep for a week, and then he'd had nightmares for almost a month. How, he often asked himself, could he treat them as so human but fail to take even basic steps to protect them against their enemies, things like shooting large predators that threatened them? He'd never had a satisfactory answer for himself, but somehow it seemed the right thing to do. He couldn't protect *erectus* from their natural enemies or from each other – that was something they had to do for themselves. And so it was that he watched, frozen with no small amount of horror, as the fearsome predators bore down upon their helpless prey.

“We've got to stop them!” Maria's gun was in her hand in an instant.

“No, Maria,” Lennik shook his head mournfully. “We shouldn't interfere with nature.”

Barid looked troubled but nodded his agreement. “I think Lennik is right.”

Maria looked somewhat taken aback. “But we –” She was clearly at a loss for words.

A primal, bone-chilling, ululating call froze the three *sapiens* in their shoes as Balthazar leaped into action, his spear still grasped in one hand,

the hatchet in the other. One of the lupokrakens was almost upon one of the adult female *erectus*, tentacles with embedded grasping teeth poised to strike. Balthazar's lance-thrust hit it between its eyes, above the tentacles and beaklike mouth. The lupokraken was going much too fast to stop: its momentum carried it onto the lance, puncturing its hide. It hooted in pain as its strange hide gave and blood spurted out.

Balthazar brought the hatchet down on the lupokraken's head. Far stronger than an average *sapiens* man, his swing split the lupokraken's head open and dropped it in its tracks, dead. Howling in victory, Balthazar brandished the bloody hatchet at the other lupokrakens. The other male and several of the female *erectus* in the camp, emboldened by his fearless example, were starting forward with long lances, trade hatchets and knives, and burning brands of firewood. The lupokrakens, practically indomitable but not invincible and taken aback by the sudden loss of their companion, realised they had met their match and retreated.

It took several moments for the hearts of the three *sapiens*, and, for that matter, Renna, to return to normal. When he could focus again Lennik realised his hands were shaking.

"Everyone all right?" Maria asked, her voice not entirely steady.

Barid and Lennik answered in the affirmative; Renna warbled in her usual manner.

"So tell me again, now that we're not in the heat of the moment watching it happen" – Maria's eyes narrowed – "why weren't we going to help?"

Lennik groaned. "I know, it sounds terrible of me to say. But that was one of the very first and very hardest lessons I had to learn when I went out into the field for the first time. My professor made it a point to tell me the first time we went out to the field: 'Lennik,' he said, 'you can't intervene. I know it's hard, I know they're another species of human so it's not like watching predators take down any of those cattle, but they've been living successfully on this planet for almost a million and a half years by now, using some of the simplest tools in our shared prehistory. And before they were here our mutual ancestors were preyed on by dangerous predators as well. *They don't need your help.* As always, some of them will get unlucky or careless and one of the large predators will get them, but the species will continue. They've got a remarkable set of survival strategies for coping with conditions that we can't even begin to imagine dealing with.' That was what he told me, and unfortunately I've found it to be true ever since."

"Well, that makes sense, I guess," Maria conceded grudgingly, not

sounding entirely convinced, “but it’s a little hard to stay on the sidelines and remember all that in the moment.”

“That *erectus* sure didn’t need help, though!” Barid laughed. “The way he took down that lupokraken –” He whistled admiringly.

“So their material culture is changing profoundly and rapidly,” Lennik noted, “which, from the standpoint of their own security, isn’t a bad thing necessarily – except when it means a dependence on items they can’t manufacture and have to obtain from us.”

“You think this is more evidence for that round-up theory of yours?” Maria asked.

“In a way, yes,” Lennik responded, “although I’m guessing Refiner’s Agent is planning to put their plans into effect soon enough that the *erectus* won’t have much choice in the matter.”

“Well, we’ve seen what we’ve come to see here.” Barid wrinkled his nose in disgust. “What say we move on?”

Renna was staring at the group of *erectus* intently. The small foraging party had been greeted with joy at their safe return and rescue by the rest of the band, and there was much excited warbling, trilling and cooing. Balthazar, of course, was the hero of the hour and he made sure everyone knew it: not only had he delivered several of their number from danger, he had also provided them with fresh meat. He hooted and pranced, walking around the carcass of his fallen enemy with pride. Several of the adult *erectus* took it upon themselves to begin butchering the carcass with the knives and hatchets. Butchering apparently beneath his notice at the moment, Balthazar took advantage of his hour of glory to copulate with a receptive female.

Lennik watched Renna for a reaction: she had always been fascinated by the groups of *erectus* they encountered, but had never shown an inclination to join them. He was grateful for that, but at the same time torn: the self-appointed protector of the *erectus* in their natural lifeways, yet he had had an influence on Renna that had kept her from those same lifeways.

The moment passed. Renna turned toward the plane, uttering her usual cheerful warble.

“Well, looks like someone’s ready to go,” Lennik chuckled.

“Where to next?” Barid asked.

“I was thinking we might check out one of those prospecting camps,” Maria said.

The gold yields had proven more bountiful than Jacqueline could possibly have imagined. They had continued prospecting in the area and in the

course of a week had turned up a tidy amount of gold dust and a number of gold nuggets. Over all they had scooped over a pound and a half – yields that Jacqueline and Emil agreed were hardly trivial. The men of the Greenpark Brigade sent to accompany them were talking about it as well, murmuring excitedly around their fires at night. *Good, let them be excited*, she told herself. She had given all of the men free access to the satellite line: their calls to friends and family would help to fan the flames a little.

All in all Jacqueline counted herself lucky: it had taken a full eight days for there to be any desertions. On that morning they had discovered that three of the Brigadesmen had taken off in the night, taking with them their guns, extra ammunition, and as much of the provisions as they could carry. The remaining men expressed shock, dismay and disgust, but Jacqueline expected that before all was said and done they'd find their numbers reduced yet again – perhaps even entirely. For now, however, the company pressed on, continuing to prospect the gold-bearing regions in the area. The goal was not so much extraction of the gold – that could wait – but ascertaining its presence and quantities. So far, it had had quite a bit of both.

“Director, ma’am!” One of the Brigadesmen ran up to her, breathing hard, and saluted. “Jenkins and I were just up ahead and we think we’ve discovered which way the deserters went, ma’am!”

“Good, good,” Jacqueline commended him, “you’ve both done well. We’ll let Joachim know, and he can relay the information to the pilots to keep an eye out for them.” It was hopeless, of course: the men were long gone and, while not expertly seasoned woodsmen, they were strong and able-bodied and would have little trouble moving far and fast into the wilderness where they’d never be found. With their guns they could hunt a little: obviously they thought they’d be fine long enough to get rich. Jacqueline seriously doubted that supposition. They weren’t prospectors, and while the gold was pretty thick in the area, it probably wouldn’t be dense enough for them to find readily. In all probability they’d get far enough from civilisation to die of starvation, accident, or hungry animal where no one could help them. But better to give the men reason to think the deserters would be caught and face recrimination: it might serve as a disincentive for them to follow the deserters’ example.

“The tracks are real clear, ma’am,” the Brigadesman told her. “We can probably follow them and track them down in a few hours.”

Jacqueline started to say something, then thought better of it. She had thought to tell him it wouldn’t prove necessary, that Joachim could no doubt take care of it better than they could, but stopped once she realised

that this would make her look somewhat indifferent to the circumstance. "Well, if that's the case, we'd better try, right?" she asked with an encouraging smile. "Great, everyone get ready – pilot, you can take a crew aloft to look for them, the rest of us will stick to the ground and help guide you. One of us should spot them, and if we don't we'll call Joachim and get him on it." Inwardly she cursed. A needless delay to hopefully keep even just a few of the men from deserting a little longer. A delay that might not even work.

The tracks were indeed quite clear: the three men – Goldberg, Chou, and O'Brien – had apparently made no effort to cover their escape, either due to haste or confidence in the inability for reprisal. Jacqueline was no more than mildly annoyed by the men's desertion: they were all three among the toughest and most self-reliant of the Brigadesmen under Joachim that had been assigned to the project.

It was a little after mid-day that they found evidence of the three men's passing that shocked even the usually imperturbable and unflappable Jacqueline. Rounding a bend on the overgrown banks of a creek they were confronted with a horrifying spectacle: the bodies of no fewer than nine miners.

"Oh, *god* –" The Brigadesman who'd first suggested following the three deserters turned and promptly lost his lunch. Several of the others looked as though they might follow his example.

Jacqueline, overcoming an initial wave of nausea, ventured closer to take a better look. The nine men had all been dispatched with gunshots to the head, throat, or spine, delivered either as precise-looking point shots or small bursts of fire. Much to her surprise, they all were wearing the clothes of mine workers. Interspersed among the corpses and stacked by the creek's edge were mining tools: the men had evidently been prospecting for gold here after...

After running away from the mines, she realised. Refiner's Agent's *own* mineworkers had caught the gold fever bug – and become victims of it, as well. The identity of the killers wasn't hard to guess at: the three deserters had all been well-armed and mineworkers were hardly issued with guns, although the positions of some of the tools seemed to indicate that at least a few of the former copper miners and would-be gold prospectors had died trying to fight back with picks, spades or other implements in hand. The reason the three deserters would murder nine men in cold blood were easy to guess at: the men had found gold.

"Come on, everyone," Jacqueline said aloud at last, "I think it's pretty obvious who did this. We'd better let Joachim know we've got three

killers on the loose. I think the Range Sheriff's Department will want to know about this, too."

One of the men saluted and relayed the information as ordered. They skirted the scene of the gristly spectacle and continued to follow the creek. No sense in wasting good prospecting time and territory, Jacqueline realised.

Her handheld beeped. It was the pilot. "Miss Director, ma'am, you'd better check this out. I think we may have found where our runaways went."

The image relayed from the plane's scope to her handheld was so immense she had to pan in all directions to see the entire scene. Scores, *hundreds* of people had converged on the creek some miles ahead: former mineworkers alongside former National Guard alongside more than a few Greenpark Brigade and the odd NMA missionary, as well as many more not readily identifiable by the uniforms that had defined their past lives. They were all armed to the teeth: long rifles and, as the scope zoomed in at her command, fat handguns and wicked-looking knives like the one she carried were very much in evidence. The gold fever had wrought its magic: lives and responsibilities and cares had been thrown to the wind in the mad dash for riches. Now these men, who scant days (or even hours, in the case of their deserters) ago had had walks of life circumscribed and defined by codes and duties, had forsaken all to scabble madly in the mud of a creek for wealth.

"Good work," she told the pilot, "you've done well. Be sure to let Joachim know about this, and the Range Sheriff's Department will probably want to know too."

Checking in with the other crews, Jacqueline was pleasantly somewhat surprised to learn that they, too, had experienced the same phenomenon: gold-prospecting camps had sprung up overnight throughout the Greater New Zambezi drainage. *Mason will want to know about this*, she thought.

The line was answered almost immediately. True to Jacqueline's expectations, Mason was pleased.

"This is terrific!" he told her, his face breaking into an easy, confident laugh, "you've done very well, Jacqueline, I'm pleased. To think: I have asked you for many things over the course of the past few years and you have delivered on them all. Now when I ask you for a gold rush you even manage to deliver on that! This is fantastic, Jacqueline, I'm meeting with Adlai and Agustino and I'll be sure to tell them of the effects of Adlai's little speech. And don't worry about the losses from the copper mines or the Brigade – if the former were going to desert in the first place they're

not worth the company's time or money. And the latter actually did us a favour by killing them: helps demonstrate the need for order that we can provide. You've done very well, Jacqueline, and I can assure you that you will be richly rewarded. Continue finding gold-bearing locations for now, and I promise you we'll have you out of there before you know it."

"Thank you, sir," she told him with a measured smile. She never trusted anyone completely, not even a demanding boss who was very happy with her performance – no, *especially* a demanding boss who was happy with her performance, she decided. Best not to trust much of anybody at all, especially when they said they were pleased with you in some way – at least if they said they were angry they'd have no possible reason to lie.

"Well, I must really be going, I have to get ready for that very meeting with our compatriots, but again, job very well done." Mason's smile could have charmed an angel to his bed (and indeed it had on many an occasion, Jacqueline knew), but to her it was the smile of a contented, confident predator. She managed to suppress a slight shudder; Mason was the only man capable of unnerving her in the least.

Abdul Khan was having a fine day. Praise fucking Allah, he was. Hadn't been much more than a week since he'd left that shithole, Twin Mounds, hauling copper ore from the earth's bowels for hours on end, nothing but that fuck-awful military-grade shit and other slops to eat, then crammed with a buncha guys into a helluva bunk area, hardly any private space to do your own business, and on the weekends, nothing for it but to drink yourself into oblivion on whatever cheap whisky or vodka was on hand. And forget about getting any female company: he hadn't gotten into a woman since... well, longer than he cared to think, that was what.

But since the news of the gold findings hit the station his life had been on the up. He and everyone else in the entire station had taken off like a cat with a scorched tail when they'd found that out, loaded up with everything they could carry, mining tools and fuck-awful food and all. Put a fair stretch of miles between themselves and the station before dawn, just in case that fag-ass Jeffri managed to get some help tracking them down. Split up like, no sense in going any one direction all of them together – besides, more gold for each if their team got lucky, right? – and Abdul didn't trust some of those other types anyway. Got along just fine with the other Pakistanis, so they'd formed a crew and gotten the Tanzanians and Kivutians in on it. The Pakistanis all spoke Urdu and English, the Tanzanians mostly Kiswahili and English, and the Kivutians mostly Kiswahili and French, so it worked out okay. And enough of them

were Muslim that there was some Arabic throughout, so that helped things along right fine.

They'd gone all over the place, high and low, sticking mostly by the creeks and rivers because that was where the gold was most likely to be at. At first they'd run themselves right ragged, but they'd learned with time to pace it out. And they'd started to find food, too: mostly plants and shit, but some Kivutian guy named Lothaire had figured out how to make some snares and the like for small animals. And using their knives, they'd made spears, so he and a few of the others had already tried their hand at that. So far they hadn't had much success, but he'd get the hang of it.

But the reason he was having such a good day was that after more than a week of tramping out in the wilderness, away from civilisation, without a proper supply of liquor or tobacco or anything, was that at last they'd found it. Gold. It wasn't more than a fair piece so far: a handful of flakes, a moderate amount, but they were keeping at it like nobody's business. Sun-up to sun-down there were guys panning or working the cradles or whatever. Everyone took their turn on food duty, grubbing plants or hunting or whatever – the camp was run pretty good that way. Of course there was no satisfactory way to establish a leader and make it stick, so they all voted on things and took it in turn to elect leaders.

A plane soared overhead, then banked to begin angling its approach for descent.

Abdul cursed. Who the fuck could be after them? Range Sheriffs? Greenpark Brigade? Bureau of Aboriginal Affairs, those pompous assholes?

The plane drew closer, and Abdul could see it bore no official markings. It was a privately owned aircraft. It came to a stop and several well-built Japanese men got out.

“Greetings to you, friends,” said one who appeared to be the leader, “my name is Otohiko and I wondered if I could interest you in any supplies. We deal in firearms and ammunition, tents and other outdoor equipment, food, liquor, anything you could want.”

“Well, that all sounds pretty good,” Abdul replied. It all sounded decent and on the level but you never could be sure with Japanese people. Almost as bad as Americans, Canadians and Australians. “But we don't have any money.”

“Ah, no problem,” Otohiko replied. “You say you have no money? But you are prospectors for gold, no? So surely you must have some gold you are willing to trade?”

“Are they good guns?” Kareem, another one of the Pakistanis, inquired.

Otohiko flashed a winning smile. “Of course, we carry nothing but excellent firearms. Gentlemen, show them.” He gestured to his silent associates, who seemed to be hired muscle. Abdul guessed that Otohiko owned and flew the plane.

The Japanese hired hands carried out a number of well-built, durable assault rifles of the kind used by the National Guard and the Greenpark Brigade. Abdul and the others, who had by now all gathered around the strangers, stared.

“Where’d you get guns like those?” Lothaire, the Kivutian, asked.

“I have connections with the Greenpark Brigade’s suppliers,” Otohiko said. “This allows me to – ah – *obtain* certain items at before-sale rates. It is a very good arrangement.”

“What we need most is guns, I’m thinking. What about the rest of you, boys?” Abdul asked his crew. There was a ripple of assent: the motion clearly carried. By now they were all tired of trying to spear fleet and wary quarry: being able to shoot it down from a distance could provide a much-needed windfall of food.

They haggled with Otohiko for almost a half hour but in the end they talked him into two guns and a fair pile of ammunition in exchange for all their gold. At the end of the transaction the smiling Japanese man had his muscle load the rest of the merchandise up before turning to thank them. “Thank you, fine gentlemen, for doing business with Otohiko’s Frontier Air Delivery. I will return in a week or so to see if we can do business again.”

“You be able to find us okay?” Abdul asked. “Might move around some.”

Otohiko waved his hand dismissively. “Not hard to find you out here, good sir,” he chuckled, “plenty of room, to be sure, but I’ve been a pilot for a long time. I’ll find you.”

The plane climbed into the sky and faded out of sight.

The guns were no end of a good thing for the crew. The first *day* they shot one of those big tauroch things, and that was meat for all! They’d eaten until they could barely move. Then the next day Nelson, one of the Tanzanians, had said they should dry the rest and he’d seen about doing just that. Abdul and some of the others had helped. But the most amazing thing was what had happened the second night.

Abdul had been having dreams of strong alcohol and loose women again when he’d been shaken awake. It was Kareem, and he seemed pretty excited about something. Kareem was a good sort of guy, tough

and reliable, little excitable at times, but a generally solid head on his shoulders. Kind of guy you could count on in a pinch.

“Abdul, hey Abdul!” he said.

“What – what the fuck? Kareem?” Abdul jerked himself awake.

“Abdul, come on, I’ve found something!”

Abdul rubbed his eyes, shook his head and tried to focus. “You’ve – you’ve what?”

“Come on! And keep your voice down!” Kareem pulled him away from the place where he’d been sleeping.

Kareem took him to the edge of their camp. The fires had burned low, and the men all lay around the camp in no particular order. They had to step carefully to keep from stepping on someone. At the edge of the camp Kareem pulled him into a crouch.

“What the hell’s going on? Fucking Allah, man, I was –”

“Shh!” Kareem cut him off. “Over there, across the rise,” he pointed to a small, rolling bank of hills, “I was walking, doing sentry duty for the camp.” Every night they posted a sentry with one of the guns to keep wild animals and any malevolent passersby away. So far they’d had no problems, but better safe than sorry. “I smelled smoke, so I went forward, and I found a small campsite with three men!”

Abdul was all ears now. “And?”

“And they were all armed, and all asleep!” Kareem could scarcely restrain his excitement. “So I figured,” he produced the second gun, “maybe you and I could do something about that.”

Abdul’s smirk was wolfishly predatory.

They crept to the top of the rise. Sure enough, there was a small campfire that had burned low. Around it lolled three sleeping men wearing tattered and soiled uniforms belonging to the Greenpark Brigade. And each one had a large rifle much like their own.

“How about you take the one closest to you, and I take the one on the right here, and then we both peg that last one?” Kareem’s eyes glittered white in the moonlight.

“On count of three?” Abdul asked.

Kareem nodded and they counted together. “One, two, *three...*”

Goldberg and Chou never knew what hit them. They died before they could wake up. O’Brien was startled awake only to die a moment later, brain struggling to make sense of what was happening before it was pierced by two blast rounds.

Abdul and Kareem carried three new rifles, three new handguns, countless rounds of ammunition, fresh provisions and a surprising

amount of gold back to a camp brought to untimely wakefulness by their four shots.

“Funny it should be Jacqueline who actually gives us a helpful lead on something,” Maria observed nonchalantly as she examined the bodies of the nine slain men. Lennik and Barid stared at the morbid spectacle, speechless, while Renna examined the bodies with interest. *Erectus*, after all, were nothing if not consummate scavengers.

“So these men were killed because others wanted the *gold* that they had found?” Barid asked, incredulously.

“Unbelievable, isn’t it?” Lennik’s voice, when he found it, sounded more shocked than even he expected.

“Yep, I’d say we’re looking at straight-up gold-related violence here,” said Maria. “And it’s going to get a whole lot worse. Much worse. Well, not much I can do until the forensics team gets here, but meantime, Lennik, please keep Renna’s no doubt innocent but nonetheless macabre tendency for eating carrion curbed to the best of your ability.”

“Come on, Renna,” Lennik managed a half-smile. “You don’t *really* want to eat Refiner’s Agent miner, do you? Too stringy, babe.” Renna warbled nonchalantly and stepped away from the corpses. “Tell you the truth, Maria, I don’t know if she’d go for it or not,” Lennik mused. “We’re similar enough, and they usually don’t eat their own dead; I have to wonder.”

“As long as she doesn’t eat *these* ones, now, that’s all I care about.” Maria’s sardonic, dry wit was seemingly indefatigable.

The forensics team at last arrived, a report was filed, and the bodies were taken away. Lennik still found himself haunted, however, by the casual way in which they had been murdered in such cold blood: gunned down for the simple reason that they’d been successful in finding gold. He was no stranger to violence but destruction for the sole purpose of personal enrichment was sickening.

They took to the air, but they hadn’t been flying for more than a half hour before Maria landed again.

“Well, this looks like that camp Jacqueline told us about.” Maria shook her head. “Honestly, that woman – so cool and smooth and sly one minute, then makes like she’s trying to help the next. Weird.”

The various prospectors looked up, bedraggled and dirty but defiant-looking, at their approach. Hands tensed on weapons. Maria didn’t even flinch or show any visible signs of fear or apprehension.

“Range Sheriff Deputy Maria Cardenas.” She pulled out her badge. “Who’s in charge here?”

A barrel-chested man in a Greenpark Brigade uniform leered at her. "We don't got no leaders or sergeants no more, *deputy*," he said mockingly, leaning on a pickaxe with a Brigade-issue assault rifle strapped over one shoulder, within easy reach. "We's the Blood Gold Brigade, see, and we don't take no orders."

"What the man means to say is, we are a democratic and acephalous society," an astonishingly cultured voice interjected. A young, scholarly-looking man stepped forward and offered his hand. "Rafael Dominguez, formerly Father Dominguez of the NMA, now Ensign Rafael Dominguez of the Blood Gold Brigade," he said with a wry smile.

"What's a nice young man like you doing with ruffians out here?" Maria asked him. "Doesn't seem like quite your crowd."

Rafael shrugged. "Make my fortune, go back to civilisation I suppose. Maybe go to school in one of the cities, take up a profession. The Church isn't for me anymore, I know that. I'm tired of all the rules and devoting my life to something I think I never really believed in. Get a little money, maybe I can make something of myself."

"Well, all right then," Maria acknowledged, neither particularly approving or disapproving. "So have any of you seen three men go through here, couple of Caucasian men and a Chinese fellow, in Greenpark Brigade uniforms with gold?"

The barrel-chested man laughed. "Blood Gold Brigade keeps its secrets!"

Maria arched an eyebrow. "Oh? And does the Blood Gold Brigade also harbour murderers? Because these three men are wanted for multiple homicide. Of course if you'd like to keep silent, and possibly be arrested for obstruction of justice and abetting a fugitive..." She left the threat hanging.

"I can help you, Deputy," Rafael interjected. "Those three came this way, didn't care to join us so they kept going, up the creek." He pointed. "Seemed a pretty shifty lot, doesn't surprise me now that you said they'd killed nine men. Hope you're able to bring them to justice."

"Thank you for your help, Rafael," Maria responded. "We'll find them."

Back aloft and Lennik was fuming. "When I think of the *damage* that they're doing to this area!" he said.

"Can't something be done about them?" Barid asked Maria. "Lennik is right, I know it."

"Yes, he is, but no, unfortunately we can't do anything," Maria responded. "We'd need to get the National Guard out here but I understand that right now they're stretched pretty thin. There are enough of

these yahoos spilling across the border that they've got their hands more than full several times over as is."

Over a week after the incident near the depot where Balthazar had slain a great crested lupokraken, and the disturbing signs were mounting. Prospectors were trickling into New Zambezieland by the hundreds, then the thousands. The trickle was becoming a torrent. The skies were criss-crossed by planes, enterprising bush pilots marketing their wares to meet the insatiable demand of a hungry frontier. The sales of a major firearms company that sold to such clientele as the Greenpark Brigade were at a fever pitch. The various mines operated at the former MPSs now lay empty, desolate pits stretching into the bowels of the earth. They had flown countless miles, and everywhere the story was the same. Pleistonia seemed locked in the grip of the inexorably advancing tides of change.

Chapter Six

"Their actions are drawing the concern of the Pleistonian See," said Father Nigel Obsanjo. The Nigerian priest was an even-tempered, fatherly man and an immaculate host. He'd regaled the three of them with his account of his adventures with Maria, Lennik and Renna in their escape from Refiner's Agent. Now, sitting around the table after dinner, they were discussing prospective plans for the future.

Nigel was moderate in height, well-built but not overweight, his tightly-curved hair beginning to show signs of grey. He was clean-shaven and dressed well but not flamboyantly. Prabhnoor liked him on sight.

"Now, this business about the... trade goods." Nigel (as he insisted on being called) frowned. "You say they're *giving* them to the *erectus* with the claim that they are doing God's work?"

"The way they've been putting it's a little more indirect, Father – I mean, Nigel – but basically, that's what it seems to amount to," Jacob supplied.

Nigel shook his head. "Dear Lord, this is very unfortunate news. I really don't think we have any business trying to change their way of life."

"You said that the See is concerned?" Prabhnoor pressed.

"Yes, they are," Nigel confirmed. "And they've been on the ansible with the Vatican every month, sometimes every week, to get the latest from Earth." He chuckled. "Poor Pius XXV. The man's stuck on Earth, never *seen a Homo erectus*, and has to rely on glorified text messaging

for information on which to base his Papal Bulls and Encyclicals. I'd sure hate to pick up the bill for *that* call log!"

"So what would it take for the See to condemn the NMA and shut it down?" Prabhnoor asked.

Nigel looked troubled. "To be honest with you, Prabhnoor, I don't know. As you probably know the See is headed by a Cardinal – the current one is Michael O'Sullivan – appointed by His Holiness to handle most of the necessary doctrinal and administrative decisions and so forth. He's the one responsible for reporting to Pope Pius. Michael's a good Cardinal and he takes his calling seriously, but I'm afraid Cardinal Cruz has his ear a bit more than I'd like. It's not that he agrees with Cruz's position on the *erectus* – actually, he's rather suspicious of it – it's that he's too easily either intimidated by or in awe of Cruz. For some reason Cruz seems to have that effect on some people.

"The more you can tell me about this, the better case I can make to O'Sullivan. We're going to need lots of good, hard data, and if you're able to work things with your CCAA friends so much the better, too," Nigel concluded.

"What about nailing Yu and Cruz on separation of religion and politics?" Aleron said suddenly.

"Definitely an angle worth pursuing," Nigel concurred. "And one where O'Sullivan's most sympathetic right now: he's uncomfortable with this whole thing, but Cruz's political aspirations are only making it worse."

"Well, we've got a CCAA meeting coming up in a few days here," Aleron said. "Maybe if you, Nigel, could talk to Cardinal O'Sullivan about this and urge him to pressure the NMA? And we'll get our case together. I know I've got a fair number of contacts in the Bureau who want this whole thing stopped – it was a wonder it ever got through in the first place, I tell you – and the more support we have the better. Prabhnoor, I'm sure you must have contacts at the University of Hearth that can help us out?"

"Absolutely," Prabhnoor affirmed. "Sounds like a plan."

"Anything I can do?" Jacob asked.

"Believe me," Prabhnoor replied, "you'll have plenty to do helping me. We'll need a lot of help running data and checking reports, not to mention corresponding with Lennik and his crew."

The day of the CCAA hearing dawned bright and clear. Tensely, Prabhnoor and Jacob breakfasted and took the cab to meet up with Aleron, who drove them to the building. Despite having slept well enough on the previous night, Prabhnoor felt drained. She had been up

for the past few nights with Jacob, Aleron, and a team of experts from the University and the Bureau compiling data to support their case, combing through years of reports on *erectus-sapiens* interactions in the field and synthesising them with the data obtained from the mission *erectus* as well as the new data provided by Lennik and his crew.

Lennik had been particularly helpful, elaborating at length on his theory that the Greenpark Brigade was going to use the dumping depots as a means to round the *erectus* up, as well as commenting on the changes in behaviour and material culture engendered by *erectus* reliance on these trade goods and the dangers it posed. Her colleagues from the University included more than a few who had spent time at at least one of the MPSs, and they would be able to give firsthand testimony of the disastrous consequences for the *erectus* on that score as well.

“Well, this is it.” Aleron gave Prabhnoor and Jacob a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry, you’ll do very well.”

In fact when it was their turn to present Prabhnoor found that she did do surprisingly well. Overcoming her nerves she gave her portion of the presentation, including her own testimony, with ease and facility honed by years of lecturing at the University of Hearth and in the Bureau. Together with her colleagues she drew from the reams of data they had analysed and collated, segueing effortlessly into her own testimony and the observations recorded by Lennik.

“These patterns indicate marked and drastic undermining of *erectus* culture and society under the firm auspices of Refiner’s Agent,” she concluded, “just as affected *erectus* populations are beginning to recover from the horrors and abuses of the MPS system, Refiner’s Agent is beginning a fresh program to reduce them to dependency upon and servility towards *sapiens* by means of their proxy organisation the Native Missions Arm of the Pleistonian See.”

“Thank you, Dr Nanda, for bringing these disturbing revelations to the Committee’s attention.” The Committee Chair, a professional-looking middle-aged man, said. “At this time the Chair has been asked to recognise the testimony of the defence.”

Prabhnoor and Jacob braced themselves. They had known Refiner’s Agent was expected to make an appearance, although it would not have been mandated by law. “Here it comes,” Prabhnoor whispered to Jacob.

Jacqueline Armistead and Father Landa walked up to the podium and introduced themselves in turn.

“Firstly,” Jacqueline began, surveying the room with her mockingly light smile, “I wish to thank my challengers for giving me an excuse to come up here at the behest of my employer to defend the project and

elaborate upon it. Having done that, I will then defer to my colleague, Father Landa, who will make some remarks on the position of the NMA and their *quite* dedicated, single-minded, and *independent*,” she smiled bemusedly as she emphasised this last word, “efforts to bring the benefits of our civilisation to the *erectus*. Finally we will present our third speaker, who will give his own separate opinion based on his knowledge of the situation and his third-party status.

“Our current work in the area is simple: to find gold sources for further development. At present I am still surveying the area, although this early phase is almost done. When I have finished the real work begins, that of extracting the gold. We are making every effort to comply with all official guidelines: from the start our goal has been to operate with 100% transparency. If the Range Sheriff’s Department or the Bureau of the Environment objects to any of our practices, I am unaware of it.

“As far as changing the *erectus* ways of life I find this a rather disingenuous argument on the part of the plaintiffs, here. These very practices were cleared in this very assembly as an effort of good faith to counterbalance any negative effects our presence in the area might have upon the ability of the *erectus* to pursue these very ways of life.

“Ladies and gentlemen of the Committee, what we have here is a simple misunderstanding arising from quite different conceptions of the welfare of the *erectus*. Are they wild beasts, or children to be protected, or our brothers and sisters to be edified and built up? Refiner’s Agent and the NMA have been working together because our organisations share the latter view. Unfortunately the plaintiffs share the former, as far as I’m able to tell.” She went on to detail the workings of their operations before turning the floor over to Landa.

“Well, as Jacqueline’s told you, the NMA is very much concerned with promoting the welfare of the *erectus* and we embrace Congressman Yu’s very bold and timely vision of a united future for our two species,” Landa began. “While our actions have been criticised as colonialist, imperialist, myopic, misguided, and the like, our founder and leader, Cardinal Agustino Cruz, has never wavered from his conviction that they are human where it matters most – in the soul.” The priest’s voice carried a note of sombre reverence. “Time and again Cardinal Cruz has been criticised, ridiculed and mocked for his beliefs, as well as lambasted by the liberal press and academic establishment, but I have seen the indomitable spirit of this courageous man as he has struggled against the odds, labouring selflessly in the field for many years to allow our missionaries to be sent to found the Mission Partnership Stations. Their fail-

ure was a devastating blow to him and I can tell you firsthand that he has only gradually been recovering from that failure.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am not a field specialist on the *erectus* in the manner of the plaintiffs, but I have laboured among them for many years to improve them. Progress at times has seemed so slow as to be nonexistent, but then there have been those breakthrough moments that have made it all seem worthwhile. My brothers of the cloth and I have kept our own records, hardly scientific studies I realise, but personal memoirs and journals that without exception recount amazement at the transformative power of the work we have done. Losing that work was the hardest and most painful chapter in my life. Ladies and gentlemen, we are not trying to destroy the *erectus*, we are trying to *redeem* them.

“It is in the interest of fairness that I yield the floor to our third speaker, an outside witness who is not an employee of Refiner’s Agent nor a brother of the Native Missions Arm. This man has a commitment to knowledge and free scientific inquiry: indeed, he is a noted field researcher of the *erectus* and an employee of this very Bureau. A man who has, in fact, taken up the administration of the very Mission Partnership Station where the fateful debacle broke a year ago.”

“No —” Prabhnoor and Jacob watched in disbelief as Kamyron Pritchard took the stage.

“Thank you for that glowing introduction, Father Landa.” He smiled ingratiatingly. “And all of you, members of the Committee, for allowing me to address you today. I have been privileged to serve as the administrator of Twin Mounds for the past year and have witnessed the momentous changes there. What I have witnessed has led me to profound and unsettling conclusions, unsettling in that they forced me to re-evaluate my previous beliefs. And in re-evaluating them I was led to the eventual conclusion that much of what I had taken for granted was wrong.

“With the fall of the Mission Partnership Station system we began a program of systematic repatriation of the *erectus* to the wild. Some adapted, while others did not. Tragically, a number of them died. This is something the plaintiffs know they cannot deny.”

Prabhnoor felt her face burn with anger and contempt towards Pritchard as he continued, clearly avoiding meeting her or Jacob’s gaze.

“Of those that adapted, the vast majority have stayed in the area and show little inclination to leave it. Again, this is something the plaintiffs must know to be true. While this might merely be dismissed as habit or fear of the unknown, these *erectus* had been living in civilised conditions for varying lengths of time and are of various ages. In my professional analysis, this indicates a reluctance to leave the security of the area

around the mission. Reports from the other stations have, by and large, concurred with the findings at Twin Mounds.

“And finally, the plaintiffs themselves admit that the *erectus* have taken to the depots quite readily. I ask you, would they be doing this if they did not wish it? Clearly we are not violating their wishes or their rights: they seem to be more than grateful for fresh resources of food on their territory as well as useful new items beyond their ability to manufacture.”

Prabhnoor felt herself seething with anger towards Pritchard for his clear and spineless betrayal. Lennik’s haunting words, delivered to Pritchard when he’d dramatically slashed his Bureau ID in two, came back to her: “*How much are they paying you, Pritchard? What price for your integrity?*”

Whatever the price, Pritchard was clearly a fish on a reel. He continued in the most compelling manner he could muster about the benefits of bringing civilisation to the *erectus* and, in his completely professional and unbiased opinion, what a fine job Refiner’s Agent and the NMA were doing of it.

After the presentations the debates began in earnest, with various Congressmen or women or aides arguing for or against one proposition or another. The issue of the ever-increasing number of illegal gold prospectors in *erectus* lands quickly came to the fore, with some arguing that the depots were all the more necessary because of it while a substantial number sided with Prabhnoor and her colleagues, concerned with the implications for the *erectus* and desiring to see government intervention to remove the prospectors.

Finally it was motioned to adjourn for the remainder of the day and resume the session on the next. The motion carried unanimously and a much exhausted Prabhnoor, Jacob and Aleron exited the building. It was already fading to evening.

“That was... the longest day... of my life,” Prabhnoor declared emphatically.

Jacob shook his head. “Mine, too. I can’t believe any of this.”

Aleron’s face was grim. “It’s only the beginning. There’ll be a ways to go yet before we can get anything we want from this lot.”

A pile of assault rifles lay stacked next to canisters of blast cartridges, stored foodstuffs, and pouches of gold dust next to the cargo hold of the plane. It was a medium-sized private aircraft and had probably seen duty ferrying shipments of much-needed supplies to Range Sheriff outposts and MPSs before being converted to its most recent purpose.

“Is this everything?” Maria asked the pilot and crew, who lay handcuffed facedown in the dirt, Lennik and Barid standing guard over them with drawn handguns while Renna looked on curiously.

Otohiko turned his head and spat a mouthful of dirt to the side. “Your search has been most thorough in depriving me of my assets,” he said malevolently.

“Watch your tone, sir, you’re in enough trouble as is,” Maria told him severely. “Gunrunning is a federal felony punishable by up to several years in prison.”

Otohiko scowled but held his tongue.

Lennik frowned, leaning closer to examine the guns. “Maria, is it just my ignorance or do these look like the models used by the Greenpark Brigade?” he asked.

Maria nodded grimly. “They do indeed. I’d say our enterprising bush pilot here has probably scored a contact with the Brigade’s supplier, Dammerung. Usually these deals take place informally, not to mention illegally, between the gunrunner himself, such as our friend here, or a kind of gunrunning gang boss on the one hand and a sales clerk or other administrator within the company on the other. The company official fills an order and makes a commission with an unspecified ‘private party’ or, in some cases, with a front organisation and usually takes a little kickback from the merchant. The merchant gets the guns at almost the before-market price and can resell them to make a profit sometimes at the market value – or a little more, if the merchant’s clientele are unsavoury enough.”

“So this gun company Dammerung is benefiting from the gold rush in a big way, then.” Barid spoke up at last. The Rangetrekker had been lost in his own troubled thoughts since they had apprehended the gunrunners.

“Something that can’t have been lost on Refiner’s Agent...” Lennik mused. A sudden realisation stopped him cold in his tracks. He reached for his handheld.

“What is it?” Maria asked in puzzlement.

“Maria, of the shipments of guns intercepted by your Department since this whole nightmare began, how many would you say were of this brand Dammerung or one of its subsidiaries? Because this is what, the third that you’ve taken down and they’ve *all*, come to think of it, been this very brand?”

Maria frowned. “You think there’s some deeper connection or something, Lennik? I’m afraid I don’t follow you there. She hefted one of the rifles. “The Brigade uses the Dammerung, or DMG for short, for much the same reasons the AK-47 was popular in the ancient Eastern bloc and

many other countries from the mid-twentieth century into the twenty-first: it's a compact, powerful, durable assault rifle. It's efficient, it's accurate, for the power it delivers it's a remarkably convenient size and weight, and it'll endure many years of wear and tear."

"And there aren't others that do similar things?" Lennik asked.

"Well, sure there are, but Dammerung's the foremost in its league," Maria responded.

"You think Refiner's Agent is somehow to blame in this?" Barid asked.

"I'm not sure." Lennik turned back to Otohiko and his crew, still lying prone in the dirt. "Any of you care to make things a little easier for yourselves and help us out here?" he asked with a slight smile.

"You will never discover anything from me," Otohiko informed him contemptuously. "I am just a supplier for a market!"

"The excuse of the profiteer who votes for the warmonger," Lennik responded dismissively. "I'm calling Prabhnoor to see if there isn't anything she and Jacob can't dig up. If there's a link I'm sure they'll be able to find it. And if not, it's only an interesting hypothesis."

It was another two hours until a Range Sheriff detail arrived to transport the prisoners: two planes with passenger space converted to accommodate prisoners.

"We'll take 'em from here, Cardenas," one of the officers said, saluting her, "you've done a fine job. All of you have." He thanked Lennik and Barid for assisting Maria. "Under ordinary circumstances we'd have had a bit more help for Deputy Cardenas for this kind of thing, I should like to think, but unfortunately these are hardly ordinary circumstances." He sighed, producing a cigarette case of embossed silver filigree. Opening it he selected one and, placing it between his lips, offered it to the others. Barid, Maria, and Lennik all accepted. "These days it seems every unscrupulous pilot who can charter a plane is loading up with all manner of weapons, foodstuffs, medicines, tools, tobacco, alcohol, marijuana, peyote, even illegal drugs like neuroin and meth, anything you could want, and lifting it to the frontier to make some quick and easy gold." He sighed and shook his head. "Four days ago I myself caught a Deputy extorting gold to turn a blind eye to a gang of these bush pilots. They're becoming organised now. It's a bad business."

"Lennik here voiced an interesting point," Maria responded after the officer had fallen silent, "he thinks there may be a connection of some sort between Refiner's Agent, who are at least indirectly responsible for all of this, and the high incidence of DMGs being trafficked by these illegal bush pilot merchants."

The officer frowned, turning to Lennik. "Anything to back that supposition up? I'm not saying you're wrong, sir, but that's a bit of a wide inference."

"I know," Lennik acceded, puffing his cigarette. "But it stands to reason in a way. I don't believe for a second that any of this – *any* of it – was or is accidental. I know Refiner's Agent much too well to believe that, as I think Maria does as well." He nodded to Maria. "And I'm sure by now Barid, too." The tall Rangetrekker nodded soberly. "Don't get me wrong, I'm sure these gunrunners like our Otohiko here are simply purchasing DMGs because they're the best choice of wares for a market like this. Their clientele probably know it for the most part, and the gunrunners know it. Personally I can't imagine Refiner's Agent missing a trick like that, not if there was money to be made for them. Especially since they're already affiliated with Dammerung."

The officer nodded soberly. "Affiliated? They're its biggest customer after the military, making them its biggest civilian customer! And they're partly the number one choice for illegal gunrunners because of their lack of oversight over their sales agents, shipping clerks and the like, not to mention the great commissions and kickbacks they hand out to employees who show a little interest and initiative towards... *acquiring* those new clients, even if they lack reputability."

Maria raised her eyebrows. "I didn't realise all of that."

"You check out that angle," the officer told them, finishing his cigarette and flicking the butt to one side, "I've got the feeling your hunch may just prove to lead you somewhere."

They bid the officers farewell and watched as the planes, now loaded with the prisoners and the impounded evidence, took off and receded to nothingness. The day had dawned bright but now clouds were beginning to gather.

"Looks like rain," Barid noted.

Maria nodded. "Let's get back to the station. I think we could all use a rest."

They were all quiet on the way back to the nearest Range Sheriff's outpost. The past several days had been a cavalcade of disaster for all of them: Maria's department was stretched thin to the breaking point trying to curb the illegal sales of arms (they had all but given up on the overwhelming numbers of illegal prospectors, preferring to leave those to the National Guard, who had had negligible success in dealing with them), and was further faced with desertions by officers who decided to seek their fortunes in the gold fields. Barid and Lennik were beset by an overwhelming feeling of uselessness as they struggled to help Maria in any

way they could as they documented the ecological and social crisis in the making. The death toll was clearly mounting: hardly a day or two had gone by without fresh reports of prospectors found murdered by their armed fellows, or of Range Sheriffs or even National Guard gunned down by illegal gun dealers or prospectors. (Maria had been lucky: Otohiko had been working alone with his small crew.) And every day fresh signs of environmental trouble surfaced: the carcasses of wild animals, shot for food or in self-defence or sport, were being discovered in ever-greater numbers. A few *erectus* corpses had also been reported by other Range Sheriffs, although mercifully few at present.

They landed in a driving rain. The skies of Pleistonia unleashed a torrential tropical downpour even as they were rent by great lightning bolts. Renna whimpered and warbled mournfully at the wet and the loud noises.

"It's okay, we'll get you inside," Lennik assured her.

"What a day," Maria groaned. "If I ever see Congressman Yu in person I'm going to throttle him."

"I wouldn't stop so short," said Barid darkly with no trace of humour.

They stepped into the station and set about the business of getting themselves dry again. Lennik and Barid raided the pantry for food with Renna's persistent help while Maria put her feet up.

Lennik's handheld rang. He answered it. "Prabhnoor, what's up?... You did?... that's great! They what?" he frowned. "I see... yes, that's exactly what I infer from that... yes, I think that's definitely an angle to pursue... great, yes, same to you both." He hung up.

Maria arched an eyebrow and Barid looked up with interest. "So what's the news?" she asked.

Lennik nodded. "I think my little hunch might have just paid off. Apparently Refiner's Agent purchased substantial shares of Dammerung's stock before Adlai Yu's little speech. This just keeps adding up and getting more and more interesting as it does."

"What's all this about?" Yu asked brusquely as he and Cardinal Cruz took seats at the balcony table overlooking the harbour. "I don't mind telling you, Petyor, we've a very busy campaign to run and it's more than a little inconvenient to jaunt over here! I can't speak for Agustino, but Johanna will be most cross with me: I had promised to take her to a social at the Devereux Manor."

"Adlai, Adlai," Mason chuckled, "how many times do I have to tell you to relax?" he motioned the Congressman and the Cardinal to take menus. "I've called you both here tonight, and you as well, Jacqueline

and Father Landa, to discuss matters of some importance. Now, Jacqueline here has been telling me about the mounting successes of our troublesome little batch of naysayers: this Dr Prabhnoor Nanda, a priest by the name of Nigel Obsanjo and an agent of the Bureau, this Aleron Schreiber, seem to be the ringleaders but they're getting their information from none other than our old friend Lennik, a.k.a. Dr Ostrand."

"I thought this troublesome Dr Ostrand had been neutralised." Yu's manner was still irritable but he was starting to listen.

"As did I." Mason nodded his agreement. "Our friend Dr Pritchard went to some trouble to get him to resign. Pritchard and I were sure that, given Dr Ostrand's unfortunately volatile nature and eccentric personal habits, he would lack any credibility outside of the Bureau – at least, none that could prove a challenge to us. His own university is largely embarrassed by the man, or at best regards him as an amusing but irresponsible academic."

"Be that as it may, his reach is long," Jacqueline chimed in. "This woman Prabhnoor's an agent of the Bureau, an eminent and respected Ph.D. at the University of Hearth – the real deal as far as most people are concerned. So even though she's getting data from him – or even *all the more* because she's getting data from him – people are starting to take note. There are rumblings of seeking the passage of an act that would restrict movement in the frontier territories, deport illegal prospectors en masse and the like."

"And what of the climate regarding the actions of the NMA?" Cardinal Cruz asked, concernedly.

Landa spoke up. "I think as far as everyone on that Committee who's been listening to them is concerned, we're pretty much colonialist devils." He snorted. "And we're getting killed in the media, in case you two haven't noticed. This CCAA hearing's got the nation's attention like nobody's business – unfortunately for us it's painting the NMA in particular in a very poor light."

"O'Sullivan spoke with me about this very topic recently." Cruz's voice was troubled. The accusations hit him harder than he had expected they would. How could so many people be so opposed to something that was so clearly for the good of the *erectus*?

"So what is to be done?" asked Yu, all attention now, social and broken promises clearly forgotten.

"You two must address the CCAA," Mason said emphatically. "Both of you – work your magic, give it your usual spin. That 'I have a dream' spin was sheer brilliance, Yu – capitalise on that but see if you can't give it a bit of a fresh taste, people like a little originality, that shows you've

been thinking about it and trying to expand upon it. Cardinal, for you I'd recommend a bit more of the 'Compassionate Father to the Savage Children' approach – which is why you're going to sell people on using the Greenpark Brigade to round up the *erectus* after Adlai here proposes it."

"After I – *what?*" Yu spluttered with surprise. "Isn't that jumping the gun a little?"

"You haven't been in that chamber, Congressman," Jacqueline told him smoothly, "now have you? Believe me, it's not. We need to parry these arguments they're fielding, things like ecological impacts and loss of *erectus* life, changes in material culture and society and all that nonsense. Poor Pritchard can only bullshit away on his own for so long before all but the hardest heads in there see through it."

"Have the impacts really been that bad?" Cardinal Cruz asked, concern still evident in his voice.

"It doesn't matter, Cardinal," Mason impatiently dismissed the concern, "the point of fact is, our adversaries are hitting home with these arguments and we need to counter by saying in effect, 'Yes, you do have a point, we need to protect the *erectus* – by protectively rounding them up and putting them on reservations!' It's called putting a spin on it."

"Reservations?" Cardinal Cruz's brow furrowed. "I do hope only as a temporary measure before integrating them into our society."

"Of course we won't *call* them 'reservations', Cardinal," Jacqueline explained. "People would be all over us for that. No, Regulated Protective Zones might work, or something like that. And then once we've deprived the *erectus* of their lands and their ways of life it'll be easy to put some of your priests in there to civilise them a little."

"And with all the funding we'll get for that I'm sure we'll be able to manage for ourselves quite nicely on the protective zones or whatever, with private manors and *erectus* servants to boot," Landa mused.

Cruz's face still bore lines of worry but he remained silent.

"So, to recap," Yu rejoined, "you want both of us to go in there and try to spin this issue of putting the *erectus* on these reservations or whatever to foist attention away from the real issue that the opposition's raising, yes?"

"Correct," Mason smiled.

"And I'm going to be working the idealistic political angle, and Cruz will be pumping the idealistic missionary angle?"

"Yes," Mason confirmed.

"Okay." Yu breathed deeply. "That, I can see, was worth breaking a

promise for. But if Johanna doesn't see it that way then it's your fault, Mason." He smiled slightly.

"The pleasure," Mason assured him with his smooth smile, "is all mine on that account. Now, you all must really try the calamari, it's ever so delectable at this place. Other than the privacy it's probably the biggest reason I come here."

Cardinal Cruz, lost in his own concerns, tried to focus on the menu long enough to order something. *All for the greater good*, he rationalised, *Christianity and civilisation*.

Every day had become a battle. It was all Prabhnoor could do to put one foot in front of the other, and getting up in the morning was becoming an increasing strain. She had taken to drinking an ungodly amount of caffeine to bolster her waning energy levels and spirits, which in turn led to periodic crashes and frayed nerves when the energy burst wore out. It had been rough on all of them, she thought as they sat dejectedly around Aleron's private study in the Bureau building: her, Jacob, Aleron and Nigel, who had stopped by to commiserate and plan after another exhausting day of wrangling. Nigel had testified before the CCAA that day for the first time since the Twin Mounds debacle, reiterating his own experiences with Refiner's Agent and evaluation of the role of the NMA. His own personal battle had been dealing with Cardinal O'Sullivan.

"He's a tricky one, O'Sullivan," Nigel sighed, sipping a mug of herbal tea. "He's no fool – he's intelligent enough to question what the NMA is doing but he knows they're a powerful enough faction, both within the See and without, that he's got quite the job on his hands saying no to Cardinal Cruz. Cruz is quite the character: he's subtle enough to get a lot by you because he gives the illusion of being so straightforward."

"What I can't get over is how Pritchard sold out." Jacob spoke up in disgust. "Whatever happened to academic responsibility? He's like a researcher for a tobacco company claiming smoking doesn't give you cancer."

Prabhnoor compulsively reached for a cigarette but stopped herself. It was a bad habit from her undergrad days that she'd tried to keep behind her, but in periods of stress it sometimes made a temporary reappearance. Instead she sipped her own mug of herbal tea. "I don't know how much more of this I can take," she groaned. "Every day I stay up late with you all planning out what we're going to say and every day we get up there and we say essentially the same things we've been saying all along. I'm starting to sound like a song on 'repeat' mode."

"You've all done an outstanding job." Aleron was looking much the

worse for wear after the days of CCAA hearings: he smelled of cigarette smoke and his beard and moustache needed a trim. His voice, however, was remarkably focused and strong. "And that new data that's been coming in from Lennik, Barid and Maria has been an immense help to our cause. I know it may be hard to tell, but we're winning a lot of allies for ourselves in there. And Refiner's Agent knows it too, which brings me to an important piece of news that I managed to obtain: they're bringing in Yu and Cruz to address CCAA tomorrow."

"They *what?!*" Prabhnoor choked on her tea. Spluttering, she looked up with streaming eyes. Nigel and Jacob both started.

"It's true, I'm afraid." Aleron's face and voice were grim but resolute. "Or am I? Their attempt to force this in their favour says to me that they're rash, impatient, or desperate, and maybe all three. And we don't know what will happen: there are some good, intelligent people on that Committee just as there are some real blockheads. It could swing our way."

"If Cruz is going to be there then so should I, I am thinking," Nigel responded.

"I agree, and see if you can't persuade Cardinal O'Sullivan to be there, as well." Aleron nodded. "O'Sullivan's presence can't hurt us: if he sides with Cruz we've got them on mixing religion with politics, but if he sides with us then, well, we've got Cruz nailed and we could really pull the rug out from underneath a good portion of Yu's platform."

They discussed further tactics before calling it a night. Prabhnoor and Jacob shared adjacent rooms on the same floor, one above Lennik, Renna and everyone else. Just before she turned to bid him good night, however, Prabhnoor was struck by a sudden epiphany. In her tired state she had been too muddle-headed to think of it before but its saliency struck her now.

"Jacob," she said, "we need to get Lennik and his crew up here as fast as possible!" *How had she not thought of this before?*

"You think so?" Jacob asked wearily.

"I'm sure of it."

The carcasses lay strewn across the grassy savannah, felled with bursts of fire from powerful assault rifles and butchered with hunting knives and machetes. Evidently a tauroch herd had encountered a band of hungry prospectors, to its downfall. A band of *erectus* were busily scavenging the meat from one of the carcasses, and a pack of common lupokrakens were ravenously devouring another. In their excitement at the unexpected bounty neither species seemed even to notice the other.

Flying creatures known as manta-hawks soared overhead, waiting for their turn at the bountiful feast. The three moons shone with their muted grace in the placid night sky, but the spirits of the small party could not have been more troubled. The signs of an ecosystem under stress had been mounting everywhere.

Barid shook his head sorrowfully. "Such a waste of meat," he said. "It looks like they just took the most prized cuts and left the rest for the scavengers."

"Who are happy for now but won't be as the herds become depleted and there aren't enough of them to kill anymore," Lennik concluded grimly. "And then they'll switch from killing octephants, mammoth octephants, buffalo and taurochs like they've been doing to killing swift-cattle, stiltoxen and cattalo. The large predators will be completely extirpated from this entire area, and the largest ones that would probably have a hope of persisting would be the leopokraken and the common lupokraken – at least their quarry is small and abundant enough that they've got a chance at survival."

"How long could all this take?" Maria asked. Barid looked alarmed.

"Years, probably," Lennik said. "It all depends, really, on how many people come out here, stay out here, and how fast they kill off the game."

They had spent most of the last few days on octephant, surveying the effects of the gold rush on the ground. Everywhere the news had been bad: the numbers of miners were impossible to estimate but they were clearly in the upper tens of thousands, with more coming every day. In an area as immense as the greater New Zambesiland drainage it would take a long time for their impact to permeate but so far most of them had been localised in the general region near Twin Mounds. In this more localised area their impact had been devastating, and was becoming more so as their numbers swelled and their extractive techniques become more destructive.

Lennik's handheld rung. "Prabhnoor, what's up? ... Yes, we're all still up out here, just getting a late start back to the station... yes, it's pretty bad out here, and the signs are only getting worse... they *what?* ... are you sure? ... yes, yes I agree. We'll get right to it... Of course, see you then." He hung up.

"What was that all about?" Maria asked.

Lennik's face was grim. "We need to get to Hearth now."

"Hearth?" Maria asked incredulously. Barid frowned in puzzlement.

"They're bringing Congressman Yu and Cardinal Cruz in. They've pulled out all the stops this time – this is the big one."

"Lennik, Hearth is... a *long* ways away!" Maria told him.

"I know," Lennik said soberly. "The question is can you do it?"

"What do you think, Barid?" Maria asked the Rangetrekker.

Barid thought intently for a long moment before responding. "Take the bull by the horns, I say!" he grinned at last.

"Renna?" Maria asked with a weary smile. Renna stared back at her, large, intelligent eyes unusually contemplative. "I'll take that as a yes. Right, then, you three, off we go." She shook her head. "Honestly, I don't know what I'm going to do with you lot."

"You're the best, Maria," Lennik told her appreciatively.

The next morning saw Prabhnoor, Jacob and Aleron join with Maria, Lennik, Renna and Barid at the Founder's Airport at Hearth. Nigel had gone to accompany O'Sullivan to the meeting. The latter party was bone-tired, although mercifully Maria had managed to charter a flight out of a Range Sheriff outpost in the New Zambeziland territory. Aleron greeted the others enthusiastically. "I've heard quite a bit about you all from these two," he told them with a smile.

"Here," Prabhnoor pressed upon them a large thermos containing a hot liquid, "it's Masala chai tea. An Indian specialty. It'll wake you up."

Maria took a swallow of the energising beverage, feeling its magic steal into her veins. She sighed contentedly, passed the thermos to Barid and lit a cigarette. "Thanks, Prabhnoor," she said, "that's a great brew."

"So what's the plan?" Lennik asked as the chai stole through his system, replenishing him.

"In all probability, Yu and Cruz will lead," Aleron said. "They'll address CCAA and make their case, and then we'll respond. I'll speak a little but then I'll yield the floor to you, Prabhnoor. And then I was thinking it would make the most sense for you three, Barid, Lennik and Maria, to speak next. This is it, everyone..."

Together they drove to the building. Inside the crowd was packed, everyone fidgeting or making small talk, the entire room thick with nervous energy and anticipation. Lennik and Barid had to fight back a wave of claustrophobia, but Renna picked her way forward with curiosity tempered by caution. Nigel waved to them from across the room and they waved back. He was accompanying a grandfatherly-looking Caucasian man with thinning white hair in clerical garb whom they could only assume to be Cardinal O'Sullivan. Lennik scowled as he recognised Cardinal Cruz sitting near Cardinal O'Sullivan and a somewhat Chinese-looking man whom he could only assume to be Congressman Adlai Yu.

The Chairman called the meeting to order and went through his usual preamble. At last he came to the topic of the day's meeting. "Today we

will hear final testimony from both sides of this case before adjourning to deliberate a verdict. Our verdict will consist of an official recommendation to the General Congress and Parliament on a course of action regarding national policy toward the *erectus* and the territories they occupy. I do not have to tell you, ladies and gentlemen of the Committee, that we face a crucial juncture in our policies: our recommendation regarding the recent state of affairs will most likely be elevated to national law. Therefore I advise each of you to deliberate your own views with care: they may make all the difference in the world." He paused to allow his words to sink in before continuing. "Now then, our first speaker today is Congressman and presidential hopeful Adlai Yu."

Yu took the podium to the sound of scattered applause. "Ladies and gentlemen, honoured Chair." He flashed his dazzling smile. "I want to thank you very humbly for this chance to speak before you today. Your work ensures our nation's greatness, for what great nation does not concern itself with those deemed most low?"

Jacqueline watched Yu with satisfaction from her seat. "Good, Yu," she muttered, "sell it to them."

Yu continued, his natural charisma and intensity rising. "I am aware that my critics here believe, erroneously, that I do not care for the *erectus*, that I aim only to further the interests of my friends and constituents, the Development Party and Refiner's Agent. While I have no doubt that their confusion is sincere and that they themselves have nothing but the best interests of the *erectus* in mind, I can not begin to say how wrong they are about me."

Lennik gritted his teeth. Barid glowered. Prabhnoor gave both of them sympathetic looks.

"The welfare of the *erectus* has been foremost on my mind at all times throughout this campaign," Yu continued. "I have spoken of my simple dream of *erectus* and humans living together. We are evolutionary cousins, making us *family*, ladies and gentlemen!"

The scattering of applause was louder this time and fuller.

Yu beamed. "*Family* have the obligation of love to care for each other, ladies and gentlemen! Just as I have consistently promoted the unbridled market to create jobs and wealth for more people, including the poor and unemployed, so I extend the reach of my vision to include my evolutionary cousins. These *erectus* are orphans of another star, let us orphan them no longer!"

More applause. Prabhnoor bit her lip worriedly. The rest of the party looked grim and nervous. Yu was famed for his eloquence and persuasiveness.

“I have been made aware,” Yu went on, “of certain very troubling recent developments. It would seem that the discovery of gold in the greater New Zambeziland drainage has sparked something of a gold rush. I have been told that concern about this gold rush has motivated this hearing. Accordingly, I extensively reviewed the particulars of the events in question – and I was truly devastated, ladies and gentlemen. Devastated at the loss of life, human and *erectus*, and devastated by the irresponsible manner in which the ecosystem of the New Zambeziland is being used.

“This is not, and never has been, my vision for development of the New Zambeziland or any other area of Pleistonia. I have always supported socially and environmentally responsible roads to development. And I have never condoned the lawlessness and violence that is now occurring in the absence of authority in this region.

“Much to my chagrin, it appears that a portion of the blame is mine – that the greatest leak of this information was a speech that I made not long after the discovery of the gold. I regret this very much, but alas, it can not be undone. What is needed is a strong hand for the future. The first thing we must do is to stabilise the region in order to protect its inhabitants, human and *erectus*, as well as its natural ecosystems.

“Fortunately, we are not without a key ally in this struggle: my friends at Refiner’s Agent have informed me that they wish to be of help in this. Petyor Mason could not be here today but he wanted me to convey his deepest regrets for the situation, particularly as he, too, feels some measure of responsibility, no matter how indirect, as well.”

“*Indirect*,” snorted Lennik derisively.

“Accordingly, with Petyor’s full approval and express wishes, I relay to you his proposal: that the Greenpark Brigade be deployed to protect the *erectus*. The first step will be to remove them from areas where they might come into contact with harmful individuals –”

There were audible gasps of surprise. Prabhnoor glared daggers at the Congressman. Jacob’s clenched knuckles were white and shaking. Barid looked as though he regretted having to leave his weapons behind at the Range Sheriff’s station. Lennik merely gave a low whistle. “Never saw that coming,” he joked dryly.

“And place them in regulated protective zones, or RPZs, where they will be provided with good food, clean water, shelter, medical care, and protection from outside elements, such as illegal prospectors and hunters that might do them harm. Here they can be kept safely until such time as stability has been restored to the region and they can be repatriated to it.”

“And kept as useful domestic house slaves,” Lennik muttered sarcastically.

A flurry of whispered mumbling accompanied the end of Yu’s proposal, and the Chair began to field questions from the Committee.

“Why not simply remove the illegal elements from the area?” one Committee member asked.

“Excellent question.” Yu nodded. “First of all, the *erectus* have clearly been traumatised by the presence of these illegals – the plaintiffs have made this clear enough. We need to intervene to prevent further loss of life of the *erectus* by starvation or violence. Secondly, and this is really an extension of the first, the *erectus* need to be contained until we can establish order in this very large region. Until that time the tens and hundreds of thousands of illegals will go on rampaging through it with no way of calling them to account for their crimes, and the situation of the *erectus* will worsen. Unlike these illegals, they don’t have guns and their entire livelihood depends on their local environments.”

“How long do you see this protective quarantine needing to be in place?” another Committee member asked.

“As long as it takes,” Yu answered resolutely. “I’m sorry, I know that’s a rather broad and non-definitive answer but it’s the best and most honest one I can give. We really don’t know how long we’re looking at here, but it’ll be considerably shorter if the Greenpark Brigade is responsible for the quarantine, freeing the National Guard and the Range Sheriff’s Department to manage the illegals.”

“Are you still in favour of human settlers being granted lands on the mainland?” yet another asked.

“I am,” Yu’s voice carried a note of caution, “but I think that should be addressed as a separate issue, one I certainly will devote much time to if I am elected president. I do wish to go on record as saying that I have no doubt that responsible human colonists can work wonders for our cousins and bring them into our civilisation, instead of ravaging their lands and killing them. The harmful elements over there now are causing strife, but helpful colonists can greatly improve the *erectus* – this much can be deduced from at least the better-run of the Mission Partnership Stations alone, prior to their unfortunate demise.”

Several more questions were fielded and Yu answered them.

“We will now hear from a man who has recently returned from the field and will speak for the plaintiffs.” The Committee Chair said. “Mr Aleron Schreiber was going to be speaking next instead, but he has very graciously forfeited his time to give the floor to Dr Lennik Ostrand. Dr Ostrand, would you please take the podium and state your credentials?”

Lennik experienced a strange, brief rush of vertigo as he stood up and as if in a daze went to take the podium. It was all so overwhelming: this room, these people who were already whispering at his strange and uncouth appearance, the very crowd that had just been so easily handled by the competent and charismatic Adlai Yu.

His lecturer's instincts saved him. As he took the podium he found himself back at the University of Hearth, a sometimes-visiting lecturer whose presentations were almost always very well-attended. "Good morning, everyone, members of the Committee," he began, not deigning to open his presentation with Yu's flatteries, in the style of a university lecturer. "I am indeed Dr Lennik Ostrand, graduated University of Hearth Summa Cum Laude with a degree in *erectus* studies or erectology, and obtained my Ph.D. from that same institution. I have been employed by the Bureau of Aboriginal Interests in the capacity of a field researcher and more recently, as a liaison and consultant. I recently resigned for personal reasons. I have studied *Homo erectus pleistonien-sis* in the field for twelve years, and lived full-time in the field for at least the last seven. Recently I have been investigating the effects of the policies of Refiner's Agent and the Native Missions Arm upon the local *erectus* populations, as well as the devastation that has been incurred by the swarms of illegal prospectors and hunters on their society and their environment.

"I will begin by stating my personal opinion that never in their 1.4-million year history have the members of this *erectus* population faced such an overwhelming threat. Not from the Visitors nor from the biological blitzkrieg they unleashed, not from anything. If steps are not taken they may be locally extirpated from these affected areas within a generation or two." He proceeded to tell the Committee in great detail of what he had found, starting that first day with Prabhnoor when he'd spotted the hatchet, to the mounting catastrophe that loomed at present. He even told them of Refiner's Agent's investment in Dammerung's stocks and the degree of premeditated profiteering this suggested. He carefully and patiently elaborated every last detail, not wanting to lose a single member of the Committee by being too technical or academic. Most effectively, in his estimation, were the pictures he had brought, detailing examples of the various threats to the *erectus* and their lifeways. Palpable shock gripped the room as the grim tale unfolded.

Lennik at last wrapped up his presentation. "In conclusion, everyone, my proposal has one thing in common with Congressman Yu's. I, too, think we need to separate the *erectus* from the illegal elements. Where I diverge is that I think we need to stop Refiner's Agent before they do fur-

ther damage, and send in the National Guard and if need be, the military, to remove these illegals. We need to crack down on the flow of illegal shipments of these bush pilots trafficking arms and supplies to the illegals.

“Furthermore, and I freely admit that this is my personal belief, in my estimation Congressman Yu has an ulterior motive: to remove the *erectus* from their lands to facilitate the development of these lands for commercial purposes, not only mining and prospecting but realty, even cash-cropping. Quite frankly the reason I believe this so strongly is because of his backing by Refiner’s Agent and the NMA. In conclusion, thank you for hearing me out and I close by asking you to have an open mind.”

The applause started out scattered but grew stronger. Lennik felt his confidence surge as he surveyed the crowd.

“Next up, Cardinal Agustino Cruz is scheduled to speak,” The Chair stated.

Cardinal Cruz looked visibly pale and ill. O’Sullivan was frowning deeply and whispering something in his ear. Cruz nodded feebly and rose, suddenly looking every day of his sixty-seven years, and slowly took the podium.

Yu scowled, sensing the wind had changed direction. Fuming against the injustice of how easily the crowd had been swayed, he could only sit back and watch as his running mate began to speak.

“Today you have the opportunity to do something very important.” Cruz’s voice quavered somewhat and he coughed before continuing. “Something very important to protect a beautiful and priceless species.

“The older I grow the more I feel like a foolish old man at times. I only hope God does not see fit to keep me on this planet until I have attained wisdom, for then I fear that I will be here forever.” He chuckled lightly at his own joke.

Yu frowned. His running mate seemed off-focus: this didn’t sound like the preamble they’d discussed him giving. Maybe Cruz was changing it last-second, modifying it to counter Lennik’s deeply personal but nonetheless academic presentation.

“For many years I have been convinced of the way in which I was to go,” Cruz went on. “I was to be God’s light in the wilderness, taking His word to the most savage of the savage. I thought of myself as another St. Paul in those days.” He laughed embarrassedly at himself. “Ah, but the arrogance and idealism of youth! I became so sure of my way in this that at some point I ceased to question it – accepted it merely as a given. And that is where I fell into error. Ladies and gentlemen, today I was sup-

posed to tell you a very different version of this story, one in which I pleaded with you to do the Christ-like thing, no matter your religious convictions or beliefs, and extend the hand of charity to take these magnificent beings from their homes and confine them to plots of land where they could be controlled, the easier to exploit the resources of their lands.

“But I can in good conscience say only this: I beg, I implore you not to do it. I have seen the error of my ways these many years: the *erectus* are as God desires them to be. It is not my place, nor any of ours, to change it. With my apologies to Congressman Yu, I must renounce my status as his running-mate. I would renounce my leadership of the Native Missions Arm, but as the good Cardinal O’Sullivan who sits in attendance here has just informed me that he has decided, as of today, to disband the Arm in its entirety I find this to be redundant. In conclusion, ladies and gentlemen, my thoughts and prayers toward you in your decisions. I only hope you will search within yourselves until you find what you know to be right.”

“WHAT?!” screamed Yu, his face purple with rage.

Jacqueline, tightlipped, raced for the exit with handheld in hand.

Prabhnoor, Lennik, Maria, Jacob, Barid, and Aleron looked at each other in stunned silence.

The applause was deafening. The entire Committee stood to the last woman and man. The Chair, overcoming his professional dignity, stood and clapped heartily with all his might.

That night Aleron took them out to celebrate. They walked the streets of Hearth, Renna occasioning much comment and many stares from passersby who had never seen an *erectus* in the flesh before. Renna in turn found them interesting, sniffing and pulling at their hair and clothing. They stopped for dinner at a fine restaurant Aleron was partial to overlooking Hearth Harbour. Pleistonia’s three moons bathed the night sky in their gentle, milky light as the unlikely troupe found seats at a balcony table. A garden of some of Pleistonia’s more bizarre and unusual plants wafted heady aromas up to them from below.

“Well, I’d say we’re looking pretty good, all things considered,” Aleron told them cheerfully. “Thanks to all of you, of course. And Nigel... what can I say? How hard did you have to work on O’Sullivan?”

Nigel smiled ruefully. “Believe it or not, not very hard. He was concerned about everything even before I talked with him. He resolved to finally have a word with Cardinal Cruz, who developed reservations of his own over – well, over the idea of putting the *erectus* on reservations, believe it or not.”

"I commend the man, I really do." Prabhnoor shook her head admiringly. "What it must have taken to stand up there and say, to a crowd of strangers, that you believed your life's work to be wrong!"

"He might make a fine Rangetrekker," Barid smiled.

"I'm just astonished he listened to *me* at all." Lennik shook his head. "Not something I would have expected of him."

"I don't think any of us would have expected much of anything from him," Jacob pointed out. "It's simply amazing what he did."

"Oh, Lennik," Aleron snapped his fingers, "I've been authorised to tell you that the Bureau would very much like to reinstate you in a new capacity."

Lennik gave a light chuckle and drew Renna into an embrace. "I appreciate that, Aleron, I really do, but I think Renna and I fend for ourselves better without people like Pritchard around."

"Pritchard?" Aleron asked disgustedly. "I'm sorry, Prabhnoor mentioned to me that you were working with him."

"'With' in the loosest possible sense, I can assure you," Lennik told him

"Well, he's being replaced," Aleron told him. "Really drew a lot of criticism from the Bureau for sticking up for Refiner's Agent like that, enough to draw closer scrutiny – and when it was discovered that a certain financial transaction had taken place between Petyor Mason's personal account and Pritchard's, he was sacked from his current post, suspended as an employee of the Bureau and criminal proceedings are now underway against him."

"That's – that's phenomenal!" Lennik laughed.

"All right, enough with the congratulations and backslappings, everyone!" Maria spoke up mock-peevishly. "I'm starved! What's good to eat here?"

"Try the calamari," came a voice from the next table over. The speaker was sitting alone, chain-smoking, with a half-empty bottle of whisky. He was clearly trying to drown his troubles, whatever they were. He was handsome and well-built and looked to be in his mid-thirties or thereabouts. He was clearly affluent: his sun-darkened blond hair was carefully styled and his suits looked tailored.

Aleron turned. "Why, speak of the devil, everyone! Hello there, Petyor, nursing our troubles are we?"

"Petyor?" Lennik asked with a frown. "As in *the* Petyor –"

"Mas– Mason," the drunken executive hiccupped. His eyes strove to focus and he jerkily pointed towards them. "You haven't won yet!"

Human greed will out, there's gol-gold and lands to settle out there and people are going to... going to take advantage of that."

Aleron chuckled derisively. "After today, Petyor, Yu's career in politics is probably over and his chances of becoming president certainly are. He might as well throw in the towel now. And with Cruz pretty much spilling the dirt on your little bag of tricks I don't think you'll be making progress anytime soon."

"The Sec-Second Fleet will come." Mason swayed unsteadily in his chair. "You'll see! D-droves of sh-ships with millions of colonists – you can't stop us forever!"

"Well, let's see," Lennik said mockingly, "so far the four of us," he indicated himself, Maria, Nigel and Renna, "have escaped your henchmen to blow the whistle on your abusive policies, bringing your Mission Partnership Station program to a crashing halt, and then more recently all of us have collaborated to show the world what you're really up to with all your grand proclamations and pronouncements.

"When the Second Fleet comes, we'll deal with them, too. Meanwhile, I think I could go for a bit of that calamari, what about you all?" he turned back to his tablemates.

Mason went back to sulking in drunken silence. He drained another quarter of the bottle of whisky before stumbling drunkenly away, cursing under his breath.

"When *is* the Second Fleet to Pleistonia expected?" Maria mused.

Aleron thought. "I think within the next three to five years," he said, "they tend to have a little trouble gauging these things."

"And how many people will be on it, give or take?" Lennik asked.

"Not sure exactly, but I think it's estimated at about six or seven million," Aleron said.

Six or seven million – what will that be like? Lennik thought, then checked himself. *Time enough for that hurdle when it comes.*

For now, the three moons shone peacefully in Pleistonia's boundless skies, their light reflected over the watery expanse of Hearth Harbour. And the unusual group of friends, savouring their triumph, felt that they had indeed accomplished a great thing.

Epilogue

The wind streamed through Lennik's long hair and beard as his octephant galloped for all it was worth across the savannah. He whooped and Renna warble-trilled, grabbing tighter and pressing against him to

hold on as he spurred the beast forward. They drew to the top of a low rise and Lennik slowed the mount.

“You all right there?” he asked.

Renna nipped him playfully.

He laughed. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

The momentous triumph before CCAA was now a month in the past. As Lennik and his friends had suspected, CCAA had passed a resolution against the illegals and the activities of Refiner’s Agent. Barid had been able to convince them fairly easily of the benign presence of his people on the landscape and they had been granted the legal right to remain. Parliament had ratified the Aboriginal Protection Act, which severely restricted *sapiens* activities in *erectus* territory and required legal supervision. The Greenpark Brigade and all Refiner’s Agent personnel had been forced to leave and Congressman Yu had withdrawn from the presidential race in despair.

Prabhnoor drew level with him, her mount breathing hard. “Easy there, chief, we’re not all born to the saddle like you are,” she ribbed.

“You’ve got to start somewhere,” Lennik told her. “How are we looking on those tracks?”

“Should be nearby, Bureau Chief Regional Consultant Dr Lennik Ostrand,” she kidded him, laughing as he winced at the mention of his full name and title.

“Don’t remind me,” Lennik groaned. “At least as Chief what’s-it I’ve been able to dismantle the MPSs once and for all.” In his new role, Lennik had at last seen to the repatriation of the remaining mission *erectus* and the destruction of the hated Mission Partnership Stations. Despite being compensated, Petyor Mason had had a fit.

“Our brave commander, sleeping under the stars and in tents!” Prabhnoor laughed again.

It didn’t take them more than another half-hour’s ride to find the *erectus* group. Balthazar still looked as proud as ever, his trade hatchet somewhat the worse for wear but his spear – Lennik zoomed in and frowned. “Prabhnoor, check out that spear our boy Balthazar is carrying.”

She zoomed in and pursed her lips in thought. “Seems a little sharp. Usually they just fashion them with their stone tools, teeth, and fire, unless –”

“Unless they’ve gotten hold of steel tools,” Lennik concluded.

“Well, at least the ones from Twin Mounds that joined up with Balthazar seem to be doing well,” Prabhnoor noticed, looking closely at the five individuals from the mission who’d joined Balthazar’s band.

“It’s rather a large group for *erectus*, all the same,” Lennik mused.

“But they seem to be managing. I’m sure new tools, like that spear and whatever else they might have come up with or even will come up, help in that regard.”

“They’re evolving, then,” Prabhnoor realised. “Not that they weren’t before, I mean, but maybe they’re entering a new phase of their evolution.”

“Maybe. They’re learning new skills, at least. I can’t deny I’m concerned by the thought,” Lennik mused.

“But change is inevitable, Lennik,” Prabhnoor pointed out, “that’s what evolution is ultimately all about – being able to change so that you can become better adapted to your environment.”

“You’re right,” said Lennik. “Things change, sometimes rather fast. Whatever the future of Pleistonia holds, it’ll be one where *sapiens* and *erectus* have to figure out how to live with each other. Right, Renna?”

Renna, of course, needed no persuasion on that account.

SCIENCE FICTION

Lost Futures

Cyril Simsa

Everyone in the exam hall seemed to be dead. Either dead or sleeping.

Two dozen limp bodies slumped forward over the flimsy, old-fashioned wooden desks, like sinners raised up from their graves the day before Judgement, surrounded by a thick, dark loam of scattered dreams and exam papers – black ink seeping from their crushed fountain pens like heart-blood.

But Grace had been there, he knew it. He could still smell her perfume on the hot, still air – that curious blend of musk and guile and bergamot.

The clock on the far wall checked off another minute with a sound like a weather vane.

12.00. High Noon. The sun had just crossed the meridian.

Enough talk. Time to be walking the walk.

He set off down the aisle, embarrassed that he would never be able to face the future with the same aplomb as every second-rate Hollywood gunslinger, uncertain whether he should stop and stare at the dead, or tactfully avert his eyes.

Then, one of the corpses sat up and spoke to him.

“Mr Jettlag,” it said ironically, “you’re losing your touch...”

Cousin Grace. Long, dark hair. Legs like a selkie, and eyes the colour of rock pools. Hadn’t they had sex once? Or was it just that he had wanted to? Fragmented memories of Grace running naked around the galley of a barge superimposed themselves on the exam hall, but knowing her fondness for the joys of practical mycology, that was far from conclusive.

She looked so permanent now, she might have been waiting at the periphery of his unconscious all his life.

“Have you come to join the Revolution?” she asked, menacing him with a strange ritual object plaited out of freshly cut willow sprigs and ribbons.

He felt out of his depth, like a wounded sailor making futile attempts to reach the shore as the tide went out.

“Put this on, then,” she continued, throwing him a pink caftan. “So the Comrades will be able to recognise you.”

The sky outside was so clear and bright, it seemed almost artificial. Like a bubble-thin membrane stretched over the mouth of an extinct volcano; or the giant, translucent dome of some secret, antediluvian space station, buried under the immemorial weight of the sea-green Antarctic ice. Electromagnetic. Molecular. Geodesic.

The streets were lined with abandoned cars and empty storefronts. No living thing moved. Nobody kept them company, except the reflections of their own faces in the blank plate-glass windows, flickering like the false-colour images of a lost space orbiter, blundering around the uncharted lanes of the Kuiper belt. The cosmological equivalent of cave painting.

“Do you ever have the feeling,” he asked suddenly, “that you are being haunted by a double? A twin? A clone? The avatar of a parallel universe you can only ever glimpse on the far side of an empty window – except that, when you get closer, it is invariably gone...”

“Oh, Gunnar...” She laughed, and for the first time, her knowingness was tempered by a hint of compassion. “Why must you always be testing yourself? Confusion is good for you. Look at what grew out of the

confusion of the late Devonian. Without confusion, how could we ever hope to build our New World Order?"

She led him past the padlocked warehouses of Speedway and Chumlli Street to the lakeshore.

The water was impossibly still and silent, slow and viscid as mercury, and covered in mist. For a moment he was reminded of other embankments he had known – of St Petersburg, Prague and Paris – and he seemed almost to catch a glimpse of an old stone bridge, stretched over a rapidly flowing stream in a gorge. But then the vision was gone, and there was only a glassy placidity. Still, he knew the tranquillity was deceptive, that every still exterior was, rather, the outcome of a tortuous inner equilibrium. There would be passions beneath the surface. Vectors, both spiral and linear. Equations that could never be precisely resolved even to a million decimal places.

"But, Grace, how can you be sure that your New World Order will ever really exist?" he asked, leaning like a wayward logarithm over the lake's balustrade. "How do you know that your particular plan will succeed, where so many have failed?"

She laughed, and for a moment he could almost believe that their tryst on the barge had really happened. Would happen.

"Well, I don't, of course. There is always a sense in which we are exploring dead ends in the garden of forking paths. How is it that some individuals are plucked out of the time-stream to become movers and shapers, while the rest of us are reduced to eking out lives that have already been forgotten, even as we are living them? Every one of them, not merely a lost past, but also a lost future... Uncertainty is everywhere."

He turned to peer out over the water again, and where before he had seen a surface as static and frozen as glass, now he saw collapsing islands of stability being pulled apart by contingency and conflicting currents. He supposed every universe longed for its moments of stability, and few achieved it, especially here at the well-spring of so many different time-streams. Here on the shore of this silvery lake that seemed, all of a sudden, to be the representation of all possibilities and none, at least as far as he and Grace were concerned.

But how to choose?

"Ah yes, that's the dilemma, isn't it?" – smirked Grace, as if reading his mind. "Should you cleave to the past or seize the future? Should you open the box, or take the money?"

No wonder the waters seemed so readily to succumb to confusion, as

they waited for the collapsing equilibrium to show them the flow of history.

The flows of history.

“Soldier, where’s your uniform?” called Grace from behind the natty, electric-blue railings that enclosed the cobbled city square, just outside the exam hall.

She tossed him the pink caftan again.

“It’s no use claiming it makes you feel uncomfortable. In our War on Terror, our own fears and anxieties are the first target...”

He caught the ludicrous garment out of the air, and pulled it over his head awkwardly.

“Yes, that’s better.” She smiled. “You have to realise that, come the Revolution, all men will wear frilly blouses...”

She looked up over the roofs at the glittering curve of the sky, and for a moment her eyes changed their focus, as if the horizon was no more than a storm of static. As if she could see right through its shimmery arc to another world – a world of the lost, where contingency had already chosen its path – a world where humanity’s fate had already been decided, where nothing hung in the balance.

She paused.

“Have you ever experienced the peculiar stillness that descends on a city, the day before a change in the time-stream?” she asked all of a sudden. “I have, once, in one of those forgotten corners of Europe that always somehow seem to land on the wrong side of history. There was some kind of Coalition on the hillsides, and a population of old men and young women in the cellars. I hid in the cemetery, because I thought there would be no point in bombing the dead, but it turned out I was wrong. One of the very first shells must have hit the marble plinths of the grave of the unknown soldier, because the next thing I knew I was lying in the shadow of a snaggle-toothed tomb, fragmented and ruinous as the streets of Ashkelon, and the day was heavy with blackness.

“A couple of hours later, the whole city was under the occupation of the Willing, and Coalition forces were looting the art galleries. I never realised till then, how many Surrealists it took to protect a tank emplacement – how many churches and potsherds one had to destroy to defend an armed cultural policy... It was almost like being invaded by an army of necromancers, who were being driven by otherworldly forces into exorcising the dead, and casting spells of protection around their feeble encampments by acts of simple desecration – binding their enemies by destroying their spirit...”

“And then came the counter-attack, and the armies moved through the shattered streets like wraiths, and the real life of the city was forced underground, into the catacombs. And the survivors came together in their secret communities, and scratched their sigils into stonework as old as the Romans, as so many of their ancestors had done the best part of two thousand years earlier. And the Willing cursed them for it. And they cursed the soil, and they cursed their mothers, even as they bombed them back beyond the start of the Stone Age – even as they forced them, through the teeth of their wombs, back to the Vale of Tears, where we are all begotten...”

“You know, sometimes I think the whole world – all our worlds – are in the grip of a colossal case of castration envy, only we won’t admit it. We are all in denial, and we all want to return to the mother. To bombard our errant hearts with love...”

She paused to fiddle with the tangle of ribbons on her willow switch. And then she smiled at him, and winked with her bottomless, sea-green eyes.

“Come on, my boy, I think it’s time to exorcise your fear of the school-room.”

She took him by the hand, and led him back into the exam hall.

Then she lay back on the invigilator’s desk, in front of the two dozen corpses. Her intentions were unmistakable.

“Gunnar,” she sighed theatrically. “The War on Terror begins at home. Time to reclaim your place in history.”

Then she reached down to the bottom of her blouse and pulled.

FANTASY

Orchid Strangelove and the Kiss of the Taipan

Sam Leng

“I’m just so depressed.” The vampire hung his head, a forlorn expression sheathing his face. “How am I ever supposed to feel content with my undead life when I’m so lonely?”

Orchid placed her mug of untouched coffee back on the desk and sighed. She didn’t charge enough to counsel miserable vampires. Unfortunately, running a dating agency for social misfits seemed to encourage these oddballs to vomit out their emotional troubles. She was something of a mother figure to her clients, ever-smiling and soft voiced. And yes, she understood why they felt at ease with her, but why not give her a break, just occasionally? This week she had already suffered the panic attacks of a doraphobic werewolf, and struggled to show sympathy towards a stunningly beautiful nymph with an inferiority complex. She was beginning to wonder how much more she could take.

Zephon glanced up at her, his midnight eyes transfixed on her ruby lips. “So what should I do, Miss Strangelove?” he whimpered, exposing his fangs, despite himself.

Orchid could tell this vampire was not altogether comfortable with his situation, and she had to admit she empathised with his anguish. It must be difficult to find a nice girl, break the ice, date and kiss, and all the while desperately crave her blood. The obvious solution would be to pair Zephon with a vampire woman, but such creatures were hard to come by. At least single ones were. Vampire women were usually dark, attractive and seductive. No man could ever resist them and they rarely fell for their own kind. This made the challenge of unearthing a suitor for Zephon rather complicated. The mere prospect of such a search might fluster any average woman, but this was Orchid Strangelove, founder and sole employee of the Strangelove Dating Agency. She was certainly

no *average* woman and she embraced each new challenge with a passion. That was, of course, so long as the client wasn't too dejected.

"Do vampires ever commit suicide?" she asked Zephon, out of curiosity.

Zephon nodded, his long, white hair falling down over his eyes. "Sunlight, usually. There have been a few stake-through-the-heart cases. Personally, I'd starve myself. It's near impossible for vampires to starve themselves because the Hunger always forces the body to feed, but it can't be as impossible as enduring this sad and solitary existence."

Wishing she hadn't asked, Orchid took out her bible – *The Strangelove Catalogue of Unusual Singletons* – and began to peruse the pages for a possible match.

Quill skulked behind the fiction shelves of her local library. She had just finished reading the entire stock of books indexed under S, and now she was feeling hungry. At this time of evening the only other presence in the building was the middle-aged cleaning lady, who was currently swishing a soapy mop over the laminated floorboards.

As Nita, the cleaner, manoeuvred the mop into a particularly dusty corner, Quill emerged from behind the shelves.

"I'm hungry," she declared, pushing her black-framed spectacles further up her nose.

Nita stopped in her tracks, pointing the dripping mop towards the small, whispery voice.

"Don't you know you shouldn't sneak up on people like that?" she growled. "You could have given me a heart attack. You're all so quiet, you night creatures. So stealthy."

"I'm hungry," Quill repeated, ignoring the mop-wielder's grumblings.

Nita frowned and glared at the girl. She was petite. Not unattractive, but nerdy. With her auburn hair cut so short, she appeared boyish. She had freckles, which was unusual for her kind, and the skinniest arms Nita had ever seen. Not that Nita was fooled by this thin frame. She knew Quill possessed unnatural strength; strength that could force the most muscular of men to crumble.

"Over there," Nita instructed, pointing with her free hand towards the Biography section.

Quill followed Nita's finger, first with her eyes, then her feet. She crept slowly towards the shelves of books which told of people's lives. Real people. Biographies were not Quill's favourite books, though she had, of course, read them all several times. She loved to read, but much preferred fantasy stories. Fictions, dreamt up by great weavers of words.

One day, maybe, she would attempt to write her own book, but she didn't think her imagination was quite strong enough yet. It took time to develop such a skill. And that was fine, because Quill had plenty of time.

Nita continued to watch the girl as she began her tip-toed hunt. Living among creatures such as Quill had become the norm. There had been a time, long ago, when the mere sight of any Inhuman being was a dreaded occurrence, but as their numbers multiplied, the fear of the general public subsided. There was little point to living in terror. The mutated creatures – vampires, lycanthropes, shapeshifters, etc – were not likely to go away, and so they became accepted. Most were harmless enough and lived out their own lives without interfering or causing too many problems. Some were murderous, but so were some humans. Some humans were also hunters. They had chosen not to accept the presence of the new all-powerful community, and spent their time tracking them down, hoping to impale them with stakes, shoot them with silver bullets and capture them with intent to torture. Nita was saddened by this, especially as her own son had joined their ranks. She wished everyone would just adapt to the changing times. Those who didn't embrace the future, she thought, probably didn't have much of a future at all. Besides, Quill was the least aggressive young woman Nita had ever met. The girl would never try to harm her. She just liked to read.

Suddenly, Quill lurched forward, scooping up an unwise rat who had just dashed past a biography of William Shakespeare. She bit into the rodent, oblivious to its protesting squeals. She had not realised quite how hungry she was until the sweet blood warmed her throbbing veins. Rat blood was not of the best quality, but she had never enjoyed biting into humans. Certainly not Nita. The cleaner had always been very kind to Quill. Sucking her blood would seem wrong, somehow. It wouldn't kill her, so long as the vampire didn't take too much, nor would it lead to The Change; Quill was not yet old enough to administer this transformation. But still, Nita probably wouldn't be very happy about it.

After draining the rodent, Quill wiped her mouth with the back of her hand and glanced down at the Shakespeare biography. She liked William Shakespeare and his bio was interesting. Perhaps she would read this book again, before starting on the fiction under T.

“So, you're a vampire,” Genesis observed, twisting a lock of red hair around her right index finger. “What's that like?”

“An utter bore,” Zephon replied, not really noticing his date's attempt at flirting. “It's all very depressing. Sleeping at daytime, waking at night. Hunting, biting, feeding. Mundane. Very mundane.”

“Do you feed on human blood?”

“Sometimes,” the vampire admitted. “I have never killed a human though. I wouldn’t like to. Mostly I feed on stray animals, and often I don’t even kill *them*. To be honest, I don’t much like the taste of blood, which is rather unfortunate for a vampire.”

“I bet it is,” Genesis agreed. “Don’t you ever wear the garb?”

“The garb?”

“Yes, you know, black cape with a red lining, high collar, lots of eyeliner?”

Zephon frowned. He suspected this woman, who claimed to like vampires, had anticipated meeting someone much more vampire-like than himself. She obviously had a vision of a Count Dracula style lover, caked in white make-up and dressed, quite literally, to kill. Zephon had not considered this before entering the restaurant. Instead he had worn his usual attire; blue, stonewashed jeans, Caterpillar boots and an old Steeleye Span T-shirt. Zephon liked Steeleye Span. He liked all folk music, in fact. Genesis didn’t seem to. She was probably more interested in gothic rock; Marilyn Manson, and the likes.

“No. I mean, I wouldn’t really want to. It’s all very theatrical. Some vampires like to dress that way, but not me.”

There was a long, awkward silence. Zephon shuffled in his chair, wondering how to proceed with the conversation. Genesis – or Gene, as she had asked him to call her – was an attractive woman. Almost beautiful. She wore a body length red dress, which Zephon also thought to be theatrical and didn’t really like. She had a black and grey tattoo on her left shoulder but, sitting opposite the vampire as she was, he couldn’t decipher the artwork; some type of acronym, with letters too small for him to read from this distance. Her body was slender and shapely. She had impressive breasts which bulged out of the top of the dress. It was likely those breasts were the best thing about her, because otherwise, despite her good looks, Zephon didn’t care for her much.

The arrival of a waiter carrying a tray, which held their plates of food and a bottle of wine, broke the uneasy silence. Zephon glanced at his meal with little interest and poured himself a glass of the fruity red.

“Would you like a glass?” he asked Gene, finally remembering his manners.

Genesis refused the offer. “I’d prefer to keep a clear head,” she responded.

Zephon frowned, downed his wine and poured himself another. “Suit yourself. But I wouldn’t take advantage of you, if that’s what you’re

worried about. I'm really not like that. I don't want to sleep with you anyway."

Gene felt hurt. This vampire was not what she had been expecting, but his rudeness would make her job all the more simple. She began to cut up her steak. Zephon had ordered the same, his extra rare. Blood was essential for a vampire, whether he liked the taste of it or not, and he had failed to satisfy The Hunger before leaving home, so was now attempting to mop up the remaining fluid from his meat with a slice of bread. Genesis watched this intently. He was a very poor date, she decided, but she was not one to give up without a fight. It was her duty to endure the evening for a while longer. At the rate he was knocking back the alcohol, her companion would soon be drunk, and making her move then would be much easier.

"When you're not biting stray animals, what else do you like to do?" Gene asked, not really interested, but unsure of what other topic to discuss.

"I like to play computer games," Zephon answered, after swallowing the slice of bread. He wished he could just pick the steak up and suck it dry – he had no appetite for other cuisine – but his limited knowledge of etiquette prevented him from doing this.

"Computer games?!" Genesis was disgusted. "But you're a vampire, an immortal being! You should be travelling the world, sightseeing, soaking up the culture!"

Zephon shrugged. "I'm halfway through the new Tomb Raider game. I've been to Greece and Egypt. I've battled against crazed animals and mythical beasts. That, Gene, is culture."

"You're wasting your life," Genesis concluded.

The vampire was undeterred. "Life isn't very exciting. It's really very depressing and lonely. Sometimes I wish my life was over."

Gene gritted her teeth. She could take no more of this. "It can be arranged," she muttered, before leaning over the table and kissing Zephon hard on his lips.

"This is very bad," Orchid groaned to herself, rubbing her aching head. She had just received the morning post through the office letterbox. The usual junk mail, which Orchid always liked to examine, had taken a side seat upon noticing a handwritten envelope. She wished she hadn't opened it now, at least not until she had filled herself full of strong coffee.

The letter was from the HIB Guild. Hunters of Inhuman Beings. Typed on headed paper it stated, quite frankly, that the young woman

Orchid had arranged to date Zephon had been a HIB member on initiation. They were pleased to note that the said initiation had gone very well, and that Genesis had poisoned Zephon with her toxic kiss. The kiss had left Zephon in a temporary state of paralysis and had made his capture effortless.

This was strange. Orchid had known a few bad kissers in her time but had never been poisoned by the act. It could only mean that Genesis herself was not human. The HIB Guild were well known hunters of all such creatures, and working alongside one was very much out of character. It also meant that Genesis had lied to Orchid in her Agency consultation, so her entry in the *Strangelove Catalogue of Unusual Singletons* was now incorrect. More paperwork. Orchid grimaced. She hated having to re-key entries.

The letter went on to remind Orchid that if Zephon – her last client – was unfortunate enough to die, his demise would instantly be linked to her and the Strangelove Dating Agency, and would seriously damage her career, and quite possibly her life. However, saving the vampire was quite simple; all she had to do was hand over the personal details of her previous and future Inhuman clients – addresses, physical descriptions, photographs – to the HIB Guild. The handover would be confidential, and the Guild would see to it that any deaths or mutilations which occurred in the upshot would not be associated with Orchid.

Orchid slouched in her chair. It was too early to be thinking about deaths and mutilations. Besides, she couldn't possibly hand over any details. Her clients came to her in the strictest confidence. She could not betray them for any reason, especially if such a betrayal was likely to result in their murders. Equally as important, she could not allow the Guild to kill Zephon. They had a lot of power, as some of their members were politicians and police chiefs who would be happy to use their authority to the Guild's advantage. Destroying the reputation of her business – and maybe even pinning the murder on her – would be a simple task for them. It was all very inconvenient.

Orchid scraped back her hair into a ponytail. "Rescue mission, I suppose," she murmured, snatching up her jacket and rising begrudgingly to her feet.

Before leaving her office, she glanced longingly at the kettle. It had been years since she'd last started a hectic morning without a cup of coffee. Today there just wasn't the time.

Quill had started on the *Ws*. She was an extraordinarily fast reader and could finish dozens of novels in any one night. The sun had now risen

and she slid her current read back onto the shelf. The library was dark enough for her to survive without sleeping through the daytime, but she was feeling tired, and the public would be arriving soon.

"There aren't enough books in this library," she complained. "I want to read something new."

Nita shrugged. "I just clean here," she said. "You'll have to take it up with the librarian."

Quill scowled. "If the librarian knew I lived here I'd be told to leave immediately, and you'd be out of a job for certain."

This was true. The library was extremely precious to the librarian, who was something of an ogre and would be very unhappy to learn that a rat-sucking vampire was reading all the books. She'd also be very unhappy with Nita for allowing such a thing to happen. Nita was only supposed to mop the floor and dust the shelves. Recently, however, she had started to sleep at the library along with Quill. Since becoming a member of the HIB Guild, her ambitious son Tibor had taken over her own house, filling it with all kinds of torture devices and lethal weapons. He had worked his way swiftly up the hunter's ladder, eventually securing himself the highest ranking position: Boss of the Guild. Nita found this upsetting. She had wanted to raise him well, teach him to tolerate all walks of life and regard everyone as equals. Unfortunately, after his father abandoned the family, Tibor had found his own path, and now he seemed to take great pleasure in ending the lives of Inhumans.

Before she had left her home, Nita had mentioned Quill to Tibor. She had told him the young woman was an intelligent and determined vampire with a bright future ahead of her. She wished he would meet her, to realise that Inhumans were not all monsters and had a place in modern society. However, she never told him she worked at the library, or that the vampire lived there. She knew, deep down, if Tibor ever did meet Quill he would most certainly try to kill her.

A grunt from a small window caused both women to stare upwards. Two legs dangled from the opening, followed by the rest of a slim female body. Orchid hit the floor of the library with a thud, dropping to her knees.

"I'm getting too old for this," she groaned to Nita and Quill, picking herself up and dusting down her clothes.

Quill bared her fangs. Who was this woman, entering the library so early through the window? She was not a member of staff. Perhaps it would be a good idea to attack? She glanced at Nita, who was scratching her head.

"The library isn't open yet," Nita explained to Orchid.

“Oh, I know, but I needed to be in here urgently,” she said, studying Quill with interest. “You’re a vampire woman! That’s great. Do you have a boyfriend?” She had suddenly remembered that after saving Zephon’s life she still needed to fulfil her promise of finding him a lover. It was very doubtful now that there would be any future for him and Genesis.

The vampire growled. “I don’t like boyfriends, I like books.”

“How about a boyfriend with a book?”

Quill considered this. “Yes, I suppose that would be ok.”

“Fantastic!” Orchid cried. Surely Zephon owned at least one book. She mused on this as she trotted off towards the Reference shelves. Nita and Quill hurried after her.

“Excuse me,” Nita mumbled, “you really shouldn’t be in here. The doors don’t open to the public for another half an hour. The librarian will be here soon, and if she catches you, you’ll be in big trouble.”

Orchid rolled her eyes. “Librarians are the least of my problems. Any idea where I might find some information about creatures with toxic kisses?”

“*Inhumans of the World*, page ninety-three,” Quill offered.

Orchid raised her eyebrows. “Excellent. You have a good memory.”

Taking out the volume, she flicked to the appropriate page. Quill had been correct, of course. There on the paper, complete with a colour picture of a woman who, to the naked eye, appeared completely human, lay two paragraphs relating to taipans. These creatures, the book told, were always female. They were rare – much more so than vampires and werewolves – and were almost human, except for their paranormal abilities and their saliva, which was infused with the venom of an Inland Taipan snake, causing paralysis and occasionally death.

Zephon was too strong to be killed by such a poison, but it had obviously been sufficient to stun him for long enough to be captured by the HIB Guild. Orchid was nowhere near as resilient as a vampire, and taking on this creature would be running the risk of fatality. The book didn’t mention whether taipans had any lesbian tendencies. Perhaps they’d only kiss men. Orchid hoped so. That would just leave the toxic woman’s mystical powers to contend with, and a Guild full of hunters with deadly weapons. This rescue was sure to be a walk in the park!

Wondering if she could persuade Quill – a scrawny looking vampire, but better than nothing – to help with the mission, Orchid turned to face the two women, who were still staring at her suspiciously when the front door of the library burst open. Quill screeched as sunlight flooded into the building and scurried behind a bookshelf for cover.

“What’s going on in here?” a rotund woman boomed, her deep voice reverberating off every wall in the library.

“Shh,” Orchid hissed. “This is a library, you know?”

“And I am the librarian,” the newcomer snarled. Then, without further warning, she tossed a firebolt from her fingertips, aiming it directly at the head of Orchid, who hurled herself to the floor, landing heavily on her stomach. The firebolt flew past the grounded matchmaker, and dissolved into the air.

“Can we not talk this over?!” Orchid begged, as another bolt narrowly missed her shoulder. “This is really all too much without a decent cup of coffee inside me!”

Quill, now that the library door had closed, dashed out of her darkened hiding place, scooping Orchid off the floor and dragging Nita along by her cardigan as she fled past. Her speed and agility were remarkable, and she dodged a further three sorcery attacks with ease before leaping up onto the first floor balcony with the two humans still in her clutches.

“What’s *her* problem?!” Orchid gasped, as soon as she was back on her feet. “Is she not getting enough? She’s very tetchy. I could probably help her out if she visited my dating agency.”

Nita glared at her. “This is all your fault. Quill and I are now homeless, I’m out of a job, and the chances are we won’t escape with our lives intact anyway! Isn’t it about time you explained who you are?”

Before Orchid could answer, a single gunshot blasted a hole through the wooden library door. The librarian dived out of the way as four HIB members, with their shoulder tattoos proudly exposed, marched inside. One carried a crossbow, while the other three cradled firearms.

“This is just great!” Orchid yelled, throwing her hands in the air. She was very frustrated and wished she possessed some of the power the librarian had demonstrated. Firebolts would be very useful at this moment in time. Either that, or a strong coffee. She desperately needed a caffeine fix.

“So, this is where you’ve been living, mother!” A sole voice bellowed from below as the librarian struggled against the three gunmen. “Sleeping rough in the library. And there’s your little vampire. Your beloved Quill, yes? I’m so pleased to finally meet her! And Miss Orchid Strangelove! What a surprise to see you here!”

Orchid snorted. She hated sarcasm but didn’t retort. Instead she allowed her eyes to rest on the cleaner, who, it seemed, had given birth to this insolent hunter.

“Tibor,” Nita croaked.

“I found your contract of employment, mother, when I was throwing

away the rest of your junk. A cleaner at the library! You always were terrible at keeping secrets. And now here I am!”

Tibor glowered at Quill with hate burning in his eyes. He raised his loaded crossbow and fired a silver arrow straight for the heart of the skinny vampire. It tore through the air faster than any other weapon Quill had ever witnessed, and momentarily she lost all ability to move. Perhaps it was the magic in the air which clouded her senses, or simply the numbing fear of being evicted from the library. Either way, she left her parry far too late. Nita was quicker and launched herself into the path of the airborne missile. The tip of the projectile pierced her chest and she crashed to the floor of the balcony, shrieking with pain.

“Mother...” Tibor began, but his brief spell of weakness was all it took for the librarian to blast him with a powerful charge, sending him running hysterically from the library, aflame. On witnessing this, the trio of gunmen abandoned their attempts at capturing the wild woman. Instead they took off after Tibor, intending to help extinguish him.

The librarian, however, seemed relentless in her quest to destroy as many of these intruders as possible, and bounded up the stairs and onto the balcony to confront Quill and Orchid with her magic once again. Orchid had had enough. One woman was already on her deathbed as a result of the morning's events and currently had a morose vampire hunched over her fragile body. Nobody was in the mood for more supernatural harassment.

Picking up the largest book at hand – *The Encyclopaedia of the World*, no less – Orchid lurched at the librarian, slamming the book down on her head until she collapsed, unconscious.

“We need to get out of here,” she advised Quill, deciding it was time to take control of the situation. She handed the vampire her jacket. “Take this, put it over your head so the sun doesn't harm you. The hospital is too far away, and I'm not sure what they could do to help anyway. My office is just around the corner. We can stay there until it gets dark. Bring her with you,” – Orchid pointed to the comatose librarian – “I'll carry...”

“Nita,” Quill informed.

“Right. Nita it is.”

Orchid Strangelove hugged the limp cleaning lady close to her body, taking care not to jar the arrow which was stopping her from bleeding to death. She was pleased she had selected the least heavy of the two women.

Abiding by the orders, Quill casually draped the plump librarian over her shoulders, hid her face under Orchid's jacket, and followed the stranger out into the daylight.

* * *

Zephon groaned. His head spun. Usually he could drink gallons of wine without any repercussions, but last night seemed to have ended abruptly and now he had a dreadful hangover. Worse still, he appeared to be in jail.

“Why am I in prison?” he enquired, noticing a guard outside the cell.

The guard turned around to face the vampire, revealing the HIB tattoo on his shoulder. Zephon gasped. He had been captured by hunters? But how could that be? He was an aged vampire; strong and quick. No hunter had ever got close to capturing him before, and the last thing he could remember was sitting in the restaurant with...

Genesis strode provocatively up to the barred cell, stopping to stare fiercely at the vampire.

“You were such a bore at dinner,” she spat. “Quite possibly the most boring date I’ve ever had. It was my absolute pleasure to kiss you good-night.”

Gene licked her lips, black saliva dripping from her tongue. Now close up, Zephon could make out the tattoo he had noticed in the restaurant. It was the standard mark of the Hunters of Inhuman Beings Guild. His date had been a set up. Did Orchid Strangelove know?

“She does now,” Genesis replied, using telepathy to read Zephon’s mind. “And don’t you worry, you’ll be seeing her soon enough, I’m sure.”

Another figure strode into view, admiring the taipan’s womanly shape. He was a burly man, seemingly human, with slightly charred skin and ruffled hair.

“Oh yes, the appalling woman will be here soon. We’ve blackmailed her for your release. Not that we actually intend to release you, of course. We will merely keep you alive, but starved, until Miss Strangelove brings our goodies. Then, my fanged friend, we will kill you, just like all of the other lonesome Inhumans Strangelove keeps on file. I think it may well be time for Orchid to meet *her* maker too. After all, any human who keeps such freakish company does not deserve to live.”

Genesis scowled at the man, who smiled sheepishly by means of apology, took her hand and led her away from Zephon’s cell. As they left, the scalded hunter called back to the guard. “Radio down for some troops, Astrop. I want the library destroyed. And if anyone happens to find a demented librarian there, make sure she is tortured and killed.”

The guard nodded, slightly confused as to why the Boss might want to murder a librarian, but he made no argument and did as he was told.

Zephon slumped in his cell. Hunger burned inside him causing weak-

ness. There was nothing he could do without feeding. Feeling useless, and even more depressed than usual, he consoled himself with hopes that Orchid would have a plan. She seemed like a woman who could handle anything life threw at her. There would be no problems, he was sure. Everything was bound to turn out fine.

Orchid scanned her office. Under her desk, an auburn-haired vampire was sleeping off the effects of over-exposure to sunlight. The swivel chair homed a wheezing, cataleptic cleaning lady with a silver arrow still sticking out of her chest. The once limited floor space was now extra limited since becoming a bed to the homicidal, but luckily unconscious, librarian. Orchid sighed. At least now she could have a cup of coffee.

“What are we going to do about Nita?” Quill demanded to know, before Orchid could reach for the kettle. The vampire had risen from sleep early, her mind filled with worry. She adjusted her glasses and hauled herself to her feet.

Strangelove sighed again. “She’s not looking too healthy, I’m afraid. I don’t think she’s going to make it. Not as a human, anyway. But you’re a vampire. Can’t you turn her?”

Quill shook her head. “I’m only three hundred and seventy-two years old. Vampires must be at least five hundred to process The Change. Besides, I don’t like the idea of turning people into vampires without their consent.”

The two women stared down at Nita, whose breathing was becoming ever more shallow by the minute. Orchid shrugged, sadly. “I don’t think there’s much choice. I’m sure, if she were in any fit state, she would gladly consent. But if *you* can’t do it... *Aha!*”

Quill scowled as the human stepped over the librarian and manoeuvred around the swivel chair. The office had become something of an obstacle course, but eventually she retrieved a large book from her desk. *The Strangelove Catalogue of Unusual Singletons*. Scanning quickly through the pages, she finally pointed one finger triumphantly in the air.

“Zephon is five hundred and eight,” Orchid beamed. “If we can rescue him, he should be able to change Nita. Being a vampire can’t be that bad.”

“It isn’t,” Quill agreed, “but I’m not sure about saving this Zephon character. Is he the one with the book?”

Orchid hesitated. After thinking this through, the depressed and lonely Zephon didn’t seem the type to read books. In fact, the only interests he had listed were folk music and computer games, but surely a little white lie had never hurt anyone, especially if it was for the greater good.

“Yes, he has lots and lots of books. You’ll adore him. He’s... err... good natured and charming.”

Perhaps that was more than a little white lie, but she could deal with the wrath of the deceived Quill later. Right now she had more pressing matters to attend to, like the rescue of a vampire whose survival could salvage her own freedom, her business and the existence of the dying cleaner. In fact, she presently had matters even more pressing than that, as the crazed librarian rose unsteadily to her feet.

“My head,” the librarian groaned. “Where am I?”

Orchid saw this question as a chance to develop her dishonesty further. “The hunters knocked you out,” she said, “and we saved your life. It just so happens Quill and I are going to visit the scoundrels soon. You should definitely come along and get your revenge on them.”

The librarian blinked uncertainly. She couldn’t quite remember what had happened at the library, but she very much doubted a few measly hunters had overpowered her. Besides, she recognised this human woman as an intruder, and any intruder who dared to step foot in her library before opening hours, then expected her to help with some vengeance mission, was clearly not to be believed.

“I’ll blast you into Kingdom Come one day,” the librarian roared, before stomping out of the office, her hefty bulk wobbling violently with each step.

Orchid shrugged. “We’re on our own then,” she told Quill. “Not ideal, but it could be worse. I mean, we could be dead.”

Quill perched herself on the corner of the office desk, listening carefully while Orchid filled her in on the details of the forthcoming rescue. Ten minutes later, the office door swung open and the librarian crashed back in. She took a seat on the other end of the desk, causing the table to tip. Orchid and Quill observed her with wide eyes.

“The HIB Guild have smashed up my library,” she bawled. “My name’s Bux, by the way. What time do we set off?”

The HIB Guild headquarters were located in an old storage warehouse. It was a well known fact that the Guild occupied the building, but non-members rarely entered the premises. Even more seldom did Inhumans visit voluntarily, and so the sight of a human woman, a vampire and some type of librarian sorceress would have been enough to draw attention, if there had been anyone nearby to notice. As it happened, the night was dead and the trio slipped around the side of the warehouse undetected.

The rescue had become paramount and needed to be speedy. Nita had

been left at Orchid's office alone. There was no-one else trustworthy enough to take care of her and it was clear she was not going to last much longer. Zephon must be freed to bite Nita before she died. If there was no pulse left in her body, The Change would never happen. This would result in a distraught Quill, who would then refuse to date Zephon, which in turn would make him even more depressed, possibly even suicidal. And if he decided to kill himself, the whole coffee-less day would have been for nothing.

Once out of the sight of the main street, Orchid stopped for a moment to evaluate the situation.

"There will be guards at both entrances, but probably less around the back," she explained. "If it comes to a fight, Bux, you take charge. Your firebolts in the library were impressive, and the distraction will give Quill and I the opportunity to run in and find Zephon. He should still be alive. The Guild's letter said they would hold him until I delivered my Catalogue."

Orchid patted her shoulder bag. She had brought the Catalogue along in the hope of conning the Guild; an attempt to ensure a peaceful hand-over. Of course, she would never actually give them her bible, nor did she believe they planned to release Zephon, but one could always hope.

As the three women approached the back door of the shadowy building, eight HIB guards emerged from the warehouse. They wore sturdy armour and held shields and long blades. Orchid hadn't expected them to be so well prepared, but Bux wasn't discouraged. A vision of her beloved library flashed before her eyes. The bookshelves had been toppled, the books themselves ruined. Thousands of volumes had been slashed and soiled. The expense of repairing the damage would be vast. She gritted her teeth. These hunters would pay. Who did they think they were, discriminating against Inhumans like her?

She raised her fingers high above her head and threw the first of a series of firebolts at the eight men. The guards yelled as the bolts heated their armour, but they soon recovered and marched purposefully towards the librarian, their glinting blades slicing through the air.

"Just look who's arrived!" A female voice cooed from behind the proceeding guards. "Little Miss Strangelove and friends!"

"How could you do this?" Orchid asked the taipan. "How could you lie to me in your Agency consultation? Typing out new Catalogue records is a dull job at the best of times. I really don't savour the prospect of having to re-key entries."

Genesis snorted. "You won't have a Catalogue to worry about for much longer. Why not hand it over now? I'll pass it on to Tibor."

Orchid scratched her ear, confused. "Why are you working for him, Genesis? The Boss of the HIB Guild! You do know he'll kill you as soon as you give him this book? He's just using you to do his dirty work. You're an Inhuman. He hunts Inhumans. It's a doomed relationship – but I can find you a nice partner. After all, I'm Orchid Strangelove of the Strangelove Dating Agency. Maybe Zephon was the wrong choice, but there's someone out there for everyone, I assure you."

A firebolt flew past the taipan's head after deflecting off the helmet of a guard who fell to the ground. Bux grinned and ducked her chubby body underneath one of the blades. She was enjoying herself, though such physical exertion was taking its toll. She did not know if she could keep the pace for much longer.

Genesis gazed glumly at the ground. "There's nobody for me," she told Orchid. "How can I have a meaningful relationship when I poison everyone I kiss? I have rebelled against my Inhumanity, and I will help the HIB Guild destroy all other Inhumans, whatever the cost."

Bux halted, taking a gash to the arm. "You poison everyone you kiss?" she panted. "How can that be? You're not a..."

Another blow to the stomach caused Bux to double up in pain. Quill, who until now had been lurking behind Orchid, dived into battle, throwing Bux's assailant to the ground and stomping on him, using all of her colossal strength. There were now six guards still standing, and they advanced towards the trio in a deathly formation.

I'm a taipan, Genesis thought.

So am I! Bux responded, telepathically. *But how? We're so rare. I've been so miserable and bad tempered alone. I thought I was the only one left.*

"Me too!" Gene shrieked, clapping ecstatically. "I have never met another of our kind!"

Simultaneously, both taipans stuck out their tongues to reveal sticky, black saliva. The two women whooped with joy as Orchid, Quill and the guards became a bemused audience to the affair. While the HIB men were preoccupied, Genesis hurried out of the building, tore off one of the guard's helmets and kissed him passionately. The guard immediately collapsed to the ground.

"Damn I'm good," Orchid smirked, as Genesis and Bux held hands and showered the last five guards with a torrent of fire and lightning bolts. "Sometimes I matchmake without even realising it!"

"Zephon is in the cells in the underground passageway," Genesis called, amidst the chaos. "Tibor is watching over him. You'd better be quick. He hasn't fed since arriving here and he's looking very pale."

Orchid and Quill dodged the taipan attacks and rushed inside the HIB headquarters and down the stairs into the bowels of the warehouse. Along the passage, Quill efficiently disposed of three more guards who had opted not to wear armour but were still foolish enough to stand in her way. Tibor, still a little burnt after Bux's assault in the library, stood silently by Zephon's cell, gun in hand, waiting for Orchid to arrive. The two women came to a standstill as they approached him.

"So you came, Miss Strangelove," the Boss began, "and you brought my mother's vampire with you. Wonderful! Another Inhuman for me to kill. First though, do you have the book?"

Orchid nodded. "But before I hand this over, Tibor, you should know your mother is in a critical condition. The arrow *will* kill her and the only way to save her is for a five-hundred-plus year old vampire – like Zephon, for instance – to bite her. After this, she will, of course, become a vampire herself, but surely that's preferable to death?"

For a moment Tibor wavered. He still had feelings for his mother. She was a wonderful woman. *Too* wonderful and *too* accepting. If only she hadn't intercepted that arrow to save the life of the disgusting vampire who stood in front of him now, healthy and vigorous. Not that it would make any difference to the outcome. His love for her was not enough to abandon his calling.

"I would rather see her die," he muttered, coldly. "Now please give me the records of your Inhuman clients."

"Very well," Orchid sighed, taking the *Catalogue of Unusual Singletons* out of her shoulder bag. "I had hoped I wouldn't have to do this. I'm not really a lover of violence."

In one swift movement, Orchid Strangelove drew back her arm and hurled the Catalogue at Tibor's head. The book was slightly less heavy than the *Encyclopaedia of the World* which she had used to knock out Bux, but the effect, Orchid noted, was much greater. As the Catalogue hit Tibor's face, his mouth opened wide, his eyes rolled back, and his head fell clean off his neck and bounced down the corridor. The rest of his body remained still for a moment, before dropping the gun and running blindly down the passage after its skull, waving its hands frantically in the air.

"Well, wasn't that unexpected?!" Orchid mumbled, crumpling up her nose in confusion. She walked over to retrieve her Catalogue, unsure of exactly what had happened.

"Very unexpected," Quill agreed, turning to face the pasty vampire who was crouched in the cell. "Do you own any books?" she asked him, hope flickering in her eyes.

Orchid bit her lip and prepared to make her excuses. She really shouldn't have lied. Without Quill's help, the rescue would have been practically impossible, and now the bloodsucking bookworm was destined to face the disappointment of a lifetime. Good natured and charming? Zephon? *Ha!* Dull and self-absorbed, more like.

Zephon lifted his eyes, fascinated by the freckled vampire who loomed above him. "I've got a few old Tomb Raider walkthroughs, and a lot of lyrical inlays from folk CDs," he declared.

Orchid silently cursed him, but Quill appeared delighted.

"That's great!" she exclaimed. "I've never read anything like that before! The library doesn't stock those kind of books."

"You'll love them," Zephon assured her. "I could teach you how to play computer games too, if you like."

The female vampire grinned and wrapped her hands around the bars of the cell. With a surge of strength she pulled the bars apart, creating an opening big enough for Zephon to slither through. She then knelt down and allowed the starving vampire to feed on her blood. He didn't take much. He didn't need to. Vampire blood was powerful and just a few drops would make him strong again. Despite not usually liking the taste, Quill's blood was sugary and satisfying. He realised, as he rested on the female's shoulder, that he had not felt this happy for a long time. Orchid was relieved. She didn't think her book throwing technique would have been much use against two vampires; one angry and one disheartened.

Outside, Bux and Genesis hugged each other affectionately. Fate had dealt them a pleasing hand. Around them lay the motionless bodies of the eight HIB guards. It made for a pleasing setting, and the taipan women were thrilled to have found each other.

Orchid Strangelove entered her office. It was early morning, before dawn, and she had not yet had any sleep.

I'll skip sleep in favour of a coffee, she thought to herself, skirting around two kissing taipans, a pair of vampire lovers playing Sonic The Hedgehog on a portable console, and a newly born bloodsucker, who was presently trying to apply lipstick without dirtying her fangs. Despite Orchid's fatigue, she was pleased that Zephon had been able to save Nita's life. And the cleaning lady, regardless of her make-up troubles, seemed unperturbed about spending her now-immortal existence as an Inhuman.

"I'm very at ease with Inhuman beings," Nita professed, her speech slightly slurred as a result of her elongated canine teeth.

"Unlike your son," Orchid pointed out, turning on the kettle and tak-

ing a seat at her desk. "Oh, by the way, you should probably know that his head fell off after I threw the *Catalogue of Unusual Singletons* at him. He seemed to be okay though, all things considered."

Nita was unsurprised. "His head was always falling off when he was a young boy. In fairness, it was probably a traumatic experience, so I can't really blame him for the way he turned out. His father was an Inhuman, you see. When Tibor was twelve his dad up and left. That was when he first began his hate campaign against Inhumans, and chose to rebel against his genes. Much like Genesis, I suppose."

Genesis smiled, taking a short break from kissing Bux. It felt good to be able to kiss without killing or paralysing her partner. She could now accept herself again, and had covered up the HIB tattoo with long sleeves. She intended to undergo laser removal surgery as soon as possible.

"We should probably leave now," Bux whispered to Gene, as quietly as her booming voice would allow. "I believe we are interrupting Miss Strangelove's coffee break. We can head over to my library. It'll need a bit of a tidy up. Perhaps you could help, Nita, and we could find you a comfortable bed, if you still want to sleep there. It's plenty dark enough during the day."

Nita nodded happily, then turned to face Quill.

"I think I'll split my time between the library and Zephon's house," the spectacled vampire grinned. "He says he has some lyric books they don't store in the library, and I think I'd like to read them. Also, I'm quite enjoying these computer games. *They* tell stories too, of sorts. But don't worry, I'll visit you often. We can hunt for rats together!"

The cleaner was pleased with this arrangement. She had new skills to develop, thousands of books to read, and a library to clear of rodents.

All in good spirits, the three women left the office together, engaged in friendly chatter. Zephon and Quill remained, embracing each other as they proceeded to level three of Sonic the Hedgehog. Zephon was clearly in love and much more content with his life now that he had a girlfriend. Orchid didn't mind if the two vampires wanted to stay a bit longer. She poured herself a strong coffee. No, she didn't mind anything now, so long as she was free of miserable Inhumans, at least until she had finished her drink.

As Orchid raised the mug to her lips, the door of the office edged open to reveal a glum looking penangallan. With his head tucked under his left arm, Tibor uttered a bleak greeting.

"I'm just so depressed," he groaned.

REVIEWS

The Quarterly Review

BOOKS

The Age of Chaos: the Multiverse of Michael Moorcock

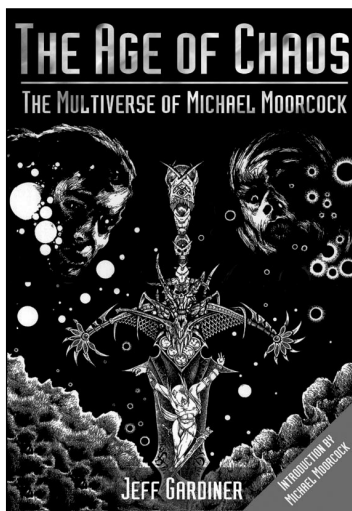
Jeff Gardiner

BFS Publications, pb, 120pp (2002)

This is a well-written overview of Michael Moorcock's complete works, published by the British Fantasy Society with an introduction by Moorcock himself. Moorcock has written hundreds of books, so covering them all in under 120pp is obviously going to leave some underserved. Although the chapters on Moorcock's early and later periods are detailed and fascinating, the heroic fantasy for which he's still best known gets extremely short shrift (quite oddly, given the publisher), being crammed into one nine-page chapter. There's little room for anything more than brief summaries of Elric, Hawkmoon, Corum and the rest. The complete chapter given over to *Gloriana*, in contrast, seems extremely generous.

Nevertheless, this is an ideal book for anyone looking to get a quick critical grasp on Moorcock. The lack of footnotes may limit its academic usefulness, but a useful reading list is provided. The discussion of *Behold the Man* contains a couple of odd comments (apparently "Moorcock does not deny the truth of the crucifixion") but is still very illuminating.

It was a perfect book for me: in my twenties I read everything I could that Moorcock had published up till then; now a new pile of his books has accumulated and I find myself a little daunted. Reading *The Age of*



Chaos has left me primed to have a crack at the pile; recurring themes, characters and in-jokes have been dislodged from my memories and reactivated.

On the other hand, will that help me enjoy Moorcock's new books? It's the critic's job to trace the connections between an author's various works, to identify the themes and preoccupations, and Gardiner does an excellent job of that. But these books are already awfully interconnected; they lock together like chainmail. By stressing the connections this book gives an impression of sameiness and repetition.

But maybe it's just me, an impression I was left with after reading far too many of them all at once a long time ago, an impression revived by this book, but not derived from it.

After all, reading Gardiner's description of *The City in the Autumn Stars*, I didn't recognise a thing: my overwhelming memory is of thinking, right, there's Tanelorn, there's Jerry, there's Von Bek, and so on. Gardiner's account has tempted me to re-read it: it's entirely possible that I read it as a fan, looking for the things that fans look out for, rather than paying attention to everything that was new.

Still, I'm probably not alone in thinking Moorcock's books would benefit from being pushed apart a little bit. When I first read most of them they were short, easily digestible books. Then some began to be collected in omnibuses. And then they were all gathered together into a fourteen-volume series of gigantic paperbacks. While I appreciated the value for money, it felt as if they were being drawn closer and closer together, like the stars at the end of the universe.

The Knight of the Swords, *The King of the Swords*, *The Sword and the Stallion* and *The Hollow Lands* were all winners of BFAs for best novel, but now they are permanently reduced to chunks of larger volumes. Even an important literary novel of ordinary length like *A Cure for Cancer* is only available as part of an omnibus, which is utter madness. (Shouldn't it be a Penguin Modern Classic by now?) These books could really do with being treated as individuals again, given some room to develop separate identities. Maybe if ebooks take off and economies of scale stop being so all-important, that will happen. **8**

Armageddon 2419 A.D.

Philip Francis Nowlan

Feedbooks, eb, c.195pp (1928)

Who'd have thought that Wilma Deering predated Buck Rogers, but here

she is, as frosty as she ever was in the TV series and palling around with Buck's prototype, Anthony Rogers. It's like finding out that Watson had adventures with Sheriff Holmes before teaming up with Sherlock!

Readers may also be surprised by other differences from the Gil Gerard-powered thrill-machine they know and love. Principally, this Rogers is fighting the Chinese, who live in floating cities above the US, leaving the Americans to scoot around in the forests below like overgrown Ewoks.

One thing that baffles is why, if the Chinese live on synthesised food and never set food on the ground, they would choose to park their floating cities over America rather than some nice part of China. Maybe it's the sunsets! Or maybe they're mining some natural resource not mentioned in the book. Or maybe the book does explain this point, and I missed it through reading late at night.

Modern readers may be rather shocked by one of the great victories of the Rogers-led resistance: they bring down a passenger liner and massacre everyone on board. Yay for the resistance...

This is a fast-paced, exciting, action-packed book. It stopped a little too early in the campaign for my liking (and in fact casually mentions how the campaign will conclude about half-way through, presumably to stop readers getting too anxious) but there is at least one sequel so I look forward to finding out what's next for Rogers and his merry band of murderous terrorists. Free to read on Feedbooks. **6**

Badge of Infamy

Lester del Rey

Feedbooks, eb, c.116pp (1973)

An unfairly disbarred doctor plies his trade on the Martian frontier and gets involved in a revolution. An epic story in a short book – just my cup of tea. Available on Feedbooks. **6**

Derai (Dumarest of Terra #2)

E.C. Tubb

Arrow, pb, 188pp (1968)

My rating of this book shows me to be a bit of a hypocrite... I recently criticised *Chosen* by Jerry Ibbotson for not bringing anything new to the table, and for being a little humourless, and then on Goodreads I gave

this book four stars (and very nearly five) despite there being barely a single word or idea in it that was new to me, and certainly nothing that made me crack anything other than a wry smile.

The difference I guess is that this kind of space adventure is my absolute favourite kind of book, and E.C. Tubb nails it on the head. Everything the book does, it does with superb efficiency and skill. It reminds me of Jack Vance's space adventures, and there is nothing I like to be reminded of more. Even if you've eaten a hundred chocolate biscuits before, the next one looks just as nice. This kind of stuff is my comfort food... 8

The Hub: Dangerous Territory

James H. Schmitz

Baen, pb, 480pp

This is volume four of the collected works of James H. Schmitz. I paid fifteen pounds for a battered, dirty copy of this book, to complete my seven-volume set, and it was absolutely worth every penny. If I hadn't already found that copy, after reading the previous three books I would have paid whatever it took to acquire this one.

The highlights are the two Nile Etland stories: "Trouble Tide" (a novella) and "The Demon Breed" (a novel). Both are tremendously entertaining. Schmitz had a rare knack for combining thrilling action with hard, soft and pseudo science, not to mention a genius for creating strong, independent, intelligent and capable women (of which Etland is yet another example) and believably alien psychologies. Both stories save gently amusing twists for their closing pages, another Schmitz signature.

Having read the other stories quite a while ago (before losing the book for a while), I don't have much to say about them now. They weren't quite Schmitz's best, but they were good. I got stuck on "Balanced Ecology" – and then, weirdly, got stuck on it again in the anthology *Bug Eyed Monsters* – but after gritting my teeth and forcing myself to focus (it's a tough one to read late at night) it turned out to be one of the best stories I read all year.

Reading the back of this book, it's easy to be put off: "thousands of rough, ornery and tough-minded human worlds ... when Trouble comes Hubward in large doses, there are an awful lot of armed citizens waiting for it..."

But don't be put off! It may sound like recommended reading for

right-wing libertarians, but Schmitz makes it clear that this is no utopia – there's a terrible price to pay for that liberty: ordinary, non-violent people are never safe. They are plagued by villains and cut-throats, with no interplanetary police force to come to the rescue. And that's where Schmitz's heroes come in!

I very, very rarely think this about books any more, having so many still to read, but I would say it's a virtual certainty that I'll be reading this book again.

I'd like to express my immense gratitude to Eric Flint and Guy Gordon for putting this series of collected works together. They've done a wonderful service to this reader (and many others I'm sure), but also paid the most perfect tribute to a very special writer. **10**

Planet of Mystery

Terry Bisson

PS Publishing, hb, 108pp

Two astronauts land on Venus, but it's not the superheated sauna they expected – it's much more like the place Carson Napier visited. And that's impossible... They try to make sense of what's going on, and cling to the hope of getting back to Earth. There's an adorable robot, plus centaurs, UFOs, and disturbing orange panties.

Planet of Mystery is a playful, frivolous, serious and thoughtful book. If it has a flaw it's that the reader may conclude early on that he or she has already seen this particular episode of *Farscape* (or *Stargate*, or *Star Trek*), but ignore that feeling, it's much more interesting than that.

This is a story that operates on the subconscious level, using repetition and startling imagery to create a dream-like effect. It's also very sexy.

In my sf reading I've pretty much gone straight from reading seventies-era paperbacks (and reprints of even earlier material) to bang-up-to-date review copies like this one. I haven't read much from the intervening period, so this was my first book by Terry Bisson. I'm guessing it's fairly untypical, but I'll soon find out since it's left me wanting to read more. After this trip to Venus, a voyage to the red planet seems appropriate. **8**



The Rights of the Reader

Daniel Pennac

Walker Books, pb, 174pp

Very bracing. Aimed at teachers and parents, but anyone who likes books enough to use Goodreads, say, will get something out of it. It's rather hard to believe his stories of getting young people to read the classics, but you can't argue with experience.

The passage where Pennac talks about difficult books, about there being the right time to read them, was interesting for me, since I've a set of his books (in French) that I've never managed to get into. Maybe it's time to give them another try. 7

Shakespeare Wrote for Money

Nick Hornby

McSweeney's, pb, 132pp

This came from the McSweeney's Book Club at a good time for me. I've been writing a lot of reviews lately, both here and elsewhere, and I've started to get a bit self-conscious about them. I got it into my head that it was best to be totally objective, to aim for apparent omniscience, to try to ignore my own reading experience in order to provide a more balanced view. Clearly I've never gone very far in that direction, but the thought that I *should* had been nagging at me a bit.

So it was great to read this book of columns, and find a very respectable literary figure talking about books in just the way I like to, writing about them in context; in the context of his life, of other books he's reading, and of books he's not reading. Obviously talent-wise I'm a million miles away from Nick Hornby, but that shouldn't stop me from trying to learn from his example.

I remember reading *Fever Pitch* in a single night (in a bedsit in Lille while on a year as a teaching assistant) and this book was just as more-ish. It arrived in the morning and I finished it before bedtime. Hornby's observations on books are highly entertaining, and at times even quietly inspiring. It made a good companion piece to Daniel Pennac's *The Rights of the Reader*, a book I read a couple of weeks before this one, and one which Hornby coincidentally has some kind words for in here.

This book has certainly made me want to read more of the magazine the columns come from. In my heart I know the *Believer* is pretty much

a Sunday supplement on fancy paper, but fancy paper counts for a lot with me. I hate having inky fingers. 8

Shrike

Quentin S. Crisp

PS Publishing, hb, 112pp

The shrike is a bird that impales its prey upon thorns. This book concerns Brett, a would-be writer in his mid-thirties who travels to Japan after a relationship fails. He becomes obsessed with the idea that there's a shrike in the garden.

I'm a bit torn with this book. It's very well-written, there is some fascinating discussion of Japanese literature, there are lots of lovely details, and the central relationship, between Brett and an elderly widow, is touching and unusual. It's a fine piece of writing. However, Brett himself is spectacularly annoying and self-obsessed, the type of man you wouldn't want to sit near in a coffee shop, let alone read about for a couple of hours, the type who talks endlessly about the things he's going to do and all the trials he must go through to do them, but who never actually does anything at all. He's a huge drama queen, basically.

That's not necessarily a flaw: great books are written all the time about people much worse than Brett. But it does feel as if the book is on his side. A long time ago I read a bit of Barthes, and I did understand the point that the author's intentions shouldn't make a difference to our interpretation of the text of the book. Nevertheless, knowing the author's intentions might have made a big difference to my feelings about *Shrike*.

If it was meant as a satire or even an unsympathetic portrait of a particular type of self-obsessed and obsessive man, then I loved it; it was absolutely spot on. The astonishing 5,000-word dream sequence (in a book of just 37,000 words) supports this reading, for one thing. It arrived at just the right time, too, just as the book was becoming almost unbearably maudlin. I found the book laugh-out-loud funny in other places, though I'm not sure if it was supposed to be. For example, in one crucial passage we read:

"Brett eyed the thicket curiously, as if for the hidden shrike. 'Shrike,' he said quietly, now looking about himself. 'Shrike? Where are you, Shrike? Shrike ... I think you're a god.'"

If the book's meant as a serious portrayal of a tortured artist, I'd be inclined to think it was all rather silly and overwrought – but then I thought exactly the same thing about *Notes from the Underground* and

Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. There are some comments about praying, at least, that seem to be meant seriously:

“And those who did not pray? It was none of his business, of course, but it seemed to him that they must be like people who imagine they are watched every moment of their lives, and so cannot relax their guard at any point and do anything so embarrassing as ... praying. They lived in fear of defeat by a non-existent observer – a strange attitude for those who protested more than most that there was no ultimate observer ...”

The narrator takes atheism to be a pose, rather than an honestly held belief (or an honestly held lack of belief, I should say). But then Brett is a terrible poseur, and poseurs do tend to assume that everyone else is playing the same game. It would be a naive mistake to assume that every author shares the opinions of his or her narrator, but in passages like this (and I'm aware of not being able to articulate this very well) I didn't feel any tension between the narrator and the author. It felt that the book was with Brett on that point, that this was a chunk of wisdom dropped into the text like the educational bits on Japanese literature.

So, for the time being, my opinion of the book is in the box with Schrodinger's Cat: I both liked and disliked it. Whatever happens when that box is opened, *Shrike* is undeniably a stimulating and provoking piece of writing. The critical consensus will almost certainly be that this is a very good book indeed; it just didn't quite do it for me. **6**

COMICS

Buffy the Vampire Slayer Omnibus, Vol. 4

Andi Watson et al

Dark Horse, pb, 368pp

Enjoyable stories, but pretty forgettable on the whole – evidenced by the fact that I know I've read some of these issues before, but none caused any sparks of recognition. There's too much focus on action, too little on character and dialogue. I understand why it worked out that way – how much characterisation can you manage when the show is still airing? All you can do is echo what's already been shown on screen. But one of the great things about Buffy was that things changed, and since that can't happen here a big chunk of the programme's appeal is missing. Plus, this isn't quite the Buffy of the TV series – she's too fluffy.

There's a funny bit towards the end where Angel gets strangled. His

response – “Grip... So tight... Losing air...” (p. 358) – somewhat contradicts his discovery that upon becoming a vampire (p. 235): “I... I can’t breathe!” I’ll claim a no-prize for suggesting that the soul collector’s attack in the later story is psychological rather than physical.

Despite my griping, it was still good to spend bonus time in the company of the Scooby Gang. It was like eating a packet of bourbon biscuits – enjoyable, but nothing like eating chocolate Hobnobs. **6**

The Filth

Grant Morrison

Vertigo, tpb, 320pp

Sleeper agent Greg Feely is activated in order to fight the rising tide of anti-persons in a hilarious wig. But who’s going to look after his cat while he’s away?

You get the impression here that Grant Morrison is writing the kind of comic he really wants to read, or maybe the kind of comic his characters would like to read. He seems to be having a very good time, as if the need to keep *The Invisibles* at least semi-intelligible (in order to keep enough readers to keep it going to the end) was a hobble he could cast off for this thirteen-issue series. It’s bizarre, difficult and challenging, but also very good fun. At times I got the same feeling I had when reading 2000AD as a kid: they shouldn’t really be letting me read this!

The artwork by Chris Weston is the best I’ve ever seen by him. This must have been quite a hard book to work on, and he does brilliantly. Whenever the words get overwhelming or just a bit too baffling, you can rely on the art to keep you ticking over. **8**

JSA, Vol. 7: Princes of Darkness

Geoff Johns, David S. Goyer, Leonard Kirk

DC Comics, pb, 256pp

An enjoyable book, but I’m pretty muddled now after reading a few of these JSA books out of order. Writing a review of this one a couple of weeks after I read it is quite tricky. For example, I had to look at the description on Goodreads to remind me that Eclipso, Obsidian and Mordru are the three princes of darkness in question.

But what I am sure of is that I’m already looking forward to re-reading the series in order, and that the superheroes in this book are some of

the most well-rounded (especially Power Girl, nudge-nudge), rich and interesting in the DC universe.

I rather wish that Oliver Queen, Barry Allen and Hal Jordan had been given their own group title in which to grow old gracefully, instead of being shoehorned back into their old titles. 6

GAMES

Fable II

Lionhead (dev.), Xbox 360

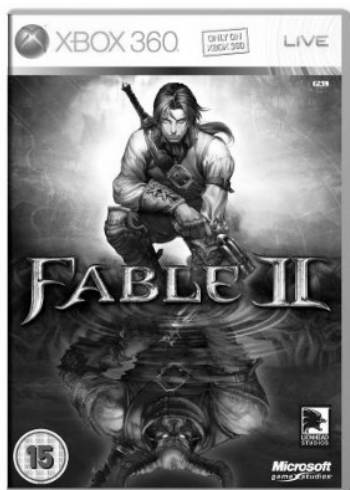
Note that this review, plus those of Dead Set, Fringe and Knight Rider, originally appeared in slightly different form in Prism, the newsletter of the British Fantasy Society.

Fable II is an action role-playing game set in the medieval fantasy world of Albion. It welds the simple action of a game like Viking: Battle for Asgard and the character interactions of The Sims to an RPG structure that plays like a hugely simplified and truncated version of Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion. That isn't to say it's a bad game. It's a lot of fun, the design is wonderful, and the voice work is excellent (in particular Stephen Fry, who should play evil more often).

But it's underwhelming, far too short, and anticlimactic. You spend most of the main quest gathering the three other great heroes of the age, but once you've pulled them together they help you in one big battle and that's pretty much it for them. You're left with the feeling that you could probably have sorted everything out without their help. And once that's done, the game pretty much dribbles away...

Oblivion, on the other hand, had several separate quest threads, some of them nearly as substantial as the main story. What quests there are in Fable II lack variety (as do the clothes, weapons, people and creatures) – nearly every mission is simply a matter of whacking a few baddies with a weapon. Never mind Oblivion, Fable II is substantially shorter than even Mass Effect, and even then it's padded out by collectathons and chores. A few days in, and even the holiest of heroes may find themselves trying to persuade their wives into a ménage à cinq, just to give themselves something to do.

The game world is described as open, but it's actually very limited – the landscapes are beautiful, but you're nearly always restricted to narrow pathways. There is very little of the joyous bounding across the



landscape that characterises a truly open game world. That's reflected in the maps – a series of tiny, discrete discs that are pretty much useless for anything.

Its biggest strength, aside from offering an accessible role-playing experience to newcomers to the genre, is probably that it really does feel like *role-playing*. In many RPGs the main character is little more than a cursor that you move around the screen. To an extent that's true of your avatar in this game (the customisation options are very limited), but what truly takes you

into the role is the interaction with other characters (silly as it can be), and especially with your family. Playing as a female character, I picked up a husband quite early on; you realise the game has *something* special to it once find yourself thinking, "I must go and see my husband" or "Why isn't my husband wearing the new shirt I gave him?"

But its most innovative elements are also its most ludicrous – you can walk up to almost any stranger, and (as long as they swing the right way) get a proposal of marriage out of them after five minutes of farting, whistling and sock puppetry. You can take a job to pay the bills, but a well-qualified bartender can earn enough in a single night to buy the entire pub. You can get married, but even if your spouse is ready to divorce you for a lack of sex you will struggle to do anything about it until you buy a special book which teaches you how to say "Come back to my place". You carry on earning rent from the properties you own, even when the Xbox is off – but as a result the best way to progress is often to stop playing!

The game is already notorious for some of its bugs. (Listen to the abbot when he's talking to you – if you don't the game is said to break entirely!) I was hit by only one, but it was a heartbreaker: my daughter wandered into a dangerous cave, but wouldn't follow me out, and when I tried to go back in to get her the mission reset. After several attempts I had to leave her there to be feasted on by goblins, after which the game criticised my parenting skills. I still haven't been home to face my husband. (Though my three wives have been very consoling, both individually and in concert.)

Overall, a great rental: it's good fun, but you'll have seen most that it has to offer after a week or so of playing it. 7

TELEVISION

Dead Set

Charlie Brooker (writer), E4

The idea behind *Dead Set* is that the Big Brother compound would be as safe a place as any in the event of a zombie attack. Though the writer of *Dead Set*, Charlie Brooker, is best known for his comedy writing – notably *TV Go Home*, the under-rated Nathan Barley and the unmissable *Screen Burn* – this is an 18-rated drama with a satirical edge and some incidental humour, much like the original *Dawn of the Dead*, rather than an outright comedy

A zombie film set entirely in the Big Brother house didn't seem like a brilliant idea when first announced – the potential for cheesiness was immense – but it gives the programme something that's a huge benefit for any survival horror (or indeed any battle sequence): a convincing sense of place. We know the layout of the house interior, the way the camera runs surround it, and the way it's all fenced off. If the viewer already knows the layout, they don't waste any time trying to figure it out, and can spend all their time being scared. That's where the special edition of *Aliens* wins out over the original version, and it turns out to be one of *Dead Set*'s greatest strengths.

The satire is of Big Brother itself, and is surprisingly harsh given the appearance of Davina McCall and the use of the actual Big Brother house, logo and music – for example there's a scene where a producer literally rips the flesh from a contestant to feed him to the “public” as a distraction. Big Brother at its best is all about getting under the skin of contestants, and at its worst is all about throwing them to the mob – well done to Brooker for realising how well both elements lend themselves to zombie horror.

Dead Set is really well made, with a very strong cast. The director is perhaps a little too fond of *28 Days Later* and its sequel, but there are worse films to imitate. Simon Pegg, writing in *The Guardian*, has criticised *Dead Set*'s zombies for running around (in imitation of the infected in those movies), but from what Brooker wrote in the same newspaper

it sounds like the running got the programme into production after a long delay, so it would be unfair to be too critical on that point.

As a television event, it's likely to be remembered by the general public for its premise rather than its plot or characters, but like the BBC's *Ghostwatch*, that premise is good enough to ensure that it *will* be remembered.

It was scary, exciting, well-made and very unusual for British television, but it's unlikely to knock the socks off aficionados of zombie horror. *Dead Set* is a skilled, frightening entertainment rather than a wholesale reinvention of the genre. **8**

Fringe

Fox, Episodes 1–5

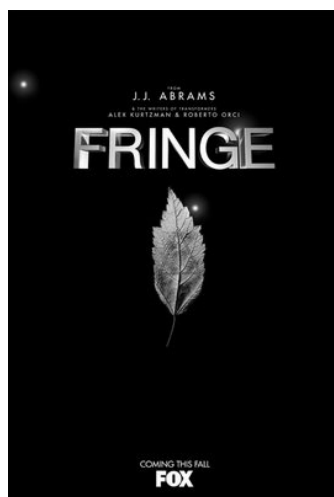
The premise: Olivia Dunham is an FBI agent who investigates strange events with the help of addle-pated scientist Walter Bishop and his estranged son Peter. As you might expect, the strange events turn out to be connected.

Fringe begins well, with a very good pilot. The budget is huge, there's lots going on, and it all looks astonishingly lovely. Going on the evidence here, there's nowhere in the world so lovely as Boston under snow. Subsequent episodes, though, have tended to be ever so slightly boring. Crucially, there are about twenty minutes in the middle of every episode where they get bogged down in some ludicrous experiment; that's the twenty minutes that would be spent running around fighting monsters in *The X-Files* or *Supernatural*.

But all it would take to fix that problem would be one good script. *Fringe*'s bigger problem lies in its characters and their dynamics.

John Noble, as Walter Bishop, would be the best reason to watch the programme at the moment if it wasn't so frustrating to spend half the episode stuck in the laboratory with him. He's funny, annoying and driven, and if you've ever rued the fact that an older actor is unlikely to play the Doctor in the current series, you'll enjoy this performance.

Olivia begins well, as a very strong (if somewhat irrational) character, but tails off quickly, and by episode five is asking some truly idiotic expository questions.



The bigger problem, though, is that they desperately need to give Joshua Jackson (as Peter) something to do. Ever since Dawson's Creek it's been clear that he's a charismatic actor with a lot of potential. Fringe needs to give him a gun and let him be a protagonist – let him be a man instead of just his dad's son. At the moment the male lead is a moaner and a follower, and they need to change that. Hopefully episode four, though not a great episode in itself, marked something of a turning point in that regard.

What you have here is pretty much the Hartnell Doctor with Ian and Barbara. But the Doctor can't leave the Tardis, Chesterton has to babysit him there and doesn't get to beat anyone up, and Barbara goes off on her own into adventures for which she's rather ill-equipped.

Fringe is also reminiscent of more recent Doctor Who – Walter Bishop, like the seventh and tenth Doctors, already knows everything about every problem they encounter. In Doctor Who that's a shortcut to get the action moving, but in Fringe half of each episode is spent waiting for Bishop to remember the things he already knows; solving the case is just a matter of waiting for him to recall his original research. They can't keep doing that for long before it becomes very annoying.

One other problem is that the music needs to be toned down. At the moment the drama of every scene is amped up ridiculously by the soundtrack, leaving you too often with the feeling that something exciting is going to happen, and an entirely unnecessary sense of disappointment when it doesn't.

J.J. Abrams' name is the one being used to sell the programme, but it's just as interesting to see Darin Morgan, an X-Files graduate, turn up in the credits. Like Supernatural, another programme providing a home for ex-X-Files staff, Fringe faces the challenge of finding fresh territory: the X-Files ran for nine seasons, there isn't much it didn't do. Supernatural has found its feet with a grand Moorcockian clash between law and chaos (and a good deal of humour, thanks to Ben Edlund), while Fringe's fresh territory seems to be corporate villainy: in particular, what if Microsoft had technologies they weren't telling us about? Not exactly thrilling stuff.

Fringe has been picked up for a full series, which is a good thing. It could easily have gone to the same early death as Threshold, another show that just couldn't kick some bad habits, despite excellent production values, great behind-the-scenes pedigree and a strong cast. If Fringe continues to move in the right direction, it could be a great show, but for now it's just a very pretty one. The snow in this programme is second-to-none! **6**

Knight Rider

NBC, Episodes 0–6

In this sequel to the original series Mike Traceur (he soon adopts the Knight surname) is played by Joey Tribbiani. Some readers may remember him from *Days of Our Lives* or from *Mac and C.H.E.E.S.E.*, or for his role opposite Gary Oldman in...

Okay, so really he's played by Justin Bruening, but you'll be hard pushed to spot the difference – and that's not *totally* meant as a criticism. As the episodes roll on, Mike and KITT (played by Val Kilmer) develop a comfortable tough guy/soft boy chemistry that isn't a million miles away from Joey and Chandler.

This version of KITT has more tricks than *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*. He's often compared to the Cylons, but the technology in this programme leaves that in *BSG* way behind: for example in episode two KITT reveals his 3-D object generator, a magic glove box! As the occasion demands, KITT's a tank, a CSI lab or a submarine, and I'm sure that by the end of the season we'll see him flying into space. That's part of the fun – there's a Thunderbird 2 factor, in that you never know what the gimmick will be in each episode.

As to the actual episodes, the initial two-hour pilot was dreadful and dull, but since then the programme has slowly but steadily improved, in entertainment value if not quality. A *Fast and the Furious* episode was followed by a *Point Break* episode, and then by another that had a touch of *Queen & Country* about it. Bikinis make frequent appearances.

There are lots of signs of behind-the-scenes wrangling. For example, in episode one Mike's death is publicly staged, but then in episode two he bumps into an old friend, blowing the secret identity out of the water. There are two sets of cast members in the backroom staff – those from the pilot, and then those brought in for the ongoing series, which makes the base seem rather overstuffed. (In fact, as I write this it's been announced that three of the cast – the three oldest, of course – are to be axed for the second half of season one.) Unlike some programmes, though, the changes seem so far to be taking *Knight Rider* in the right direction.

Like the original, this is a programme about a big doofus with a cool car getting into trouble. It's dumb but fun. It would be a tragedy if everything on US TV went back to being this stupid and silly, but there should be room on the schedules for an hour of daft action. And it gets some things right: in contrast to *Fringe*, say, the heroes do at least take an active and determined role in events.

If the programme has nothing else to recommend it, in episode six it joins Family Guy, The Middleman and The Big Bang Theory in paying tribute this year to Doctor Who. A transparent attempt to win over the geeks who have been giving Knight Rider so much grief? Probably, but it went down very well in our house! 5

ALSO RECEIVED

But Not Yet Reviewed

There are always a few things in for review that we don't get around to reading on time, or sometimes that we don't manage to finish. Here's a quick round-up (with excuses and apologies). As I think they say at *Interzone*, a mention here doesn't preclude a full review later on.

Open Grave: the Book of Horror is a collection of ten stories by Jeani Rector. It has a very nice cover from Bruce W. Cashman. For more details see www.opengravenovel.com. It came all the way from America, so I feel a bit guilty for not reviewing it yet. I'll try to get around to it eventually.

Triangulation: Taking Flight is an anthology edited by Pete Butler. It has a smashing cover by BFA winner Vincent Chong. For more details see www.parsecink.org. I read so many short stories for TQF and *Dark Horizons* that I find it hard to get stuck into anthologies and other magazines – I can't help reading the stories for errors and suitability rather than fun – but I enjoyed the first couple in here.

GUD issue three looks very good and I enjoyed what I read of it. *GUD* is one of the more ambitious small press magazines around, both in literary terms and with regard to the amount of effort and money they're putting into it.

From PS Publishing this month we also received *Gunpowder* by Joe Hill, *Harsh Oases* by Paul Di Filippo, and *Postscripts 17*, which are all waiting for me on the Rocket eBook.

A Quest for the Holy Ale is the first novel by Gene Rowe and Andrew Schofield, a 500pp comic fantasy. I may not get through all of it in time to do a timely review, but it looks like a lot of fun, and as my co-editor observed, it's likely to find an audience: there's quite a lot of crossover between fantasy fans and real ale drinkers. Why, I remember last year's Annual General Meeting of the British Fantasy Society, a very sedate affair until the agenda reached the absence of real ale at the convention...

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Rafe McGregor's new novel will be released by Robert Hale Ltd (www.halebooks.com) on 27 February 2009.

