

# The Thousand Worlds

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# The Hero

The city was dead and the flames of its passing spread a red stain across the green-gray sky.

It had been a long time dying. Resistance had lasted almost a week and the fighting had been bitter for a while. But in the end the invaders had broken the defenders, as they had broken so many others in the past. The alien sky with its double sun did not bother them. They had fought and won under skies of azure blue and speckled gold and inky black.

The Weather Control boys had hit first, while the main force was still hundreds of miles to the east. Storm after storm had flailed at the streets of the city, to slow defensive preparations and smash the spirit of resistance.

When they were closer the invaders had sent up howlers. Unending high-pitched shrieks had echoed back and forth both day and night and before long most of the populace had fled in demoralized panic. By then the attackers' main force was in range and launched plague bombs on a steady westward wind.

Even then the natives had tried to fight back. From their defensive emplacements ringing the city the survivors had sent up a hail of atomics, managing to vaporize one whole company whose defensive screens were overloaded by the sudden assault. But the gesture was a feeble one at best. By that time incendiary bombs were raining down steadily upon the city and great clouds of acid-gas were blowing across the plains.

And behind the gas, the dreaded assault squads of the Terran Expeditionary Force moved on the last defenses.

Kagen scowled at the dented plastoid helmet at his feet and cursed his luck. A routine mopping-up detail, he thought. A perfectly routine operation - and some damned automatic interceptor emplacement somewhere had lobbed a low-grade atomic at him.

It had been only a near miss but the shock waves had damaged his hip rockets and knocked him out of the sky, landing him in this godforsaken little ravine east of the city. His light plastoid battle armor had protected him from the impact but his helmet had taken a good whack.

Kagen squatted and picked up the dented helmet to examine it. His long-range com and all of his sensory equipment were out. With his rockets gone, too, he was crippled, deaf, dumb and half-blind. He swore.

A flicker of movement along the top of the shallow ravine caught his attention. Five natives came suddenly into view, each carrying a hair-trigger submachine gun. They carried them at the ready, trained on Kagen. They were fanned out in line, covering him from both right and left. One began to speak.

He never finished. One instant, Kagen's screech gun lay on the rocks at his feet. Quite suddenly it was in his hand.

Five men will hesitate where one alone will not. During the brief flickering instant before the natives' fingers began to tighten on their triggers, Kagen did not pause, Kagen did not hesitate, Kagen did not think.

Kagen killed.

The screech gun emitted a loud, ear-piercing shriek. The enemy squad leader shuddered as the invisible beam of concentrated high-frequency sound ripped into him. Then his flesh began to liquefy. By then Kagen's gun had found two more targets.

The guns of the two remaining natives finally began to chatter. A rain of bullets enveloped Kagen as he whirled to his right and he grunted under the impact as the shots caromed off his battle armor. His screech gun leveled - and a random shot sent it spinning from his grasp.

Kagen did not hesitate or pause as the gun was wrenched from his grip. He bounded to the top of the shallow ravine with one leap, directly toward one of the soldiers.

The man wavered briefly and brought up his gun. The instant was all Kagen needed. With all the momentum of his leap behind it, his right hand smashed the gun butt into the enemy's face and his left, backed by fifteen hundred pounds of force, hammered into the native's body right under the breastbone.

Kagen seized the corpse and heaved it toward the second native, who had ceased fire briefly as his comrade came between himself and Kagen. Now his bullets tore into the airborne body. He took a quick step back, his gun level and firing.

And then Kagen was on him. Kagen knew a searing flash of pain as a shot bruised his temple.

He ignored it, drove the edge of his hand into the native's throat. The man toppled, lay still. Kagen spun, still reacting, searching for the next foe.

He was alone.

Kagen bent and wiped the blood from his hand with a piece of the native's uniform. He frowned in disgust. It was going to be a long trek back to camp, he thought, tossing the blood-soaked rag casually to the ground.

Today was definitely not his lucky day.

He grunted dismally, then scrambled back down into the ravine to recover his screech gun and helmet for the hike.

On the horizon, the city was still burning.

Ragelli's voice was loud and cheerful as it came crackling over the short-range communicator nestled in Kagen's fist.

"So it's you, Kagen," he said laughing. "You signaled just in time. My sensors were starting to pick up something. Little closer and I would've screeched you down."

“My helmet’s busted and the sensors are out,” Kagen replied. “Damn hard to judge distance. Long-range com is busted, too.”

“The brass was wondering what happened to you,” Ragelli cut in. “Made ‘em sweat a little. But I figured you’d turn up sooner or later.”

“Right,” Kagen said. “One of these mudworms zapped the hell out of my rockets and it took me a while to get back. But I’m coming in now.”

He emerged slowly from the crater he had crouched in, coming in sight of the guard in the distance. He took it slow and easy.

Outlined against the outpost barrier, Ragelli lifted a ponderous silver-gray arm in greeting. He was armored completely in a full duralloy battlesuit that made Kagen’s plastoid armor look like tissue paper, and sat in the trigger-seat of a swiveling screechgun battery. A bubble of defensive screens enveloped him, turning his massive figure into an indistinct blur.

Kagen waved back and began to eat up the distance between them with long, loping strides. He stopped just in front of the barrier, at the foot of Ragelli’s emplacement.

“You look damned battered,” said Ragelli, appraising him from behind a plastoid visor, aided by his sensory devices. “That light armor doesn’t buy you a nickel’s worth of protection. Any farm boy with a pea shooter can plug you.”

Kagen laughed. “At least I can move. You may be able to stand off an Assault Squad in that duralloy monkey suit, but I’d like to see you do anything on offense, chum. And defense doesn’t win wars.’ Your pot,” Ragelli said. “This sentry duty is boring as hell.” He flicked a switch on his control panel and a section of the barrier winked out. Kagen was through it at once. A split second later it came back on again.

Kagen strode quickly to his squad barracks. The door slid open automatically as he approached it and he stepped inside gratefully. It felt good to be home again and back at his normal weight. These light gravity mudholes made him queasy after a while. The barracks were artificially maintained at Wellington-normal gravity, twice Earth-normal. It was expensive but the brass kept saying that nothing was too good for the comfort of our fighting men.

Kagen stripped off his plastoid armor in the squad ready room and tossed it into the replacement bin. He headed straight for his cubicle and sprawled across the bed.

Reaching over to the plain metal table alongside his bed, he yanked open a drawer and took out a fat greenish capsule. He swallowed it hastily, and lay back to relax as it took hold throughout his system. The regulations prohibited taking synthastim between meals, he knew, but the rule was never enforced. Like most troopers, Kagen took it almost continuously to maintain his speed and endurance at maximum.

He was dozing comfortably a few minutes later when the com box mounted on the wall above his bed came to sudden life.

“Kagen.”

Kagen sat up instantly, wide awake. “Acknowledged,” he said.

“Report to Major Grady at once.”

Kagen grinned broadly. His request was being acted on quickly, he thought. And by a high officer, no less. Dressing quickly in loose-fitting brown fatigues, he set off across the base.

The high officers’ quarters were at the center of the outpost. They consisted of a brightly lit, three-story building, blanketed overhead by defensive screens and ringed by guardsmen in light battle armor. One of the guards recognized Kagen and he was admitted on orders.

Immediately beyond the door he halted briefly as a bank of sensors scanned him for weapons.

Troopers, of course, were not allowed to bear arms in the presence of high officers. Had he been carrying a screech gun alarms would have gone off all over the building while the tractor beams hidden in the walls and ceilings immobilized him completely.

But he passed the inspection and continued down the long corridor toward Major Grady’s office. A third of the way down, the first set of tractor beams locked firmly onto his wrists. He struggled the instant he felt the invisible touch against his skin — but the tractors held him steady. Others, triggered automatically by his passing, came on as he continued down the corridor.

Kagen cursed under his breath and fought with his impulse to resist. He hated being pinned by tractor beams, but those were the rules if you wanted to see a high officer.

The door opened before him and he stepped through. A full bank of tractor beams seized him instantly and immobilized him. A few adjusted slightly and he was snapped to rigid attention, although his muscles screamed resistance.

Major Carl Grady was working at a cluttered wooden desk a few feet away, scribbling something on a sheet of paper. A large stack of papers rested at his elbow, an old-fashioned laser pistol sitting on top of them as a paperweight.

Kagen recognized the laser. It was some sort of heirloom, passed down in Grady’s family for generations. The story was that some ancestor of his had used it back on Earth, in the Fire Wars of the early twenty- first century. Despite its age, the thing was still supposed to be in working order.

After several minutes of silence Grady finally set down his pen and looked up at Kagen. He was unusually young for a high officer but his unruly gray hair made him look older than he was. Like all high officers, he was Earth-born; frail and slow before the assault squad troopers from the dense, heavy gravity War Worlds of Wellington and Rommel.

“Report your presence,” Grady said curtly. As always, his lean, pale face mirrored immense boredom.

“Field Officer John Kagen, assault squads, Terran Expeditionary Force.”

Grady nodded, not really listening. He opened one of his desk drawers and extracted a sheet of paper.

“Kagen,” he said, fiddling with the paper, “I think you know why you’re here.” He tapped the paper with his finger. “What’s the meaning of this?”

“Just what it says, Major,” Kagen replied. He tried to shift his weight but the tractor beams held him rigid.

Grady noticed and gestured impatiently. “At rest,” he said. Most of the tractor beams snapped off, leaving Kagen free to move, if only at half his normal speed. He flexed in relief and grinned.

“My term of enlistment is up within two weeks, Major. I don’t plan to reenlist. So I’ve requested transportation to Earth. That’s all there is to it.”

Grady’s eyebrows arched a fraction of an inch but the dark eyes beneath them remained bored.

“Really?” he asked. “You’ve been a soldier for almost twenty years now, Kagen. Why retire? I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

Kagen shrugged. “I don’t know. I’m getting old. Maybe I’m just getting tired of camp life. It’s all starting to get boring, taking one damn mudhole after another. I want something different. Some excitement.”

Grady nodded. “I see. But I don’t think I agree with you, Kagen.” His voice was soft and persuasive. “I think you’re underselling the T.E.F. There is excitement ahead, if you’ll only give us a chance.” He leaned back in his chair, toying with a pencil he had picked up. “I’ll tell you something, Kagen. You know, we’ve been at war with the Hrangan Empire for nearly three decades now. Direct clashes between us and the enemy have been few and far between up to now. Do you know why?”

“Sure,” Kagen said.

Grady ignored him. “I’ll tell you why,” he continued. “So far each of us has been struggling to consolidate his position by grabbing these little worlds in the border regions. These mudholes, as you call them. But they’re very important mudholes. We need them for bases, for their raw materials, for their industrial capacity and for the conscript labor they provide. That’s why we try to minimize damage in our campaigns. And that’s why we use psychwar tactics like the howlers. To frighten away as many natives as possible before each attack. To preserve labor.”

“I know all that,” Kagen interrupted with typical Wellington bluntness. “What of it? I didn’t come here for a lecture.”

Grady looked up from the pencil. “No,” he said. “No, you didn’t. So I’ll tell you, Kagen. The prelims are over. It’s time for the main event. There are only a handful of unclaimed worlds left. Soon now, we’ll be coming into direct conflict with the Hrangan Conquest Corps. Within a year we’ll be attacking their bases.”

The major stared at Kagen expectantly, waiting for a reply. When none came, a puzzled look flickered across his face. He leaned forward again.

“Don’t you understand, Kagen?” he asked. “What more excitement could you want? No more fighting these piddling civilians in uniform, with their dirty little atomics and their primitive projectile guns. The Hrangans are a real enemy. Like us, they’ve had a professional army for generations upon generations. They’re soldiers, born and bred. Good ones, too. They’ve got screens and modern weapons. They’ll be foes to give our assault squads a real test.”

“Maybe,” Kagen said doubtfully. “But that kind of excitement isn’t what I had in mind. I’m getting old. I’ve noticed that I’m definitely slower lately - even synthastim isn’t keeping up my speed.”

Grady shook his head. “You’ve got one of the best records in the whole T.E.F., Kagen. You’ve received the Stellar Cross twice and the World Congress Decoration three times. Every com station on Earth carried the story when you saved the landing party on Torego. Why should you doubt your effectiveness now? We’re going to need men like you against the Hrangans. Reenlist.”

“No,” said Kagen emphatically. “The regs say you’re entitled to your pension after twenty years and those medals have earned me a nice bunch of retirement bonuses. Now I want to enjoy them.” He grinned broadly. “As you say, everyone on Earth must know me. I’m a hero. With that reputation, I figure I can have a real screechout”

Grady frowned and drummed on the desk impatiently. “I know what the regulations say, Kagen. But no one ever really retires — you must know that. Most troopers prefer to stay with the front. That’s their job. That’s what the War Worlds are all about.”

“I don’t really care, Major,” Kagen replied. “I know the regs and I know I have a right to retire on full pension. You can’t stop me.”

Grady considered the statement calmly, his eyes dark with thought.

“All right,” he said after a long pause. “Let’s be reasonable about this. You’ll retire with full pension and bonuses. We’ll set you down on Wellington in a place of your own. Or Rommel if you like. We’ll make you a youth barracks director - any age group you like. Or a training camp director. With your record you can start right at the top.”

“Uh-uh,” Kagen said firmly. “Not Wellington. Not Rommel. Earth.”

“But why? You were born and raised on Wellington - in one of the hill barracks, I believe. You’ve never seen Earth.”

“True,” said Kagen. “But I’ve seen it in camp telecasts and flicks. I like what I’ve seen. I’ve been reading about Earth a lot lately, too. So now I want to see what it’s like.” He paused, then grinned again. “Let’s just say I want to see what I’ve been fighting for.”

Grady’s frown reflected his displeasure. “I’m from Earth, Kagen,” he said. “I tell you, you won’t like it. You won’t fit in. The gravity is too low - and there are no artificial heavy gravity barracks to take shelter in. Synthastim is illegal, strictly prohibited. But War Worlders need it, so you’ll have to pay exorbitant prices to get the stuff. Earthers aren’t reaction trained, either. They’re a different kind of people. Go back to Wellington. You’ll be among your own kind.”

“Maybe that’s one of the reasons I want Earth,” Kagen said stubbornly. “On Wellington I’m just one of hundreds of old vets. Hell, every one of the troopers who does retire heads back to his old barracks. But on Earth I’ll be a celebrity. Why, I’ll be the fastest, strongest guy on the whole damn planet. That’s got to have some advantages.”

Grady was starting to look agitated. “What about the gravity?” he demanded. “The synthastim?”

“I’ll get used to light gravity after a while, that’s no problem. And I won’t be needing that much speed and endurance, so I figure I can kick the synthastim habit.”

Grady ran his fingers through his unkempt hair and shook his head doubtfully. There was a long, awkward silence. He leaned across the desk.

And, suddenly, his hand darted towards the laser pistol.

Kagen reacted. He dove forward, delayed only slightly by the few tractor beams that still held him; His hand flashed toward Grady’s wrist in a crippling arc.

And suddenly wrenched to a halt as the tractor beams seized Kagen roughly, held him rigid and then smashed him to the floor.

Grady, his hand frozen halfway to the pistol, leaned back in the chair. His face was white and shaken. He raised his hand and the tractor beams let up a bit. Kagen climbed slowly to his feet.

“You see, Kagen,” said Grady. “That little test proves you’re as fit as ever. You’d have gotten me if I hadn’t kept a few tractors on you to slow you down. I tell you, we need men with your training and experience. We need you against the Hrangans. Reenlist.”

Kagen’s cold blue eyes still seethed with anger. “Damn the Hrangans,” he said. “I’m not reenlisting and no goddamn little tricks of yours are going to make me change my mind. I’m going to Earth. You can’t stop me.”

Grady buried his face in his hands and sighed.

“All right, Kagen,” he said at last. “You win. I’ll put through your request.” He looked up one more time, and his dark eyes looked strangely troubled. “You’ve been a great soldier, Kagen. We’ll miss you. I tell you that you’ll regret this decision. Are you sure you won’t reconsider?”

“Absolutely sure,” Kagen snapped.

The strange look suddenly vanished from Grady’s eyes. His face once more took on the mask of bored indifference.

“Very well,” he said curtly. “You are dismissed.”

The tractors stayed on Kagen as he turned. They guided him — very firmly from the building



“You ready, Kagen?” Ragelli asked, leaning casually against the door of the cubicle.

Kagen picked up his small travel bag and threw one last glance around to make sure he hadn't forgotten anything. He hadn't. The room was quite bare.

“Guess so,” he said, stepping through the door.

Ragelli slipped on the plastoid helmet that had been cradled under his arm and hurried to catch up as Kagen strode down the corridor.

“I guess this is it,” he said as he matched strides.

“Yeah,” Kagen replied. “A week from now I'll be taking it easy back on Earth while you're getting blisters on your tail sitting around in that damned duralloy tuxedo of yours.”

Ragelli laughed. “Maybe,” he said. “But I still say you're nuts to go to Earth of all places, when you could command a whole damned training camp on Wellington. Assuming you wanted to quit at all, which is also crazy—“

The barracks door slid open before them and they stepped through, Ragelli still talking. A second guard flanked Kagen on the other side. Like Ragelli, he was wearing light battle armor.

Kagen himself was in full dress whites, trimmed with gold braid. A ceremonial laser, deactivated, was slung in a black leather holster at his side. Matching leather boots and a polished steel helmet set off the uniform. Azure blue bars on his shoulder signified field officer rank. His medals jangled against his chest as he walked.

Kagen's entire third assault squad was drawn up at attention on the spacefield behind the barracks in honor of his retirement. Alongside the ramp to the shuttlecraft, a group of high officers stood by, cordoned off by defensive screens. Major Grady was in the front row, his bored expression blurred somewhat by the screens.

Flanked by the two guards, Kagen walked across the concrete slowly, grinning under his helmet. Piped music welled out over the field, and Kagen recognized the T.E.F. battle hymn and the Wellington anthem.

At the foot of the ramp he turned and looked back. The company spread out before him saluted in unison on a command from the high officers and held position until Kagen returned the salute. Then one of the squad's other field officers stepped forward, and presented him with his discharge papers.

Jamming them into his belt, Kagen threw a quick, casual wave to Ragelli, then hurried up the ramp. It lifted slowly behind him.

Inside the ship, a crewman greeted him with a curt nod. “Got special quarters prepared for you,” he said. “Follow me. Trip should only take about fifteen minutes. Then we'll transfer you to a starship for the Earth trip.”

Kagen nodded and followed the man to his quarters. They turned out to be a plain, empty room, reinforced with duralloy plates. A viewscreen covered one wall. An acceleration couch faced it.

Alone, Kagen sprawled out on the acceleration couch, clipping his helmet to a holder on the side. Tractor beams pressed down gently, holding him firmly in place for the liftoff.

A few minutes later a dull roar came from deep within the ship and Kagen felt several gravities press down upon him as the shuttlecraft took off. The viewscreen, suddenly coming to life, showed the planet dwindling below.

The viewer blinked off when they reached orbit. Kagen started to sit up but found he still could not move. The tractor beams held him pinned to the couch.

He frowned. There was no need for him to stay in the couch once the craft was in orbit. Some idiot had forgotten to release him.

“Hey,” he shouted, figuring there would be a com box somewhere in the room. “These tractors are still on. Loosen the damned things so I can move a little.”

No one answered.

He strained against the beams. Their pressure seemed to increase. The blasted things were starting to pinch a little, he thought. Now those morons were turning the knob the wrong way.

He cursed under his breath. “No,” he shouted. “Now the tractors are getting heavier. You’re adjusting them the wrong way.”

But the pressure continued to climb and he felt more beams locking on him, until they covered his body like an invisible blanket. The damn things were really starting to hurt now.

“You idiots,” he yelled. “You morons. Cut it out, you bastards.” With a surge of anger he strained against the beams, cursing. But even Wellington-bred muscle was no match for tractors. He was held tightly to the couch.

One of the beams was trained on his chest pocket. Its pressure was driving his Stellar Cross painfully into his skin. The sharp edge of the polished medal had already sliced through the uniform and he could see a red stain spreading slowly through the white.

The pressure continued to mount and Kagen writhed in pain, squirming against his invisible shackles. It did no good. The pressure still went higher and more and more beams came on.

“Cut it out!” he screeched. “You bastards, I’ll rip you apart when I get out of here. You’re killing me, dammit!”

He heard the sharp snap of a bone suddenly breaking under the strain. Kagen felt a stab of intense pain in his right wrist. An instant later there was another snap.

“Cut it out!” he cried, his voice shrill with pain. “You’re killing me. Damn you, you’re killing me!”

And suddenly he realized he was right.

Grady looked up with a scowl at the aide who entered the office. "Yes? What is it?"

The aide, a young Earther in training for high officer rank, saluted briskly. "We just got the report from the shuttlecraft, sir. It's all over. They want to know what to do with the body."

"Space it," Grady replied. "Good as anything." A thin smile flickered across his face and he shook his head. "Too bad. Kagen was a good man in combat but his psych training must have slipped somewhere. We should send a strong note back to his barracks conditioner. Though it's funny it didn't show up until now."

He shook his head again. "Earth," he said. "For a moment he even had me wondering if it was possible. But when I tested him with my laser, I knew. No way, no way." He shuddered a little. "As if we'd ever let a War Worlder loose on Earth." Then he turned back to his paperwork.

As the aide turned to leave, Grady looked up again.

"One other thing," he said. "Don't forget to send that PR release back to Earth. Make it War-Hero- Dies-When-Hrangans-Blast-Ship. Jazz it up good. Some of the big com networks should pick it up and it'll make good publicity. And forward his medals to Wellington. They'll want them for his barracks museum."

The aide nodded and Grady returned to his work. He still looked quite bored.

# Men of Greywater Station

The men of Greywater Station watched the shooting star descend and they knew it for an omen. They watched it in silence from the laser turret atop the central tower. The streak grew bright in the northeast sky, divided the night though the thin haze of the spore dust. It went through the zenith, sank, fell below the western horizon.

Sheridan, the bullet-headed zoologist was the first to speak. "There they went," he said, unnecessarily.

Delvecchio shook his head. "There they are," he said, turning towards the others. There were only five there, of the seven who were left. Sanderpay and Miterz were still outside collecting samples.

"They'll make it," Delvecchio said firmly. "Took too long crossing the sky to burn up like a meteor. I hope we got a triangulation on them with the radar. They came in slow enough to maybe make it through the crash."

Reyn, the youngest of the men at Greywater, looked up from the radar console and nodded "I got them, all right. Though it's a wonder they slowed enough before hitting the atmosphere. From the little that got through jamming, they must have hit pretty hard out there."

"If they live, it puts us in a difficult position," said Delvecchio. "I'm not quite sure what comes next."

"I am," said Sheridan. "We get ready to fight. If anybody lives through the landing, we've got to get ready to take them on. They'll be crawling with fungus before they get here. And you know they'll come. We'll have to kill them."

Delvecchio eyed Sheridan with new distaste. The zoologist was always very vocal with his ideas. That didn't make it any easier for Delvecchio, who then had to end the arguments that Sheridan's ideas usually started "Any other suggestions?" he asked, looking to the others.

Reyn looked hopeful. "We might try rescuing them before the fungus takes over." He gestured toward the window, and the swampy, fungus-clotted landscape beyond. "We could maybe take one of the flyers to them, shuttle them back to the station, put them in the sterilization ward..." Then his words trailed off, and he ran a hand nervously through his thick black hair. "No. There'd be too many of them. We'd have to make so many trips. And the swampbats...I don't know."

"The vaccine," suggested Granowitz, the wiry extee psychologist. "Bring them some vaccine in a flyer. Then they might be able to walk in."

"The vaccine doesn't work right," Sheridan said. "People build up an immunity, the protection wears off. Besides, who's going to take it to them? You? Remember the last time we took a flyer out? The damn swampbats knocked it to bits. We lost Blatt and Ryerson. The Fungus has kept us out of the air for nearly eight months now. So what makes you think it's all of a sudden going to give us a free pass to fly away into the sunset?"

"We've got to try," Reyn said hotly. From his tone, Delvecchio could see there was going to be a hell of an argument. Put Sheridan on one side of a fight and immediately Reyn was on the other.

“Those are men out there, you know,” Reyn continued. “I think Ike’s right. We can get them some vaccine. At least there’s a chance. We can fight the swampbats. But those poor bastards out there don’t have a chance against the fungus.”

“They don’t have a chance whatever we do,” Sheridan said “It’s us we should worry about. They’re finished. By now the fungus knows they’re there. It’s probably already attacking them. If any survived.”

“That seems to be the problem,” said Delvecchio quickly, before Reyn could jump in again. “We have to assume some will survive. We also have to assume the fungus won’t miss a chance to take them over. And that it will send them against us.”

“Right!” said Sheridan, shaking his head vigorously. “And don’t forget, these aren’t ordinary people we’re dealing with. That was a troop transport up there. The survivors will be armed to the teeth. What do we have besides the turret laser? Hunting rifles and specimen guns. And knives. Against screechers and 75 mikemikes and God knows what else. We’re finished if we’re not ready. Finished.”

“Well, Jim?” Granowicz asked. “Is he right? What do you think our chances are?”

Delvecchio signed. Being the leader wasn’t always a very comfortable position. “I know how you feel, Bill,” he said with a nod to Reyn. “But I’m afraid I have to agree with Sheridan. Your scheme doesn’t have much of a chance. And there are bigger stakes. If the survivors have screechers and heavy armament, they’ll be able to breach the station walls. You all know what that would mean. Our supply ship is due in a month. If the fungus gets into Greywater, then Earth won’t have to worry about the Fyndii anymore. The fungus would put a permanent stop to the war - it doesn’t like its hosts to fight each other.”

Sheridan was nodding again. “Yes. So we have to destroy the survivors. It’s the only way.”

Andrews, the quiet little mycologist, spoke up for the first time. “We might try to capture them,” he suggested. “I’ve been experimenting with methods of killing the fungus without damaging the hosts. We could keep them under sedation until I got somewhere.”

“How many years would that take?” Sheridan snapped.

Delvecchio cut in. “No. We’ve got no reason to think we’ll even be able to fight them, successfully. All the odds are with them. Capture would be clearly impossible.”

“But rescue isn’t.” Reyn was still insistent. “We should gamble,” he said, pounding the radar console with his fist. “It’s worth it.”

“We settled that, Bill,” Delvecchio said. “No rescue. We’ve got only seven men to fight off maybe hundreds - I can’t afford to throw any away on a useless dramatic gesture.”

“Seven men trying to fight off hundreds sounds like a useless dramatic gesture to me,” Reyn said. “Especially since there may be only a few survivors who could be rescued.”

“But what is all of them are left?” said Sheridan. “And all of them have already been taken over by the fungus? Be serious, Reyn. The spore dust is everywhere. As soon as they breathe unfiltered air, they’ll take it in. And seventy-two hours they’ll be like the rest of the animal life on this planet. Then the fungus will send them against us.”

“Goddammit, Sheridan!” yelled Reyn. “They could still be in their pods. Maybe they don’t even know what happened. Maybe they’re still asleep. How the hell do I know? If we get there before they come out, we can save them. Or something. We’ve got to try!”

“No. Look. The crash is sure to have shut the ship down. They’ll be awake. First thing they’ll do is check their charts. Only the fungus is classified, so they won’t know what a hell of a place they’ve landed on. All they will know is that Greywater is the only human settlement here. They’ll head toward us. And they’ll get infected and possessed.”

“That’s why we should work fast,” Reyn said. “We should arm three or four flyers and leave at once. Now.”

Delvecchio decided to put an end to the argument. The last one like this had gone all night. “This is getting us nowhere,” he said sharply, fixing both Sheridan and Reyn with hard stares. “It’s useless to discuss any longer. All we’re doing is getting mad at each other. Besides, it’s late.” He looked at his watch. “Let’s break for six hours or so and resume at dawn when we’re cooler and less tired. We’ll be able to think more clearly. And Sanderpay and Miterz will be back then, too. They deserve a voice in this.”

There were three rumbles of agreement. And one sharp note of dissent.

“No,” said Reyn. Loudly. He stood up, towering over the others in their seats. “That’s too late. There’s no time to lose.”

“Bill, you-“ Delvecchio started.

“Those men might be grabbed while we sleep,” Reyn went on, ploughing right over his superior. “We’ve got to do something.”

“No,” said Delvecchio. “And that’s an order. We’ll talk about it in the morning. Get some sleep, Bill.”

Reyn looked around for support. He got none. He glared at Delvecchio briefly. Then he turned and left the tower.

Delvecchio had trouble sleeping. He woke up at least twice, between the sheets that were cold and sticky with sweat. In his nightmare, he was out beyond Greywater, knee-deep in the grey-green slime, collecting samples for analysis. While he worked, he watched a big amphibious mud-tractor in the distance, wallowing toward him. On top was another human, his features invisible behind filter mask and skinthins. The dream Delvecchio waved to the tractor as it neared, and the driver waved back. Then he pulled up nearby, climbing down from the cab, and grasped Delvecchio in a firm handshake.

Only by that time, Delvecchio could see through the transparent filter mark. It was Ryerson, the dead geologist, his friend Ryerson. But his head was swollen grossly and there were trails of fungus hanging from each ear.

After the second nightmare he gave it up as a bad show. They never found Ryerson or Blatt after the crash. Though they knew from the impact that there wouldn’t be much to find. But Delvecchio dreamed of them often, and he suspected that some of the others did, too.

He dressed in darkness, and made his way to the central tower. Sanderpay, the telecom man, was on watch. He was asleep in the small ready bunk near the laser turret, where the station monitors could awaken him quickly if anything big approached the walls. Reinforced duralloy was tough stuff, but the fungus had some pretty wicked creatures at its call. And there were the airlocks to consider.

Delvecchio decided to let Sanderpay sleep, and went to the window. The big spotlights mounted on the wall flooded the perimeter around Greywater with night white lights that made the mud glisten sickly. He could see

drifting spores reflected briefly in the beams. They seemed unusually thick, especially toward the west, but that was probably his imagination. Then again, it might be a sign that the fungus was uneasy. The spores had always been ten times thick around Greywater as elsewhere on the planet's surface. That had been one of the first pieces of evidence that the damned fungus was intelligent. And hostile. They still weren't sure just how intelligent. But of the hostility there was no more doubt. The parasitic fungus infected every animal on the planet. And had used most of them to attack the station at one point or another. It wanted them. So they the blizzard of spores that rained on Greywater for more than a year now. The overhead force screens kept them out, though, and the sterilization chambers killed any that clung to the mug-tractor or skinthins or drifted into the airlocks. The fungus kept trying.

Across the room, Sanderpay yawned and sat up in his bunk. Delvecchio turned toward him. "Morning, Otis."

Sanderpay yawned again, and stifled it with a big red hand. "Morning," he replied, untangling himself from the bunk in a gangle of long arms and legs. "What's going on? You taking Bill's shift?"

Delvecchio stiffened. "What? Was Reyn supposed to relieve you?"

"Uh-huh," said Sanderpay, looking at the clock. "Hour ago. The bastard. I get cramps sleeping in this thing. Why can't we make it a little more comfortable, I ask you?"

Delvecchio was hardly listening. He ignored Sanderpay and moved swiftly to the intercom panel against one wall. Granowicz was closest to the motor pool. He rang him.

A sleepy voice answered. "Ike," Delvecchio said. "This is Jim. Check the motor pool, quick. Count the flyers."

Granowicz acknowledged the order. He was back in less than two minutes, but it seemed longer. "Flyer five is missing," he said. He sounded awake all of a sudden.

"Shit," said Delvecchio. He slammed down the intercom, and whirled toward Sanderpay. "Get on the radio, fast. There's a flyer missing. Raise it."

Sanderpay looked baffled, but complied. Delvecchio stood over him, muttering obscenities and thinking worse ones, while he searched through the static.

Finally an answer. "I read you, Otis." Reyn's voice, of course.

Delvecchio leaned toward the transmitter. "I told you no rescue."

The reply was equal parts laughter and static. "Did you? Hell! I guess I wasn't paying attention, Jim. You know how long conferences always bored me."

"I don't want a dead hero on my hands. Turn back."

"I intend to. After I deliver the vaccine. I'll bring as many of the soldiers with me as I can. The rest can walk. The immunity wears off, but it should last long enough if they landed where we predict."

Delvecchio swore. "Dammit, Bill. Turn back. Remember Ryerson."

"Sure I do. He was a geologist. Little guy with a pot belly, wasn't he?"

"Reyn!" There was an edge to Delvecchio's voice.

Laughter. “Oh, take it easy, Jim. I’ll make it. Ryerson was careless, and it killed him. And Blatt too. I won’t be. I’ve rigged some lasers up. Already got two big swampbats that came at me. Huge fuckers, easy to burn down.”

“Two! The fungus can send hundreds if it gets an itch. Damnit, listen to me. Come back.”

“Will do,” said Reyn. “With my guests.” Then he signed off with a laugh. Delvecchio straightened, and frowned.

Sanderpay seemed to think a comment was called for, and managed a limp, “Well…”

Delvecchio never heard him. “Keep on the frequency, Otis,” he said. “There’s a chance the damn fool might make it. I want to know the minute he comes back on.” He started across the room. “Look. Try to raise him every five minutes or so. He probably won’t answer. He’s in for a world of shit if that jury-rigged laser fails him.

Delvecchio was at the intercom. He punched Granowicz’s station. “Jim again, Ike. What kind of laser’s missing from the shop? I’ll hold on.”

“No need to,” came the reply. “Saw it just after I found the flyer gone. I think one of the standard tabletop cutters, low power job. He’s done some spot-welding, left the stat on the power box. Ned found that, and places where he’d done some bracketing. Also, one of the vacutainers is gone.”

“Okay, Thanks, Ike. I want everybody up here in ten minutes. War council.”

“Oh, Sheridan will be so glad.”

“No. Yes. Maybe he will.” He clicked off, punched for Andrews.

The mycologist took a while to answer. “Arnold?” Delvecchio snapped when the acknowledgment finally came. “Can you tell me what’s gone from stores?”

There were a few minutes of silence. Then Andrews was back. “Yeah, Jim. A lot of medical supplies. Syringes, bandages, vaccine, plastisplints, even some body bags. What’s going on?”

“Reyn. And from what you say, it sounds like he’s on a real mercy mission there. How much did he take?”

“Enough, I guess. Nothing we can’t replace, however.”

“Okay. Meeting up here in ten…five minutes.”

“Well, all right.” Andrews clicked off.

Delvecchio hit the master control, opening all the bitch boxes. For the first time in four months, since the slinkers had massed near the station walls. That had been a false alarm. This, he knew, wasn’t.

“Meeting in five minutes in the turret,” he said.

The words rang through the station, echoing off the cool humming walls.

“…that if we don’t make plans now, it’ll be way too late.” Delvecchio paused and looked at four men lounging on the chairs. Sanderpay was still at the radio, his long legs spilling into the center of the room. But the other four were clustered around the table, clutching coffee cups.

None of them seemed to be paying close attention. Granowicz was staring absently out the window, as usual, his eyes and forebrain mulling the fungus that grew on the trees around Greywater.



Andrews was scribbling in a notepad, very slowly. Doodling. Ned Miterz, big and blond and blocky, was a bundle of nervous tension; Bill Reyn was his closest friend. He alternated between drumming his fingers on the tabletop, swilling his coffee, and tugging nervously at his drooping blond mustache. Sheridan's bullet-shaped head shared at the floor.

But they were all listening, in their way. Even Sanderpay, at the radio. When Delvecchio paused, he pulled his long legs back under him, and began to speak. "I'm sorry it's come to this, Jim," he said, rubbing his ear to restore circulation. "It's bad enough those soldiers are out there. Now Bill has gone after them, and he's in the same spot. I think, well, we have to forget him. And worry about attacks."

Delvecchio sighed. "It's hard to take, I know. If he makes it, he makes it. If he finds them, he finds them. If they've been exposed, in three days they'll be part of the fungus. Whether they take the vaccine or not. If he brings them back, we watch them three days to see if symptoms develop. If they do, we have to kill them. If not, then nobody's hurt, and when the rest walk in we watch for symptoms in them. But those are iffy things. If he doesn't make it, he's dead. Chances are, the troopers are dead. Or exposed. Either way, we prepare for the worst and forget Reyn until we see him. So what I'm asking for now are practical suggestions as to how we defend ourselves against well-armed soldiers. Controlled by some intelligence we do not understand."

He looked at the men again.

Sanderpay whooped. He grabbed the console mike as they jumped and looked at him.

"Go ahead, Bill," he said, twisting the volume knob over to the wall speaker. The others winced as the roar of frequency noise swept the room.

"...right. The damn thing's sending insects into the ship. Smear...ing...smear windscreen...on instruments." Reyn's voice. There was a sound in the background like heavy rain.

"...swampbats just before they came...probably coming at me now. Goddamn laser mount loosened..." There was a dull thud in the background. "No lateral control...got that bastard...ohmigodd..." Two more dull thuds. A sound like metal eating itself.

"...in the trees. Altitude...going down...swampbats...something just got sucked in the engine...Damn, no power...nothing...if..."

Followed by frequency noise.

Sanderpay, his thin face blank and white, waited a few seconds to see if more transmission came through, then tried to raise Reyn on the frequency. He turned the volume down again after a while.

"I think that's about what we can expect will happen to us in a couple of days," said Delvecchio. "That fungus will stop at nothing to get intelligent life. Once it has the soldiers who survive, they'll come after the station. With their weapons."

"Well," snapped Sheridan. "He knew not to go out there in that flyer."

Miterz slammed down his coffee cup, and rose. "Goddamn you, Sheridan. Can't you hold it even a minute? Bill's probably dead out there. And all you want to do is say I-told-you-so."

Sheridan jumped to his feet too. "You think I like listening to someone get killed on the radio? Just because I didn't like him? You think it's fun? Huh? You think I want to fight somebody who's been trained to do it? Huh?" He looked at them, all of them, and wiped sweat from his brow with the back of his hand. "I don't. I'm

scared. I don't like making plans for war when men could be out there wounded and dying with no help coming."

He paused. His voice, stretched thin, began to waver. "Reyn was a fool to go out there. But maybe he was the only one who let his humanity come through. I made myself ignore them. I tried to get you all to plan for war in case any of the soldiers made it. Damn you. I'm afraid to go out there. I'm afraid to go near the stuff, even inside the station. I'm a zoologist, but I can't even work. Every animal on this planet has that- that stuff on it. I can't bear to touch it. I don't want to fight either. But we're going to have to. Sooner or later."

He wiped his head again, looked at Delvecchio. "I-I'm sorry, Jim. Ned, too. The rest of you. I'm- I have - I just don't like it any more than you. But we have to." He sat down, very tiredly.

Delvecchio rubbed his nose, and reflected again that being the nominal leader was more trouble than it was worth. Sheridan had never opened up like this before. He wasn't quite sure how to deal with it.

"Look," he finally said. "It's okay, Eldon" It was the first time he could remember that he - or any of them - had used Sheridan's first name. "This isn't going to be easy on any of us. You may be right about our humanity. Sometimes you have to put humanity aside to think about... well, I don't know.

"The fungus has finally found a way to get to us. It will attack us with the soldiers, like it has with the slinkers and the swampbats and the rest, Like it's trying to do now, while we're talking, with the burrowing worms and the insects and the arthropodia. The station's defenses will take care of those. All we have to worry about are the soldiers."

"All?" said Granowicz, sharply.

"That, and what we'll do if they breach the wall of the field. The field wasn't built to take screechers or laser explosives. Just to keep out insects and flying animals. I think one of the first things we've got to do is find a way to beef up the field. Like running in the mains from the other power sources. But that still leaves the wall. And the entry chambers. Our weakest links. Ten or twenty good rounds of high explosives will bring it right down. How do we fight back?"

"Maybe we don't," said Miterz. His face was still hard and angry. But now the anger was turned against the fungus, instead of Sheridan. "Maybe we take the fight to them."

The suggestions flew thick and fast from there on. Half of them were impossible, a quarter improbable, the most of what were left were crazy. At the end of an hour, they had gotten past the points of mining, pitfalls, electrocution. To Delvecchio's ears, it was the strangest conversation he had ever heard. It was full of the madnesses of men plan against each other, made more strange by the nature of the men themselves. They were all scientists and technicians, not soldiers, not killers. They talked and planned without enthusiasm, with the quiet talk of men who must talk before being pallbearers at a friend's funeral, or the pace of men who must take their turns as members of a firing squad the next morning.

In a way, they were.

An hour later, Delvecchio was standing up to his ankles in grey-green mud, wrestling with a powersaw and sweating freely under his skinthins. The saw was hooked up to the power supply on his mudtractor. And Miterz was sitting atop the tractor, with a hunting laser resting across his knee, occasionally lifting it to burn down one of the slinkers slithering through the underbrush.

Delvecchio had already cut through the bases of four of the biggest trees around the Greywater perimeter- about three quarters of the way through, anyway. Just enough to weaken them, so the turret laser could finish the job quickly when the need arose. It was a desperate idea. But they were desperate men.

The fifth tree was giving him trouble. It was a different species from the others, gnarled and overhung with creepers and rock-hard. He was only halfway through, and already he'd had to change the blade twice. That made him edgy. One slip with the blade, one slash in the skinthins, and the spores could get at him.

"Damn thing," he said, when the teeth began to snap off for the third time. "It cuts like it's half petrified. Damn."

"Look at the bright side," suggested Miterz. "It'll make a mighty big splat when it falls. And even duralloy armor should crumple pretty good."

Delvecchio missed the humor. He changed the blade without comment, and resumed cutting.

"That should do it," he said after a while. "Looks deep enough. But maybe we should use the lasers on this kind, if we hit any more of them."

"That's a lot of power," said Miterz. "Can we afford it?"

He raised his laser suddenly, and fired at something behind Delvecchio. The slinker, a four-foot-long mass of scales and claws, reared briefly from its stomach and then fell again, splattering mud in their direction. Its dying scream was a brief punctuation mark.

"Those things are thick today," Miterz commented.

Delvecchio climbed up into the tractor. "You're imagining things," he said.

"No I'm not." Miterz sounded serious. "I'm the ecologist, remember? I know we don't have a natural ecology around here. The fungus sends us its nasties, and keeps the harmless life forms away. But now there's even more than usual." He gestured with the laser. Off through the underbrush, two big slinkers could be seen chewing at the creepers around a tree, the fungus hanging like a shroud over the back of their skulls.

"Look there. What do you think they're doing?"

"Eating," said Delvecchio. "That's normal enough." He started the tractor, and moved it forward jerkily. Mud, turned into a watery slime, spouted out behind the vehicle in great gushes.

"Slinkers are omnivores," Miterz said. "But they prefer meat. Only ear creepers when there's no prey. But there's plenty around here." He stopped, stared at the scene, banged the butt of the laser rifle on the cab floor in a fit of sudden nervous tension.

Then he resumed in a burst of words. "Damn it, damn it. They're clearing a path!" His voice was an accusation. "A path for the soldiers to march on. Starting at our end and working toward them. They'll get here faster if they don't have to cut through the undergrowth."

Delvecchio, at the wheel, snorted. "Don't be absurd."

"What makes you think it's absurd? Who know what the fungus is up to. A living ecology. It can turn every living thing on this planet against us if it wants to. Eating a path through a swamp is nothing to something like that."

Miterz' voice was distant and brooding. Delvecchio didn't like the way the conversation was going. He kept silent. They went on to the next tree, and then the next. But Miterz, his mind racing, was getting more and more edgy. He kept fidgeting in the tractor, and playing with the rifle, and more than once he absently tried to yank at his mustache, only to be stopped by the filtermask. Finally, Delvecchio decided it was time to head in.

Decontamination took the usual two hours. They waited patiently in the entry chamber and sterilization rooms while the pumps sprays, heatlamps, and ultraviolet systems did their work on them and the tractor.

They shed their sterilized skinthins as they came through the final airlock.

"Goddamn," said Delvecchio. "I hope we don't have to go out again. Decon takes more time than getting the work done."

Sanderpay met them, smiling. "I think I found something we could use. Nearly forgot about them."

"Yeah? What?" Miterz asked, as he unloaded the laser charge and placed it back in the recharge rack. He punched several buttons absently.

"The sounding rockets."

Delvecchio slapped his head, "Of course. Damn. Didn't even consider them." His mind went back. Blatt, the dead meteorologist, had fired off the six-foot sounding rockets regularly for the first few weeks, gaining data on the fungus. They had discovered that spores were frequently found up to 50,000 feet, and a few even reached as high as 80,000. After Blatt covered that he still made a twice-daily ritual of firing the sounding rockets, to collect information on the planet's shifting wind patterns. They had weather balloons, but those were next to useless; the swampbats usually vectored in on them soon after they were released. After Blatt's death, however, the readings hadn't meant as much, so the firings were discontinued. But the launching tubes were still functional, as far as he knew.

"You think you can rig them up as small guided missiles?" Delvecchio asked.

"Yep," Sanderpay said with a grin. "I already started. But they won't be very accurate. For one thing, they'll reach about a mile in altitude before we can begin to control them. Then, we'll be forcing the trajectory. They'll want to continue in a long arc. We'll want them back down almost to the launching point. It'll be like wrestling a two-headed alligator. I'm thinking of filing half of them with that explosive Andrews is trying to make, and the rest with white phosphorus. But that might be tricky."

"Well, do whatever you can, Otis," said Delvecchio. "This is good news. We needed this kind of punch. Maybe it isn't as hopeless as I thought."

Miterz had been listening carefully, but he still looked glum. "Anything over the comms?" he put in. "From Bill?"

Sanderpay shook his head. "Just the usual solar shit, and some mighty nice whistlers. Must be a helluva thunderstorm somewhere within a thousand miles of here. I'll let you know if anything comes in, though."

Miterz didn't answer. He was looking at the armory and shaking his head. Delvecchio followed his eyes. Eight lasers were on the racks. Eight lasers and sixteen charges, standard station allotment. Each charge good for maybe fifty fifth-second bursts. Five tranquilizer rifles, an assortment of syringes, darts, and projectiles. All of which would be useless against armored infantry. Maybe if they could adapt some of the heavier projectiles to H.E....but such a small amount wouldn't dent duralloy. Hell.

“You know,” said Miterz. “If they get inside, we might as well hang it up.”

“If,” said Delvecchio.

Night at Greywater Station. They had started watch-and-watch.

Andrews was topside at the laser turret and sensor board. Delvecchio, Granowicz, and Sanderpay lingered over dinner in the cafeteria below. Miterz and Sheridan had already turned in.

Sanderpay was talking of the day’s accomplishments. He figured he had gotten somewhere with the rockets. And Andrews had managed to put together some explosive from the ingredients in Reyn’s lab.

“Arnold doesn’t like it much, though,” Sanderpay was saying. “He wants to get back to his fungus samples. Says he’s out of his field, and not too sure he knows what he’s doing. He’s right, too. Bill was your chemist.”

“Bill isn’t here,” Delvecchio snapped. He was in no mood for criticism. “Someone has to do it. At least Arnold has some background in organic chemistry, no matter how long ago it was. That’s more than the rest of us have.” He shook his head. “Am I supposed to do it? I’m an entomologist. What good is that? I feel useless.”

“Yep, I know,” said Sanderpay. “Still. It’s not easy for me with the rockets, either. I had to take half the propellant from each one. Worked nine hours, finished three. We’re gonna be fighting all the known laws of aerodynamics trying to force those things down near their starting point. And everybody else is having problems, too. We tinker and curse and it’s all a blind alley. If we do this, we gotta do that. But if we do that, it won’t work. This is a research station. So maybe it looks like a fort. That doesn’t make it one. And we’re still scientists, not demolition experts.”

Granowicz gave a thin chuckle. “I’m reminded of that time, back on Earth, in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, when that German scientist... von Brau? von... Von Braun and his men were advised that the enemy forces would soon be there. The military began giving them close-order drill and marksmanship courses. They wanted them to meet the enemy on the very edge of their missile complex and fight them hand to hand.”

“What happened?” said Sanderpay

“Oh, they ran three hundred miles, and surrendered,” Granowicz replied dryly.

Delvecchio downed his two hundredth cup of coffee, and put his feet up on the table. “Great,” he said. “Only we’ve got no place to run to. So we’re going to have to meet them on the edge of our little missile complex, or whatever. And soon.”

Granowicz nodded. “Three days from now. I figure.”

“That’s if the fungus doesn’t help them,” said Delvecchio.

The other two looked at him. “What do you mean?” asked Granowicz.

“When Ned and I were out this morning, we saw slinkers. Lots of them. Eating away at the creepers to the west of the station.”

Granowicz had a light in his eyes. But Sanderpay, still baffled, said “So?”

“Miterz thinks they’re clearing a path.”

“Uh oh,” said Granowicz. He stroked his chin with a thin hand. “That’s very interesting, and very bad news. Clearing away at both ends, and all along, as I’d think it would do. Hmmmmmm.”

Sanderpay looked from Delvecchio to Granowicz and back, grimaced, uncoiled his legs and then coiled them around his chair again in a different position. He said nothing.

“Ah, yes, yes,” Granowicz was saying. “It all fits, all ties in. We should have anticipated this. A total assault, with the life of a planet working for our destruction. It’s the fungus...a total ecology, as Ned likes to call it. A classic case of the parasitic collective mind. But we can’t understand it. We don’t know what its basic precepts are, its formative experiences. We don’t know. No research has been carried out on anything like it. Except maybe the water jellies of Noborn. But that was a collective organism formed of separate colonies for mutual benefit. A benign form, as it were. As far as I can tell, Greywater, the fungus, is a single all-encompassing mass, which took over this planet starting from some single central point.” He rubbed his hands together and nodded. “Yes. Based on that, we can make guesses as to what it thinks. And how it will act. And this fits, this total hostility.”

“How so?” asked Sanderpay.

“Well, it’s never run up against any other intelligence, you see. Only lower forms. That’s important. So it judges us by itself, the only mind it has known. It is driven to dominate, to take over all life with which it comes in contact. So it thinks we are the same, fears that we are trying to take over this planet as it once did.

“Only, like I’ve been saying all along, it doesn’t see us as the intelligence. We’re animals, small, mobile. It’s known life like that before and all lower form. But the station itself is something new, something outside its experience. It sees the station as the intelligence, I’ll bet. An intelligence like itself. Land, establishing itself, sending out extensions, poking at it and its hosts. And us, us poor animals, the fungus sees as unimportant tools.”

Delvecchio signed. “Yeah, Ike. We’ve heard this before. I agree that it’s a persuasive theory. But how do you prove it?”

“Proof is all around us,” said Granowicz. “The station is under a constant around-the-clock attack. But we can go outside for samples, and the odds are fifty-fifty whether we’ll be attacked or not. Why? We don’t kill every slinker we see, do we? Of course not. And the fungus doesn’t try to kill us, except if we get annoying. Because we’re not important, it thinks. But something like the flyers – mobile but not animal, strange – it tries to eradicate. Because it perceives them as major extensions of Greywater.”

“Then why the spores?” Delvecchio said.

Granowicz dismissed that with an airy wave. “Oh, the fungus would like to take us over, sure. To deprive the station of hosts. But it’s the station it wants to eradicate. It can’t conceive of cooperating with another intelligence – maybe, who knows, it had to destroy rival fungus colonies of its own species before it came to dominate this planet. Once it perceives intelligence, it is threatened. And it perceives intelligence in the station.”

He was going to go on. But Delvecchio suddenly took his feet from the table, sat up, and said, “Uh oh.”

Granowicz frowned. “What?”

Delvecchio stabbed at him with a finger. “Ike, think about this theory of yours. What if you’re right? Then how is the fungus going to perceive the spaceship?”

Granowicz thought a moment, nodded to himself, and gave a slow, low whistle.

“So? How?” said Sanderpay. “Whattaya talking about?”

Granowicz turned on him. “The spaceship was mobile, but not animal. Like the station. It came out of the sky, landed, destroyed a large area of the fungus and host forms. And hasn’t moved since. Like the station. The fungus probably sees it as another station, another threat. Or an extension of our station.”

“Yes,” said Delvecchio. “But it gets worse. If you’re right, then maybe the fungus is launching an all-out attack right at this moment- on the spaceship hull. While it lets the men march away unharmed.”

There was a moment of dead silence. Sanderpay finally broke it, looking at each of the others in turn, and saying in a low voice, “Oh. Wow. I see.”

Granowicz had a thoughtful expression on his face, and he was rubbing his chin again. “No,” he said at last. “You’d think that, but I don’t think that’s what is happening.”

“Why not?” asked Delvecchio.

“Well, the fungus may not see the soldiers as the major threat. But it would at least try to take them over, as it does with us. And once it had them, and their weapons, it would have the tools to obliterate the station and the spaceship. That’s almost sure to happen, too. Those soldiers will be easy prey for the spores. They’ll fall to the fungus like ripe fruit.”

Delvecchio clearly looked troubled. “Yeah, probably. But this bothers me. If there’s even a slight chance that the soldiers might get here without being taken over, we’ll have to change out plans.”

“But there’s no chance of that,” Granowicz said, shaking his head. “The fungus already has those men. Why else would it be clearing a path?”

Sanderpay nodded in agreement. But Delvecchio wasn’t that sure.

“We don’t know that it’s clearing a path,” he insisted. “That’s just what Miterz thinks is happening. Based on very scant evidence. We shouldn’t accept it as an accomplished fact.”

“It makes sense, though,” Granowicz came back.

“It would speed up the soldiers getting here, speed up the…”

The alarm from the turret began to hoot and clang.

“Slinkers,” said Andrews. “I think out by those tree you were working on.”

He drew on a pair of infrared goggles and depressed a stud on the console. There was a hum. Delvecchio peered through the binoculars.

“Think maybe it’s sending them to see what we were up to?”

“Definitely,” said Granowicz, standing just behind him and looking out the window over his shoulder.

“I don’t think it’ll do anything,” said Delvecchio, hopefully. “Mines or anything foreign it would destroy, of course. We’ve proved that. But all we did is slash a few trees. I doubt that it will be able to figure out why.”

“Do you think I should fire a few times?” Andrews asked from the laser console.

“I don’t know,” said Delvecchio. “Wait a bit. See what they do.”

The long, thick lizards were moving around the tree trunks. Some slithered through the fungus and the mud, others scratched and clawed at the notched trees.

“Switch on some of the directional sensors,” said Delvecchio.

Sanderpay, at the sensor bank, nodded and began flicking on the directional mikes. First to come in was the constant tick of the continual spore bombardment on the receiver head. Then as the mike rotated, came the hissing screams of the slinkers.

And then the rending sound of a falling tree.

Delvecchio, watching through the binoculars, suddenly felt very cold. The tree came down into the mud with a crashing thud. Slime flew from all sides, and several slinkers hissed out their lives beneath the trunk.

“Shit,” said Delvecchio. And then, “Fire, Arnold.”

Andrews pushed buttons, sighted in the nightscope, lined the crossnotches up on a slinker near the fallen tree, and fired.

To those not watching through goggles or binoculars, a tiny red-white light appeared in the air between the turret laser and the group of lizards. A gargling sound mixed with the slinker hissing. One of the animals thrashed suddenly, and then lay still. The others began slithering away into the undergrowth.

There was stillness for a second.

And on another part of the perimeter, a second tree began to fall.

Andrews hit more buttons, and the big turret laser moved and fired again. Another slinker died. Then, without waiting for another crash, the laser began to swivel to hit the slinkers around the other trees.

Delvecchio lowered the binoculars very slowly. “I think we just wasted a day’s work out there,” he said. “Somehow the fungus guessed what we were up to. It’s smarter than we gave it credit for.”

“Reyn,” said Granowicz.

“Reyn?” said Delvecchio. With a questioning look.

“He knew we’d try to defend the station. Given that knowledge, it’s logical for the fungus to destroy anything we do out there. Maybe Reyn survived the crash of his flyer. Maybe the fungus finally got a human.”

“Oh, shit,” said Delvecchio with expression. “Yes, sure, you might be right. Or maybe it’s all a big coincidence. A bunch of accidents. How do we know? How do we know anything about what the damned thing is thinking or doing or planning?” He shook his head. “Damn. We’re fighting blind. Every time something happens, there are a dozen reasons that might have been behind it. And every plan we make has to have a dozen alternatives.”

“It’s not that bad,” said Granowicz. “We’re not entirely in the dark. We’ve proved that the fungus can take over Earth forms. We’ve proved that it gets at least some knowledge from them; that it absorbs at least part of what they knew. We don’t know how big a part, true, however-“



“However, if, but, maybe,” Delvecchio swore, looking very disgusted. “Dammit, Ike, how big a part is the crucial question. If it has Reyn, and if it knows everything he knew, then it knows everything there is to know about Greywater and its defenses. In that case, what kind of chance will we have?”

“Well,” said Granowicz. He paused, frowned, stroked his chin. “I- hmmmmm. Wait, there are other aspects to this that should be thought out. Let me work on this a while.”

“Fine,” said Delvecchio. “You do that.” He turned to Andrews. “Arnold, keep them off the trees as best you can. I’ll be back up to relieve you in four hours.”

Andrews nodded. “Okay, I think,” he said, his eyes locked firmly on the nightscope.

Delvecchio gave brief instructions to Sanderpay, then turned and left the turret. He went straight to his bunk. It took him the better part of an hour to drift to sleep.

Delvecchio’s dream:

He was old, and cool. He saw the station from all sides in a shifting montage of images; some near the ground, some from above, wheeling on silent wings. In one image, he saw, or felt as a worm must feel, the presence of the heavy weight of sunlight.

He saw the station twisted, old, wrecked. He saw the station in a series of images from inside. He saw a skeleton in the corner of an indefinite lab, and saw through the eyes of the skull out into the broken station. Outside, he saw heaped duralloy bodies with grey-green growths sprouting from the cracked faceplates.

And he saw out of the faceplates, out into the swamp. Everywhere was grey-green, and damp and old and cold. Everywhere.

Delvecchio awoke sweating.

His watch was uneventful. The slinkers had vanished as suddenly as they had assembled, and he only fired the laser once, at a careless swampbat that flew near the perimeter. Miterz relieved him.

Delvecchio caught several more hours of sleep. Or at least of bunk time. He spent a large chunk of time lying awake, thinking.

When he walked into the cafeteria the next morning, an argument was raging.

Granowicz turned to him immediately. “Jim, listen,” he began, gesturing with his hands. “I’ve thought about this all night. We’ve been missing something obvious. If this thing has Reyn, or the soldiers, or any human, this is the chance we’ve been waiting for. The chance to communicate, to begin a mutual understanding. With their knowledge, it will have a common tongue with us. We shouldn’t fight it at all. We should try to talk to it, try to make it understand how different we are.”

“You’re crazy, Granowicz,” Sheridan said loudly. “Stark, raving mad. You go talk to that stuff. Not me. It’s after us. It’s been after us all along, and now it’s sending those soldiers to kill us all. We have to kill them first.”

“But this is our chance,” Granowicz said. “To begin to understand, to reach that mind, to-“

“That was your job all along,” Sheridan snapped. “You’re the extee psych. Just because you didn’t do your job is no reason to ask us to risk our lives to do it for you.”

Granowicz glowered. Sanderpay, sitting next to him, was more vocal. “Sheridan,” he said, “sometimes I wish we could throw you out to the fungus. You’d look good with grey-green growths coming out of your ears. Yep.”

Delvecchio gave hard glances to all of them. “Shut up, all of you,” he said simply. “I’ve had enough of this nonsense. I’ve been doing some thinking too.”

He pulled up a chair and sat down. Andrews was at another table, quietly finishing his breakfast. Delvecchio motioned him over, and he joined them.

“I’ve got some things I want to announce,” Delvecchio said. “Number one, no more arguments. We waste an incredible amount of time hashing out every detail and yelling at each other. And we don’t have time to waste. So, no more. I make the decisions, and I don’t want any screaming and kicking. If you don’t like it, you’re free to elect another leader. Understand?”

He looked at each of them in turn. Sheridan squirmed a little under the gaze, but none of them objected.

“Okay,” Delvecchio said finally. “If that’s settled, then we’ll move on.” He looked at Granowicz. “First thing is this idea of yours, Ike. Now you want us to talk. Sorry, I don’t buy it. Just last night you were telling us how the fungus, because of its childhood traumas, was bound to be hostile.”

“Yes,” began Granowicz, “but with the additional knowledge it will get from-“

“No arguments,” Delvecchio said sharply. Granowicz subsided. Delvecchio continued. “What do you think it will be doing while we’re talking? Hitting us with everything it’s got, if your theory was correct. And it sounded good to me. We’re dead men if we’re not ready, so we’ll be ready. To fight, not talk.”

Sheridan was smirking. Delvecchio turned on him next. “But we’re not going to hit them with everything we’ve got as soon as we see them, like you want, Sheridan,” he said. “Ike brought up a point last night that’s been bothering me ever since. Nagging at me. There’s an outside chance the fungus might not even try to take over the soldiers. It might not be smart enough to realize they’re important. It might concentrate on the spaceship.”

Sheridan sat up straight. “We have to hit them,” he said. “They’ll kill us, Delvecchio. You don’t-“

Sanderpay, surprisingly, joined in. “It’s eating a path,” he said. “And the trees. And this morning, Jim, look out there. Slinkers and swampbats all around. It’s got them, I know it. It wouldn’t be building up this way otherwise.”

Delvecchio waved them both silent. “I know, Otis, I know. You’re right. All signs say that it has them. But we have to be sure. We wait until we see them, until we know. Then, if they’re taken, hit them with everything, at once. It has to be hard. If it becomes a struggle, we’ve lost. They outnumber and outgun us, and in a fight, they’d breach the station easy. Only the fungus might just march ‘em up. Maybe we can kill them all before they know what hit them.”

Granowicz looked doubtful. Sheridan looked more than doubtful. “Delvecchio, that’s ridiculous. Every moment we hesitate increases our risk. And for such a ridiculous chance. Of course it will take them.”

“Sheridan, I’ve had about enough out of you,” Delvecchio said quietly. “Listen for a change. There’re two chances. One that the fungus might be too dumb to take them over. And one that it might be too smart.”

Granowicz raised his eyebrows. Andrews cleared his throat. Sheridan just looked insulted.

“If it has Reyn,” Delvecchio said. “Maybe it knows all about us. Maybe it won’t take the soldiers over on purpose. It knows from Reyn that we plan to destroy them. Maybe it will just wait.”

“But why would it have slinkers clearing a...” Sanderpay began, when shut up. “Oh. Oh, no. Jim, it couldn’t...”

“You’re not merely assuming the fungus is very intelligent, Jim” Granowicz said. “You’re assuming it’s very devious as well.”

“No,” said Delvecchio. “I’m not assuming anything. I’m merely pointing out a possibility. A terrible possibility, but one we should be ready for. For over a year now, we’ve been constantly underestimating the fungus. At every test, it has proven just a bit more intelligent than we figured. We can’t make another mistake like that. No margin for error this time.”

Granowicz gave a reluctant nod.

“There’s more,” said Delvecchio. “I want those missiles finished today, Otis. In case they get here sooner than we’ve anticipated. And the explosive too, Arnold. And I don’t want any more griping. You two are relieved of your watches until you finish those projects. The rest of us will double up.

“Also, from now on we all wear skinthins inside the station. In case the attack comes suddenly and the screens are breached.”

Everyone was nodding.

“Finally, we throw out all the experiments. I want every bit of fungus and every Greywater life form within this station eradicated.” Delvecchio thought of his dream again, and shuddered mentally.

Sheridan slapped the table, and smiled. “Now that’s the kind of thing I like to hear! I’ve wanted to get rid of those things for weeks.”

Granowicz looked unhappy, though. And Andrews looked very unhappy. Delvecchio looked at each in turn.

“All I have is a few small animals, Jim” Granowicz said. “Root-snuffs and such. They’re harmless enough, and safely enclosed. I’ve been trying to reach the fungus, establish some sort of communications-“

“No,” said Delvecchio. “Sorry, Ike, but we can’t take the chances. If the walls are breached or the station damaged, we might lose power. Then, we’d have contamination inside and out. It’s too risky. You can get new animals.”

Andrews cleared his throat. “But, well, my cultures,” he said. “I’m just getting them broken down, isolating properties of the fungus strains. Six months of research, Jim, and, well, I think-“ He shook his head.

“You’re got you research. You can duplicate it. If we live through this.”

“Yes, well-“ Andrews was hesitant. “But the cultures will have to be started over. So much time. And Jim-“ He hesitated again, and looked at the others.

Delvecchio smiled grimly. “Go ahead, Arnold. They might die soon. Maybe they should know.”

Andrews nodded. “I’m getting somewhere, Jim. With my work, the real work, the whole reason for Greywater. I’ve bred a mutation of the fungus, a non-intelligence variety, very virulent, very destructive of its hosts.

“I’m in the final stages now. It’s only a matter of getting the mutant to breed in the Fyndii atmosphere. And I’m near. I’m so near.” He looked at each of them in turn, eyes imploring. “If you let me continue, I’ll have it soon. And they could dump in on the Fyndii homeworlds, and well, it would end the war. All those lives saved. Think about all the men who will die if I’m delayed.”

He stopped suddenly, awkwardly. There was a long silence around the table. Granowicz broke it. He stroked his chin and gave a funny little chuckle. “And I thought this was such a bold, clean venture,” he said, his voice bitter. “To grope toward new intelligence, unlike any we had known, to try to find and talk to a mind perhaps unique in this universe. And now you tell me all my work was a decoy for biological warfare. Even here I can’t get away from that damned war.” He shook his head. “Greywater Station. What a lie.”

“It had to be this way, Ike.” Delvecchio said. “The potential for military application was too great to pass up, but the Fyndii would have easily found out about a big, full-scale biowar research project. But teams like Greywater’s – routine planetary investigation teams – are common. The Fyndii can’t bother to check on every one. And they don’t.”

Granowicz was staring at the table. “I don’t suppose it matters,” he said glumly. “We all may die in a few days anyway. This doesn’t change that. But- but-“ He stopped.

Delvecchio shrugged. “I’m sorry, Ike.” He looked at Andrews. “And I’m sorry about the experiments, too, Arnold. But your cultures have to go. They’re a danger to us inside the station.”

“But, well, the war- all those people.” Andrews looked anguished. “If we don’t make it through this, we lose it all anyway, Arnold” Delvecchio said.

Sanderpay put a hand on Andrews’ shoulder. “He’s right. It’s not worth it.”

Andrews nodded

Delvecchio rose. “Alright,” he said. “We’ve got that settled. Now we get to work. Arnold- the explosives. Otis- the rockets. Ike and I will take care of dumping the experiments. But first, I’m going to go brief Miterz. Okay?”

The answer was a weak chorus of agreement

It took them only a few hours to destroy the work of a year. The rockets, the explosives and the other defenses took longer, but in time, they too were ready. And then they waited, sweaty and nervous and uncomfortable in their skinthins.

Sanderpay monitored the comms system constantly.

One day.

Two.

Three, a day of incredible tension.

Four, and the strain began to tell.

Five, and they relaxed a bit. The enemy was late.

“You think they’ll try and contact us first?” Andrews asked at one point.

“I don’t know,” said Sanderpay. “Have you thought about it?”

“I have,” Granowicz put in. “But it doesn’t matter. They’ll try either way. If it’s them, they’ll want to reach us, of course. If it’s the fungus, it’ll want to throw us off our guard. Assuming it has absorbed enough knowledge from its hosts to handle a transmission, which isn’t established. Still, it will probably try, so we can’t trust a transmission.”

“Yeah,” said Delvecchio. “But, that’s the problem. We can’t trust anything. We have to suppose everything we’re working on. We don’t have any concrete information to speak of.”

“I know, Jim, I know”

On the sixth day, the storms screamed over the horizon. Spore clouds flowed by in the wind, whipped into random gaps. Overhead the sky darkened. Lightning sheeted in the west. The radio screeched its agony and crackled. Whistlers moved up and down the scale. Thunder rolled.

In the tower, the men of Greywater Station waited out the last few hours.

The voice had come in early that morning, had faded. Nothing intelligible had come through. Static had crackled most of the day.

The soldiers were moving on the edge of the storm, Delvecchio calculated.

Accident? Or planning? He wondered. And deployed his men. Andrews to the turret laser. Sanderpay at the rocket station. Sheridan and himself inside the station, with laser rifles. Granowicz to the flyer port, where the remaining flyers had been stocked with crude bombs. Miterz on the walls.

They waited in their skinthins, filtermasks looked on but not in place. The sky, darkened by the coming storm, was blackening toward twilight anyway. Soon night and the storm would reach Greywater Station hand and hand.

Delvecchio stalked through the halls impatiently. Finally he returned to the tower to see what was happening. Andrews, at the laser console, was watching the window. A can of beer sat next to him on the nightscope. Delvecchio had never seen the quiet little mycologist drink before.

“They’re out there,” Andrews said. “Somewhere.” He sipped at his beer, put it down again. “I wish that, well, they’d hurry up or something.” He looked at Delvecchio. “We’re all probably going to die, you know. The odds are so against us.”

Delvecchio didn’t have the stomach to tell him he was wrong. He just nodded, and watched the window. All the lights in the station were out. Everything was down but the generators, the turret controls, and the forcefield. The field, fed with the extra power, was stronger than ever. But strong enough? Delvecchio didn’t know. Near the field perimeter, seven or eight ghosting shapes wheeled against the storm. They were all wings and claw, and a long, razor-barbed tail. Swampbats. Big ones, with six-foot wingspans.

They weren’t alone. The underbrush was alive with slinkers. And the big leeches could be seen in the water near the south wall. All sorts of life were being pick up by the sensors.

Driven before the storm? Or massing for the attack? Delvecchio didn’t know that, either.

The tower door opened, and Sheridan entered. He threw his laser rifle on the table near the door. "These things are useless," he said. "We can't use them unless they get inside. Or unless we go out to meet them, and I'm not going to do that. Besides, what good will they do against all the stuff they've got?"

Delvecchio started to answer, but Andrews spoke first. "Look out there," he said softly. "More swampbats. And that other thing. What is it?"

Delvecchio looked. Something else was moving through the sky on slowly moving leathery wings. It was black and big. Twice the size of a swampbat.

"The first expedition named them hellions," Delvecchio said after a long pause. "They're native to the mountains, a thousand miles from here." Another pause. "That clinches it."

There was general movement on the ground and in the water to the west of Greywater Station. Echoes of thunder rolled and then piercing the thunder came a shrill whooping shriek.

"What was that?" Sheridan asked.

Andrews was white. "That one I know," he said. "It's called a screecher. A sonic rifle breaks down cell walls with concentrated sound. I saw them used once. It almost makes flesh liquefy."

"God!" said Sheridan.

Delvecchio moved to the intercom. Every box in the station was on full volume. "Battle stations, gentlemen." He said, flipping down his filter mask. "And good luck."

Delvecchio moved out into the hall and down the stairs. Sheridan picked up his laser and followed. At the base of the stairs, Delvecchio motioned for him to stop.

"You stay here, Eldon. I'll take the main entry port."

Rain had begun to spatter the swamps around Greywater, although the field kept it off the station. A great sheet of wind roared from the west and suddenly the storm was no longer approaching. It was here. A blurred outline of the force bubble could be seen against the churning sky.

Delvecchio strode across the yards through the halls and cycled through decon quickly to the main entry port. The large viewplate gave the illusion of a window. Delvecchio watched it sitting on the hood of a mudtractor. The intercom box was on the wall next to him.

"Burrowing animals are moving against the under-field, Jim," Andrews reported from the turret. "We're getting, oh, five or six shock inputs a minute. Nothing we can't handle however." He fell silent again and the only noise was the thunder.

Sanderpay began to talk, gabbing about the rockets. Delvecchio was hardly listening.

The perimeter beyond the walls was a morass of rain-whipped mud. Delvecchio could see little. He switched from the monitor he was tuned to and picked up the turret cameras. He and Andrews watched with the same eyes.

"Under-field contacts are up," Andrews said suddenly. "A couple of dozen a minute now."

The swampbats were wheeling closer to the perimeter. First one, then another, skirting the very edge of the field, riding terribly and silently on the wet winds. The turret laser rotated to follow each, but they were gone before it could fire.

Then, there was motion on the ground. A wave of slinkers began to cross the perimeter. The laser wheeled, depressed. A spurt of light appeared, leaving a quick vanishing roil of steam. One slinker died, then another.

On the south, a leech rose from the grey waters near the base wall of the station. The turret turned. Two quick spurts of red burned. Steam rose once. The leech twisted at the second burst.

Delvecchio nodded silently, clutched his rifle tighter. And Andrews voice came over the intercom. "There's a man out there," he said. "Near you, Jim."

Delvecchio slipped on his infrared goggles and flicked back to the camera just outside the entry port. There was a dim shape in the undergrowth. "Just one?" asked Delvecchio.

"All I read," Andrews said.

Delvecchio nodded and thought. Then, "I'm going out."

Many voices at once on the intercom.

"That's not wise. I don't think," said one, Granowicz?

Another said, "Watch it, Jim. Be careful," Sanderpay, maybe.

And Sheridan, unmistakable, "Don't, you'll let them in!"

Delvecchio ignored them all. He hit the switch to open the outer port doors and slid down into the driver's seat in the mudtractor. The doors parted. Rain washed into the chamber. The tractor moved forward, rattling over the entry ramp and sliding smoothly into the slime.

Now he was out in the storm and the rain tingled through his skinthins. He drove with one hand and held the laser with the other.

He stopped the tractor just outside the port and stood up.

"Come out!" he screamed as loud as he could, out shouting the thunder. "Let us see you! If you can understand me! If the fungus doesn't have you! Come out now!"

He paused and hoped and waited a long minute. He was about to shout again when a man came running from the undergrowth. Delvecchio had a fleeting glimpse of tattered torn clothes. Bare feet stumbling in the mud. Rain drenched dark hair.

But he wasn't looking at those. He was looking at the fungus that all but covered the man's face and trailed across his chest and back.

The man - the thing - raised a fist and released a rock. It missed. He kept running and screaming. Delvecchio, numb, raised his rifle and fired. The fungus thing fell a few feet beyond the trees.

Delvecchio left the tractor where it was and walked back to the entry port on foot. The doors were still open. He went to the intercom. "It has them," he said. Then, again, "It has them. And it's hostile. So now we kill them."

There were no answers. Just a long silence, and a stifled sob, and then Andrews's slow, detached voice. "A new reading. A body of men – thirty, forty, maybe – moving from the west. In formation. A lot of metal – duralloy, I think."

"The main force," Delvecchio said. "They won't be so easy to kill. Get ready. Remember, everything at once."

He turned back into the rain, cradled his rifle, walked to the ramp. Through his goggles, Delvecchio saw the shapes of men. Only a few at first Fanned out.

He went outside the station to the tractor, knelt behind it. As he watched, the turret turned. A red line reached out, touched the first dim shape. It staggered. New sheets of rain washed in, obliterating the landscape. The laser licked out again. Delvecchio very slowly, lifted his rifle to his shoulder and joined it, firing at the dim outlines seen through the goggles.

Behind him, he felt the first sounding rocket leave up the launch tube, and he briefly saw the fire of its propellant as it cleared the dome. It disappeared into the rain. Another followed it, then another, then the firings became regular.

The dim shapes were all running together; there was a large mass of men just a few yards deep in the undergrowth. Delvecchio fired into the mass, and noted where they were, and hoped Arnold remembered.

Arnold remembered.

The turret laser depressed, sliced at the trunk of a nearby tree. There was the sound of wood tearing. Then the tree began to lean. Then it fell.

From what Delvecchio could see, it missed. Another idea that didn't quite work, he reflected bitterly. But he continued to fire into the forest.

Suddenly, near the edge of the perimeter, water gouted up out of the swamp in a terrific explosion. Dwarfing all else. A slinker flew through the air, surprised at itself. It rained leech parts.

The first rocket.

A second later, another explosion, among the trees this time.

Then more, one after another. Several very close to the enemy. Two among the enemy. Trees began to fall. And Delvecchio thought he could hear screaming.

He began to hope. He continued to fire.

There was a whine in the sky above. Granowicz in the flier. Delvecchio took time to glance up briefly and watch it flit overhead towards the trees. Other shapes were moving up there too however, diving on the flier, but they were slower.

Granowicz made a quick pass over the perimeter dumping bombs. The swamp shook and the mud and water from the explosions mixed with the rain.

Now, definitely, he could hear screaming.

And then the answer began to come. Red tongues and pencil of light flicked out of the dark, played against the walls causing steam whirlpools which washed away in the rain.



Then projectiles. Explosions. A dull thud rocked the station. A second.

And somewhere in the storm, someone opened up with a screecher.

The wall behind him rang with a humming glow. And there was another explosion much bigger overhead against the forcefield dome. The rain vanished for an instant in a vortex of exploding gases. Wind whipped the smoke away and the station rocked.

Then the rains touched the dome again in sheets.

More explosions. Lasers spat and hissed in the rain. Back and forth the grizzly light show.

Miterz was firing from the walls. Granowicz was making another pass. The rockets had stopped falling. Gone already?

The turret fired, moved, fired, moved, fired. Several explosions rocked the tower.

The world was a madness of rain. Of noise. Of lightning. Of night.

Then, the rockets began again. The swamp and nearer forest shook to the hits. The eastern corner of the station moved as a sounding missile landed uncomfortably close.

The turret began to fire again. Short bursts lost in rain. Answering fire was thick. At least one screecher was shrieking regularly.

Delvecchio saw the swampbats appear suddenly around the flier. They converged from all sides, howling, bent on death. One climbed right up into the engine, folding its wings neatly. There was a terrible explosion that lit the night to ghosts of trailing rain.

More explosions around the force dome. Lasers screened off the dome and turret. The turret glowed red, steamed. On the south, a section of wall vanished in a tremendous explosion.

Delvecchio was still firing regularly, automatically. But, suddenly, the laser went dead, uncharged. He hesitated, rose. He turned just in time to see the hellion dive on the turret. Nothing stopped it. With a sudden chill, Delvecchio realized that the forcefield was out.

Laser ripples reached out and touched the hellion, but not the turret laser. The turret was still silent. The hellion hit the windows with a crash, smashing through, shattering glass and plastic and duralloy struts.

Delvecchio began to move back toward the ramp and the entry port. A slinker rose as he darted by, snapped at his leg. There was a red blur of pain, fading quickly. He stumbled, rose again, moved. The leg was numb and bleeding. He used the useless laser as a crutch.

Inside, he hit the switch to shut the outer doors. Nothing happened. He laughed suddenly. It didn't matter. Nothing mattered. The station was breached. The fields were down. The inner doors still work. He moved through, limped through the halls out to the yard. Around him he could hear the generators dying.

The turret was hit again and again. It exploded and lifted moaning. Three separate impacts hit the tower at once. The top half rained metal.

Delvecchio stopped in the yard, looked at the tower suddenly unsure of where he was going. The word "Arnold" formed on his lips, but stayed there.

The generators quit completely. Lasers and missiles and swampbats steamed overhead. All was night lit by lightning. By explosions. By lasers.

Delvecchio retreated to a wall and propped himself against it. The barrage continued. The ground inside the station was torn, turned, shook. Once there was a scream somewhere as though someone was calling him in their moment of death. He lowered himself to the ground and lay still clutching the rifle while more shells pounded the station. Then all was silent.

Propped up against a rubble pile, he watched helplessly as a big slinker moved toward him across the yard. It loomed large in the rain, but before it reached him, it fell screaming.

There was movement behind him. He turned. A figure in skinthins waved, took up a position near one of the ruined laboratories.

Delvecchio saw shapes moving on what was left of the walls, scrambling over. He wished he had a charge for his laser. A red pencil of light flashed by him in the rain. One of the shapes crumbled. The man behind him had fired too soon, though, and too obviously. The other figured leveled on him. Stabs of laser fire went searing over Delvecchio's head. Answering fire came briefly, then stopped.

Slowly, slowly, Delvecchio dragged himself through the med, toward the labs. They didn't seem to see him. After an exhausting effort, he reached the fallen figure in skinthins. Sanderpay, dead.

Delvecchio took the laser. There were five men ahead of him, more in the darkness beyond. Lying on his stomach, Delvecchio fired at one man, then another and another. Steam geysers rose around him as the shapes in duralloy fired back. He fired and fired and fired until all those around him were down. Then he plucked himself up, and tried to run.

The heel was shot off his boot, and warmth flooded his foot. He turned and fired, moved on, past the wrecked tower and the labs.

Laser stabs peeled overhead. Four, five, maybe six of them. Delvecchio dropped what had been a lab wall. He fired around the wall, saw one shape fall. He fired again. Then the rifle died on him.

Lasers tore into the wall, burning in, almost through. The men fanned. There was no hope.

Then the night exploded into fire and noise. A body, twisted flat, spun by. A stab of laser fire came on the teeth of the explosion, from behind Delvecchio.

Sheridan stood over him, firing into the men caught in the open, burning them down one by one. He quit firing for an instant, lobbed a vial of explosive, then went back to the laser. He was hit by a chunk of flying rubble, went down.

Delvecchio came back up as he did. They stood unsteadily. Sheridan wheeling and looking for the targets. But there were no more targets. Sheridan was coughing from exertion inside his skinthins. The rain lessened. The pain increased.

They picked their way through the rubble. They passed many twisted bodies in duralloy, a few skinthins. Sheridan paused at one of the armored bodies, turned it over. The faceplate had been burned away with part of the face. He kicked it back over.

Delvecchio tried another. He lifted the helmet off, searched the nostrils, the forehead, the eyes, the ears. Nothing.

Sheridan had moved away, and was standing over a body in skinthins half covered by rubble. He stood there for a long time.

“Delvecchio!” he called finally. “Delvecchio!”

Delvecchio walked to him, bent, pulled off the filtermask. The man was still alive. He opened his eyes.

“Oh, God, Jim,” he said “Why? Oh, why?”

Delvecchio didn’t say anything. He stood stock still and stared down.

Bill Reyn stared back up.

“I got through, Jim,” said Reyn, coughing blood. “Once the flier was down...no trouble. Close...I walked it. They...they were still inside mostly with the heat. Only a few...had gone out.”

Delvecchio coughed once, quietly.

“I got through...the vaccine...most, anyway. A few had gone out...infected...no hope. But...but, we took away their armor and their weapons...no harm that way. We...had to fight out way through. Me...left alone, but, God, those guys in duralloy lost some men...leeches...slinkers.”

Sheridan turned and dropped his rifle. He began to run towards the labs.

“We tried the suit radios, Jim, but the storm...should have waited, but the vaccine...short term...wearing off...we tried not to hurt you...started killing us.” He began to choke on his own blood.

Delvecchio, helpless, looked down. “Again,” he said in a voice that was dead and broken. “We underestimated it again. We...know. I...I...”

Reyn did not die for another three or four hours. Delvecchio never found Sheridan again. He tried to restart the generators alone, but to no avail. Just before dawn the skies cleared. The stars came through bright and white against the night sky. The fungus had not yet released new spores. It was almost like a moonless night on earth.

Delvecchio sat atop a mound of rubble. A dead soldier’s laser rifle in his hands. Ten or eleven charges on his belt. He did not look off to where Reyn lay. He was trying to figure out how to get the radio working. There was a supply ship coming.

The sky to the east began to lighten. A swamp bat, then another, began to circle the ruins of Greywater Station.

And the spores began to fall.

# Bitterblooms

When he finally died, Shawn found to her shame that she could not even bury him.

She had no proper digging tools; only her hands, the longknife strapped to her thigh, and the smaller blade in her boot. But it would not have mattered. Beneath its sparse covering of snow, the ground was frozen hard as rock. Shawn was sixteen, as her family counted years, and the ground had been frozen for half her lifetime. The season was deepwinter, and the world was cold.

Knowing the futility of it before she started, Shawn still tried to dig. She picked a spot a few meters from the rude lean-to she had built for their shelter, broke the thin crust of the snow and swept it away with her hands, and began to hack at the frozen earth with the smaller of her blades. But the ground was harder than her steel. The knife broke, and she looked at it helplessly, knowing how precious it had been, knowing what Creg would say. Then she began to claw at the unfeeling soil, weeping, until her hands ached and her tears froze within her mask. It was not right for her to leave him without burial; he had been father, brother, lover.

He had always been kind to her, and she had always failed him. And now she could not even bury him. Finally, not knowing what else to do, she kissed him one last time – there was ice in his beard and his hair, and his face was twisted unnaturally by the pain and the cold, but he was still family, after all – and toppled the lean-to across his body, hiding him within a rough bier of branches and snow. It was useless, she knew; vampires and windwolves would knock it apart easily to get at his flesh. But she could not abandon him without shelter of some kind.

She left him his skis and his big silverwood bow, its bowstring snapped by the cold. But she took his sword and his heavy fur cloak; it was little enough burden added to her pack. She had nursed him for almost a week after the vampire had left him wounded, and that long delay in the little lean-to had depleted most of their supplies. Now she hoped to travel light and fast. She strapped on her skis, standing next to the clumsy grave she had built him, and said her last farewell leaning on her poles.

Then she set off over the snow, through the terrible silence of the deepwinter woods, toward home and fire and family. It was just past midday.

By dusk, Shawn knew that she would never make it.

She was calmer then, more rational. She had left her grief and her shame behind with his body, as she had been taught to do. The stillness and the cold were all around her, but the long hours of skiing had left her flushed and almost warm beneath her layers of leather and fur.

Her thoughts had the brittle clarity of the ice that hung in long spears from the bare, twisted trees around her.

As darkness threw its cloak over the world, Shawn sought shelter in the lee of the greatest of those trees, a massive blackbark whose trunk was three meters across. She spread the fur cloak she had taken on a bare patch of ground and pulled her own woven cape over her like a blanket to shut out the rising wind. With her back to the

trunk and her longknife drawn beneath her cape, just in case, she slept a brief, wary sleep, and woke in full night to contemplate her mistakes.

The stars were out; she could see them peeking through the bare black branches above her. The Ice Wagon dominated the sky, bringing cold into the world, as it had for as long as Shawn could remember. The driver's blue eyes glared down at her, mocking.

It had been the Ice Wagon that killed Lane, she thought bitterly. Not the vampire. The vampire had mauled him badly that night, when his bowstring broke as he tried to draw in their defense. But in another season, with Shawn nursing him, he would have lived. In deepwinter, he never had a chance. The cold crept in past all the defenses she had built for him; the cold drained away all his strength, all his ferocity. The cold left him a shrunken white thing, numb and pale, his lips tinged with blue. And now the driver of the Ice Wagon would claim his soul.

And hers, too, she knew. She should have abandoned Lane to his fate. That was what Creg would have done, or Leila - any of them. There had never been any hope that he would live, not in deepwinter. Nothing lived in deepwinter. The trees grew stark and bare in deepwinter, the grass and the flowers perished, the animals all froze or went underground to sleep. Even the windwolves and the vampires grew lean and fierce, and many starved to death before the thaw.

As Shawn would starve.

They had already been running three days late when the vampire attacked them, and Lane had had them eating short rations. Afterward he had been so weak. He had finished his own food on the fourth day, and Shawn had started feeding him some of hers, never telling him. She had very little left now, and the safety of Carinhall was still nearly two weeks of hard travel away. In deepwinter, it might as well be two years.

Curled beneath her cape, Shawn briefly considered starting a fire. A fire would bring vampires — they could feel the heat three kilometers off. They would come stalking silently between the trees, gaunt black shadows taller than Lane had been, their loose skin flapping over skeletal limbs like dark cloaks, concealing the claws. Perhaps, if she lay in wait, she could take one by surprise. A full-grown vampire would feed her long enough to return to Carinhall. She played with the idea in the darkness, and only reluctantly put it aside.

Vampires could run across the snow as fast as an arrow in flight, scarcely touching the ground, and it was virtually impossible to see them by night. But they could see her very well, by the heat she gave off. Lighting a fire would only guarantee her a quick and relatively painless death.

Shawn shivered and gripped the hilt of her longknife more tightly for reassurance. Every shadow suddenly seemed to have a vampire crouched within it, and in the keening of the wind she thought she could hear the flapping noise their skin made when they ran.

Then, louder and very real, another noise reached her ears - an angry high-pitched whistling like nothing Shawn had ever heard. And suddenly the black horizon was suffused with light, a flicker of ghostly blue radiance that outlined the naked bones of the forest and throbbed visibly against the sky. Shawn inhaled sharply, a draught of ice down her raw throat, and struggled to her feet, half-afraid she was under attack. But there was nothing. The world was cold and black and dead; only the light lived, flickering dimly in the distance, beckoning, calling to her. She watched it for long minutes, thinking back on old Jon and the terrible stories he used to tell the children when they gathered round Carinhall's great hearth. There are worse things than vampires, he would tell them; and

remembering, Shawn was suddenly a little girl again, sitting on the thick furs with her back to the fire, listening to Jon talk of ghosts and living shadows and cannibal families who lived in great castles built of bone.

As abruptly as it had come, the strange light faded and was gone, and with it went the high-pitched noise. Shawn had marked where it had shone, however. She took up her pack and fastened Lane's cloak about her for extra warmth, then began to don her skis. She was no child now, she told herself, and that light had been no ghost dance. Whatever it was, it might be her only chance. She took her poles in hand and set off toward it.

Night travel was dangerous in the extreme, she knew. Creg had told her that a hundred times, and Lane as well. In the darkness, in the scant starlight, it was easy to go astray, to break a ski or a leg or worse. And movement generated heat, heat that drew vampires from the deep of the woods. Better to lay low until dawn, when the nocturnal hunters had retired to their lairs.

All of her training told her that, and all of her instincts. But it was deepwinter, and when she rested the cold bit through even the warmest of furs, and Lane was dead and she was hungry, and the light had been so close, so achingly close. So she followed it, going slowly, going carefully, and it seemed that this night she had a charm upon her. The terrain was all flatland, gentle to her, almost kind, and the snow cover was sparse enough so that neither root nor rock could surprise and trip her. No dark predators came gliding out of the night, and the only sound was the sound of her motion, the soft crackling of the snow crust beneath her skis.

The forest grew steadily thinner as she moved, and after an hour Shawn emerged from it entirely, into a wasteland of tumbled stone blocks and twisted, rusting metal. She knew what it was; she had seen other ruins before, where families had lived and died, and their halls and houses had gone all to rot. But never a ruin so extensive as this. The family that had lived here, however long ago, had been very great once; the shattered remains of their dwellings were more extensive than a hundred Carinhalls. She began to pick a careful path through the crumbling, snow-dusted masonry. Twice she came upon structures that were almost intact, and each time she considered seeking shelter within those ancient stone walls, but there was nothing in either of them that might have caused the light, so Shawn passed on after only a brief inspection. The river she came to soon thereafter stopped her for a slightly longer time.

From the high bank where she paused, she could see the remains of two bridges that had once spanned the narrow channel, but both of them had fallen long ago. The river was frozen over, however, so she had no trouble crossing it. In deepwinter the ice was thick and solid and there was no danger of her falling through.

As she climbed painstakingly up the far bank, Shawn came upon the flower.

It was a very small thing, its thick black stem emerging from between two rocks low on the river bank. She might never have seen it in the night, but her pole dislodged one of the ice-covered stones as she struggled up the slope, and the noise made her glance down to where it grew.

It startled her so that she took both poles in one hand, and with the other fumbled in the deepest recesses of her clothing, so that she might risk a flame. The match gave a short, intense light. But it was enough; Shawn saw.

A flower, tiny, so tiny, with four blue petals, each the same pale blue shade that Lane's lips had been just before he died. A flower, here, alive, growing in the eighth year of deepwinter, when all the world was dead.

They would never believe her, Shawn thought, not unless she brought the truth with her, back to Carinhall. She freed herself from her skis and tried to pick the flower. It was futile, as futile as her effort to bury Lane. The stem

was as strong as metal wire. She struggled with it for several minutes, and fought to keep from crying when it would not come. Creg would call her a liar, a dreamer, all the things he always called her.

She did not cry, though, finally. She left the flower where it grew, and climbed to the top of the river ridge. There she paused.

Beneath her, going on and on for meters upon meters, was a wide empty field. Snow stood in great drifts in some places, and in others there was only bare flat stone, naked to the wind and the cold. In the center of the field was the strangest building Shawn had even seen, a great fat teardrop of a building that squatted like an animal in the starlight on three black legs. The legs were bent beneath it, flexed and rimed over with ice at their joints, as if the beast had been about to leap straight up into the sky. And legs and building both were covered with flowers.

There were flowers everywhere, Shawn saw when she took her eyes off the squat building long enough to look. They sprouted, singly and in clusters, from every little crack in the field, with snow and ice all around them, making dark islands of life in the pure white stillness of deepwinter. Shawn walked through them, closer to the building, until she stood next to one of the legs and reached up to touch its joint wonderingly with a gloved hand. It was all metal, metal and ice and flowers, like the building itself. Where each of the legs rested, the stone beneath had broken and fractured in a hundred places, as if shattered by some great blow, and vines grew from the crevices, twisting black vines that crawled around the flanks of the structure like the webs of a summer-spinner. The flowers burst from the vines, and now that she stood up close, Shawn saw that they were not like her little river bloom at all. There were blossoms of many colors, some as big as her head, growing in wild profusion everywhere, as if they did not realize that it was deepwinter, when they should be black and dead.

She was walking around the building, looking for an entrance, when a noise made her turn her head toward the ridge.

A thin shadow flickered briefly against the snow, then seemed to vanish. Shawn trembled and retreated quickly, putting the nearest of the tall legs to her back, and then she dropped everything and Lane's sword was in her left hand and her own longknife in her right, and she stood cursing herself for that match, that stupid, stupid match, and listening for the flap-flap-flap of death on taloned feet.

It was too dark, she realized, and her hand shook, and even as it did the shape rushed upon her from the side. Her longknife flashed at it, stabbing, slicing, but cut only the skincloak, and then the vampire gave a shriek of triumph and Shawn was buffeted to the ground and she knew she was bleeding. There was a weight on her chest, and something black and leathery settled across her eyes, and she tried to knife it and that was when she realized that her blade was gone. She screamed.

Then the vampire screamed, and the side of Shawn's head exploded in pain, and she had blood in her eyes, and she was choking on blood, and blood and blood, and nothing more ...

It was blue, all blue; hazy, shifting blue. A pale blue, dancing, dancing, like the ghost light that had flickered on the sky. A soft blue, like the little flower, the impossible blossom by the riverbank. A cold blue, like the eyes of the Ice Wagon's black driver, like Lane's lips when last she kissed them. Blue, blue, and it moved and would not be still. Everything was blurred, unreal. There was only blue. For a long time, only blue.

Then music. But it was blurred music, blue music somehow, strange and high and fleeting, very sad, lonely, a bit erotic. It was a lullaby, like old Tesenya used to sing when Shawn was very little, before Tesenya grew weak and sick and Creg put her out to die. It had been so long since Shawn had heard such a song; all the music she knew

was Creg on his harp, and Rys on her guitar. She found herself relaxing, floating, all her limbs turned to water, lazy water, though it was deepwinter and she knew she should be ice.

Soft hands began to touch her, lifting her head, pulling off her facemask so the blue warm brushed her naked cheeks, then drifting lower, lower, loosening her clothes, stripping her of furs and cloth and leather, off with her belt and off with her jerkin and off with her pants. Her skin tingled. She was floating, floating. Everything was warm, so warm, and the hands fluttered here and there and they were so gentle, like old mother Tesenya had been, like her sister Leila was sometimes, like Devin. Like Lane, she thought, and it was a pleasant thought, comforting and arousing at the same time, and Shawn held close to it. She was with Lane, she was safe and warm and ... and she remembered his face, the blue in his lips, the ice in his beard where his breath had frozen, the pain burned into him, twisting his features like a mask.

She remembered, and suddenly she was drowning in the blue, choking on the blue, struggling, screaming.

The hands lifted her and a stranger's voice muttered something low and soothing in a language she did not understand. A cup was pressed to Shawn's lips. She opened her mouth to scream again, but instead she was drinking.

It was hot and sweet and fragrant, full of spices, and some of them were very familiar, but others she could not place at all. Tea, she thought, and her hands took it from the other hands as she gulped it down.

She was in a small dim room, propped up on a bed of pillows, and her clothes were piled next to her and the air was full of blue mist from a burning stick. A woman knelt beside her, dressed in bright tatters of many different colors, and gray eyes regarded her calmly from beneath the thickest, wildest hair that Shawn had ever seen.

"You ... who ..." Shawn said.

The woman stroked her brow with a pale soft hand. "Carin," she said clearly.

Shawn nodded, slowly, wondering who the woman was, and how she knew the family.

"Carinhall," the woman said, and her eyes seemed amused and a bit sad. "Lin and Eris and Caith. I remember them, little girl. Beth, Voice Carin, how hard she was. And Kaya and Dale and Shawn."

"Shawn. I'm Shawn. That's me. But Creg is Voice Carin ..."

The woman smiled faintly, and continued to stroke Shawn's brow. The skin of her hand was very soft.

Shawn had never felt anything so soft. "Shawn is my lover," the woman said. "Every tenth year, at Gathering."

Shawn blinked at her, confused. She was beginning to remember. The light in the forest, the flowers, the vampire. "Where am I?" she asked.

"You are everywhere you never dreamed of being, little Carin," the woman said, and she laughed at herself.

The walls of the room shone like dark metal, Shawn noticed. "The building," she blurted, "the building on legs, with all the flowers..."

"Yes," the woman said.

"Do you ... who are you? Did you make the light? I was in the forest, and Lane was dead and I was nearly out of food, and I saw a light, a blue ..."



“That was my light, Carin child, as I came down from the sky. I was far away, oh yes, far away in lands you never heard of, but I came back.”

The woman stood up suddenly, and whirled around and around, and the gaudy cloth she wore flapped and shimmered, and she was wreathed in pale blue smoke.

“I am the witch they warn you of in Carinhall, child,” she yelled, exulting, and she whirled and whirled until finally, dizzy, she collapsed again beside Shawn’s bed.

No one had ever warned Shawn of a witch. She was more puzzled than afraid. “You killed the vampire,” she said. “How did you...?”

“I am magic,” the woman said. “I am magic and I can do magic things and I will live forever. And so will you, Carin child, Shawn, when I teach you. You can travel with me, and I will teach you all the magics and tell you stories, and we can be lovers. You are my lover already, you know, you’ve always been, at Gathering. Shawn, Shawn.” She smiled.

“No,” Shawn said. “That was some other person.”

“You’re tired, child. The vampire hurt you, and you don’t remember. But you will remember, you will.”

She stood up and moved across the room, snuffing out the burning stick with her fingertips, quieting the music. When her back was turned, her hair fell nearly to her waist, and all of it was curls and tangles; wild restless hair, tossing as she moved like the waves on the distant sea. Shawn had seen the sea once, years ago, before deepwinter came. She remembered. The woman faded the dim lights somehow, and turned back to Shawn in darkness.

“Rest now. I took away your pain with my magics, but it may come back. Call me if it does. I have other magics.”

Shawn did feel drowsy. “Yes,” she murmured, unresisting. But when the woman moved to leave, Shawn called out to her again. “Wait,” she said. “Your family, mother. Tell me who you are.”

The woman stood framed in yellow light, a silhouette without features. “My family is very great, child. My sisters are Lilith and Marcyan and Erika Stormjones and Lamiya-Bailis and Deirdre d’Allerane. Kleronomas and Stephen Cobalt Northstar and Tomo and Walberg were all brothers to me, and fathers. Our house is up past the Ice Wagon, and my name, my name is Morgan.”

And then she was gone, and the door closed behind her, and Shawn was left to sleep.

Morgan, she thought as she slept. Morganmorganmorgan. The name drifted through her dreams like smoke.

She was very little, and she was watching the fire in the hearth at Carinhall, watching the flames lick and tease at the big black logs, smelling the sweet fragrances of thistlewood, and nearby someone was telling a story. Not Jon, no, this was before Jon had become storyteller.

This was long ago. It was Tesenya, so very old, her face wrinkled, and she was talking in her tired voice so full of music, her lullaby voice, and all the children listened. Her stories had been different from Jon’s. His were always about fighting, wars and vendettas and monsters, chock-full with blood and knives and impassioned oaths sworn by a father’s corpse. Tesenya was quieter. She told of a group of travelers, six of family Alynne, who were lost in the wild one year during the season of freeze. They chanced upon a huge hall built all of metal, and the family within welcomed them with a great feast. So the travelers ate and drank, and just as they were wiping their lips to

go, another banquet was served, and thus it went. The Alynnes stayed and stayed, for the food was richer and more delightful than any they had ever tasted, and the more they ate of it, the hungrier they grew. Besides, deepwinter had set in outside the metal hall. Finally, when thaw came many years later, others of family Alynne went searching for the six wanderers. They found them dead in the forest. They had put off their good warm furs and dressed in flimsies. Their steel had gone all to rust, and each of them had starved. For the name of the metal hall was Morganhall, Tesenya told the children, and the family who lived there was the family named Liar, whose food is empty stuff made of dreams and air.

Shawn woke naked and shivering.

Her clothes were still piled next to her bed. She dressed quickly, first pulling on her undergarments, and over them a heavy blackwool shift, and over that her leathers, pants and belt and jerkin, then her coat of fur with its hood, and finally the capes, Lane's cloak and her own of child's cloth. Last of all was her facemask. She pulled the taut leather down over her head and laced it closed beneath her chin, and then she was safe from deepwinter winds and stranger's touches both. Shawn found her weapons thrown carelessly in a corner with her boots. When Lane's sword was in her hand and her longknife back in its familiar sheath, she felt complete again. She stepped outside determined to find skis and exit.

Morgan met her with laughter bright and brittle, in a chamber of glass and shining silver metal. She stood framed against the largest window Shawn had ever seen, a sheet of pure clean glass taller than a man and wider than Carinhall's great hearth, even more flawless than the mirrors of family Terhis, who were famed for their glassblowers and lensmakers. Beyond the glass it was midday, the cool blue midday of deepwinter. Shawn saw the field of stone and snow and flowers, and beyond it the low ridge that she had climbed, and beyond that the frozen river winding through the ruins.

"You look so fierce and angry," Morgan said, when her silly laughter had stopped. She had been threading her wild hair with wisps of cloth and gems on silver clips that sparkled when she moved. "Come, Carin child, take off your furs again. The cold can't touch us here, and if it does we can leave it. There are other lands, you know." She walked across the room.

Shawn had let the point of her sword droop toward the floor; now she jerked it up again. "Stay away," she warned. Her voice sounded hoarse and strange.

"I am not afraid of you, Shawn," Morgan said. "Not you, my Shawn, my lover." She moved around the sword easily, and took off the scarf she wore, a gossamer of gray spidersilk set with tiny crimson jewels, to drape it around Shawn's neck. "See, I know what you are thinking," she said, pointing to the jewels. One by one, they were changing color; fire became blood, blood crusted and turned brown, brown faded to black. "You are frightened of me, nothing more. No anger. You would never hurt me."

She tied the scarf neatly under Shawn's facemask, and smiled.

Shawn stared at the gems with horror. "How did you do that?" she demanded, backing off uncertainly.

"With magic," Morgan said. She spun on her heels and danced back to the window. "Morgan is full of Magic"

"You are full of lies," Shawn said. "I know about the six Alynnes. I'm not going to eat here and starve to death. Where are my skis?"

Morgan seemed not to hear her; the older woman's eyes were clouded, wistful. "Have you ever seen Alynne House in summer, child? It's very beautiful. The sun comes up over the redstone tower, and sinks every night into Jamei's Lake. Do you know it, Shawn?"

"No," Shawn said boldly, "and you don't either. What do you talk about Alynne House for? You said your family lived on the Ice Wagon, and they all had names I never heard of, Kleraberus and things like that."

"Kleronomas," Morgan said, giggling. She raised her hand to her mouth to still herself, and chewed on a finger idly while her gray eyes shone. All her fingers were ringed with bright metal. You should see my brother Kleronomas, child. He is half of metal and half of flesh, and his eyes are bright as glass, and he knows more than all the Voices who've ever spoken for Carinhall."

"He does not," Shawn said. "You're lying again!"

"He does," Morgan said. Her hand fell and she looked cross. "He's magic. We all are. Erika died, but she wakes up to live again and again and again. Stephen was a warrior — he killed a billion families, more than you can count - and Celia found a lot of secret places that no one had ever found before. My family all does magic things." Her expression grew suddenly sly. "I killed the vampire, didn't I? How do you think I did that?"

"With a knife!" Shawn said fiercely. But beneath her mask she flushed. Morgan had killed the vampire; that meant there was a debt. And she had drawn steel! She flinched under Creg's imagined fury, and dropped the sword to clatter on the floor. All at once she was very confused.

Morgan's voice was gentle. "But you had a longknife and a sword, and you couldn't kill the vampire, could you, child? No." She came across the room. "You are mine, Shawn Carin, you are my lover and my daughter and my sister. You have to learn to trust. I have much to teach you. Here." She took Shawn by the hand and led her to the window. "Stand here. Wait, Shawn, wait and watch, and I will show you more of Morgan's magics." At the far wall, smiling, she did something with her rings to a panel of bright metal and square dim lights.

Watching, Shawn grew suddenly afraid.

Beneath her feet, the floor began to shake, and a sound assaulted her, a high whining shriek that stabbed at her ears through the leather mask, until she clapped her gloved hands on either side of her head to shut it out. Even then she could hear it, like a vibration in her bones. Her teeth ached, and she was aware of a sudden shooting pain up in her left temple. And that was not the worst of it. For outside, where everything had been cold and bright and still, a somber blue light was shifting and dancing and staining all the world. The snowdrifts were a pale blue, and the plumes of frozen powder that blew from each of them were paler still, and blue shadows came and went upon the river ridge where none had been before. And Shawn could see the light reflected even on the river itself, and on the ruins that stood desolate and broken upon the farther crest. Morgan was giggling behind her, and then everything in the window began to blur, until there was nothing to be seen at all, only colors, colors bright and dark running together, like pieces of a rainbow melting in some vast stewpot. Shawn did not budge from where she stood, but her hand fell to the hilt of her longknife, and despite herself she trembled.

"Look, Carin child!" Morgan shouted, over the terrible whine. Shawn could barely hear her.

"We've jumped up into the sky now, away from all that cold. I told you, Shawn. We're going to ride the Ice Wagon now." And she did something to the wall again, and the noise vanished, and the colors were gone. Beyond the glass was sky."

Shawn cried out in fear. She could see nothing except darkness and stars, stars everywhere, more than she had ever seen before. And she knew she was lost. Lane had taught her all the stars, so she could use them for a guide,

find her way from anywhere to anywhere, but these stars were wrong, were different. She could not find the Ice Wagon, or the Ghost Skier, or even Lara Carin with her windwolves. She could find nothing familiar; only stars, stars that leered at her like a million eyes, red and white and blue and yellow, and none of them would even blink.

Morgan was standing behind her.

“Are we in the Ice Wagon?” Shawn asked in a small voice.

“Yes.”

Shawn trembled, threw away her knife so that it bounded noisily off a metal wall, and turned to face her host.

“Then we’re dead, and the driver is taking our souls off to the frozen waste,” she said..

She did not cry. She had not wanted to be dead, especially not in deepwinter, but at least she would see Lane again.

Morgan began to undo the scarf she had fastened round Shawn’s neck. The stones were black and frightening.

“No, Shawn Carin,” she said evenly. “We are not dead. Live here with me, child, and you will never die. You’ll see.” She pulled off the scarf and starting unlacing the thongs of Shawn’s facemask. When it was loose, she pulled it up and off the girl’s head, tossing it casually to the floor. “You’re pretty, Shawn. You have always been pretty, though. I remember, all those years ago. I remember.”

“I’m not pretty,” Shawn said. “I’m too soft, and I’m too weak, and Creg says I’m skinny and my face is all pushed in. And I’m not...”

Morgan shushed her with a touch to her lips, and then unfastened her neck clasp. Lane’s battered cloak slipped from her shoulders. Her own cape followed, and then her coat was off, and Morgan’s fingers moved down to the laces of her jerkin.

“No,” Shawn said, suddenly shying away. Her back pressed up against the great window, and she felt the awful night laying its weight upon her. “I can’t, Morgan. I’m Carin, and you’re not family, I can’t!

“Gathering,” Morgan whispered. “Pretend this is Gathering, Shawn. You’ve always been my lover during the Gathering.”

Shawn’s throat was dry. “But it isn’t Gathering,” she insisted. She had seen one Gathering, down by the sea, when forty families came together to trade news and goods and love. But that had been years before her blood, so no one had taken her; she was not yet a woman, and thus untouchable. “It isn’t Gathering,” she repeated, close to tears.

Morgan giggled. “Very well. I am no Carin, but I am Morgan full-of-magic. I can make it Gathering.” She darted across the room on bare feet, and thrust her rings against the wall once more, and moved them this way and that, in a strange pattern. Then she called out, “Look! Turn and look.”

Shawn, confused, glanced back at the window.

Under the double suns of highsummer, the world was bright and green. Sailing ships moved languidly on the slow-flowing waters of the river, and Shawn could see the bright reflections of the twin suns bobbing and rolling in their wake, balls of soft yellow butter afloat upon the blue. Even the sky seemed sweet and buttery, white clouds moved like the stately schooners of family Crien, and nowhere could a star be seen. The far shore was dotted by houses, houses small as a road shelter and greater than even Carinhall, towers as tall and sleek as the

wind-carved rocks in the Broken Mountains. And here and there and all among them people moved; lithe swarthy folk strange to Shawn, and people of the families too, all mingling together. The stone field was free of snow and ice, but there were metal buildings everywhere, some larger than Morganhall, many smaller, each with its distinctive markings, and every one of them squatting on three legs. Between the buildings were the tents and stalls of the families, with their sigils and their banners. And mats, the gaily colored lovers' mats. Shawn saw people coupling, and felt Morgan's hand resting lightly on her shoulder.

"Do you know what you are seeing, Carin child?" Morgan whispered.

Shawn turned back to her with fear and wonder in her eyes. "It is Gathering."

Morgan smiled. "You see," she said. "It is Gathering, and I claim you. Celebrate with me." And her fingers moved to the buckle on Shawn's belt, and Shawn did not resist.

Within the metals walls of Morganhall, seasons turned to hours turned to years turned to days turned to months turned to weeks turned to seasons once again. Time had no sense. When Shawn awoke, on a shaggy fur that Morgan had spread beneath the window, highsummer had turned back into deep winter, and the families, ships, and Gathering were gone. Dawn came earlier than it should have, and Morgan seemed annoyed, so she made it dusk; the season was freeze, with its ominous chill, and where the stars of sunrise had shown, now gray clouds raced across a copper-colored sky. They ate while the copper turned to black. Morgan served mushrooms and crunchy summer greens, dark bread dripping with honey and butter, creamed spice-tea, and thick cuts of red meat floating in blood, and afterward there was flavored ice with nuts, and finally a tall hot drink with nine layers, each a different color with a different taste. They sipped the drink from glasses of impossibly thin crystal, and it made Shawn's head ache. And she began to cry, because the food had seemed real and all of it was good, but she was afraid that if she ate any more of it she would starve to death.

Morgan laughed at her and slipped away and returned with dried leathery strips of vampire meat; she told Shawn to keep it in her pack and munch on it whenever she felt hungry.

Shawn kept the meat for a long time, but never ate from it.

At first she tried to keep track of the days by counting the meals they ate, and how many times they slept, but soon the changing scenes outside the window and the random nature of life in Morganhall confused her past any hope of understanding. She worried about it for weeks - or perhaps only for days - and then she ceased to worry. Morgan could make time do anything she pleased, so there was no sense in Shawn caring about it.

Several times Shawn asked to leave, but Morgan would have none of it. She only laughed and did some great magic that made Shawn forget about everything. Morgan took her blades away one night when she was asleep, and all her furs and leathers too, and afterward Shawn was forced to dress as Morgan wanted her to dress, in clouds of colored silk and fantastic tatters, or in nothing at all. She was angry and upset at first, but later she grew used to it. Her old clothing would have been much too hot inside Morganhall, anyway.

Morgan gave her gifts. Bags of spice that smelled of summer. A windwolf fashioned of pale blue glass. A metal mask that let Shawn see in the dark. Scented oils for her bath, and bottles of a slow golden liquor that brought her forgetfulness when her mind was troubled. A mirror, the finest mirror that had ever been. Books that Shawn could not read. A bracelet set with small red stones then drank in light all day and glowed by night. Cubes that played exotic music when Shawn warmed them with her hand. Boots woven of metal that were so light and flexible she could crumple them up in the palm of one hand. Metal miniatures of men and women and all manner of demons.

Morgan told her stories. Each gift she gave to Shawn had a story that went with it, a tale of where it came from and who had made it and how it had come here. Morgan told them all.

There were tales for each of her relatives as well; indomitable Kleronomas who drove across the sky hunting for knowledge, Celia Marcyan the ever-curious and her ship Shadow Chaser, Erika Stormjones whose family cut her up with knives that she might live again, savage Stephen Cobalt Northstar, melancholy Tomo, bright Deirdre d'Allerane and her grim ghostly twin. Those stories Morgan told with magic. There was a place in one wall with a small square slot in it, and Morgan would go there and insert a flat metallic box, and then all the lights would go out and Morgan's dead relatives would live again, bright phantoms who walked and talked and dripped blood when they were hurt. Shawn thought they were real until the day when Deirdre first wept for her slain children, and Shawn ran to comfort her and found they could not touch. It was not until afterward that Morgan told her Deirdre and the others were only spirits, called down by her magic. Morgan told her many things. Morgan was her teacher as well as her lover, and she was nearly as patient as Lane had been, though much more prone to wander and lose interest.

She gave Shawn a beautiful twelve-stringed guitar and began to teach her to play it, and she taught her to read a little, and she taught her a few of the simpler magics, so Shawn could move easily around the ship. That was another thing that Morgan taught her; Morganhall was no building after all, but a ship, a sky-ship that could flex its metal legs and leap from star to star. Morgan told her about the planets, lands out by those far-off stars, and said that all the gifts she had given Shawn had come from out there, from beyond the Ice Wagon; the mask and mirror were from Jamison's World, the books and cubes from Avalon, the bracelet from High Kavalaan, the oils from Braque, the spices from Rhiannon and Tara and Old Poseidon, the boots from Bastion, the figurines from Chul Damien, the golden liquor from a land so far away that even Morgan did not know its name.

Only the fine glass windwolf had been made here, on Shawn's world, Morgan said. The windwolf had always been one of Shawn's favorites, but now she found she did not like it half so well as she had thought she did. The others were all so much more exciting. Shawn had always wanted to travel, to visit distant families in wild distant climes, to gaze on seas and mountains. But she had been too young, and when she finally reached her womanhood, Creg would not let her go; she was too slow, he said, too timid, too irresponsible. Her life would be spent at home, where she could put her meager talents to better use for Carinhall. Even the fateful trip that had led her here had been a fluke; Lane had insisted, and Lane alone of all the others was strong enough to stand up to Creg, Voice Carin. Morgan took her traveling, though, on sails between the stars.

When blue fire flickered against the icy landscape of deepwinter and the sound rose up out of nowhere, higher and higher, Shawn would rush eagerly to the window, where she would wait with mounting impatience for the colors to clear. Morgan gave her all the mountains and all the seas she could dream of, and more. Through the flawless glass Shawn saw the lands from all the stories; Old Poseidon with its weathered docks and its fleets of silver ships, the meadows of Rhiannon, the vaulting black steel towers of ai-Emerel, High Kavalaan's windswept plains and rugged hills, the island-cities of Port Jamison and Jolostar on Jamison's World. Shawn learned about cities from Morgan, and suddenly the ruins by the river seemed different in her eyes. She learned about other ways of living as well, about arcologies and holdfasts and brotherhoods, about bond-companies and slavery and armies. Family Carin no longer seemed the beginning and the end of human loyalties.

Of all the places they sailed to, they came to Avalon most often, and Shawn learned to love it best. On Avalon the landing field was always full of other wanderers, and Shawn could watch ships come and go on wands of pale blue light. And in the distance she could see the buildings of the Academy of Human Knowledge, where Kleronomas had deposited all his secrets so that they might be held in trust for Morgan's family. Those jagged glass towers filled Shawn with a longing that was almost a hurt, but a hurt that she somehow craved.

Sometimes - on several of the worlds, but most particularly on Avalon - it seemed to Shawn that some stranger was about to board their ship. She would watch them come, striding purposefully across the field, their destination clear from every step. They never came aboard, though, much to her disappointment. There was never anyone to touch or talk to except Morgan. Shawn suspected that Morgan magicked the would-be visitors away, or else lured them to their doom. She could not quite make up her mind which; Morgan was so moody that it might be both. One dinnertime she remembered Jon's story of the cannibal hall, and looked down with horror at the red meat they were eating. She ate only vegetables that meal, and for several meals thereafter until she finally decided that she was being childish. Shawn considered asking Morgan about the strangers who approached and vanished, but she was afraid. She remembered Creg, whose temper was awful if you asked him the wrong question.

And if the older woman was really killing those who tried to board her ship, it would not be wise to mention it to her. When Shawn was just a child, Creg had beaten her savagely for asking why old Tesenya had to go outside and die.

Other questions Shawn did ask, only to find that Morgan would not answer. Morgan would not talk about her own origins, or the source of their food, or the magic that flew the ship.

Twice Shawn asked to learn the spells that moved them from star to star, and both times Morgan refused with anger in her voice. She had other secrets from Shawn as well. There were rooms that would not open to Shawn, things that she was not allowed to touch, other things that Morgan would not even talk about. From time to time Morgan would disappear for what seemed like days, and Shawn would wander desolately, with nothing outside the window to occupy her but steady unwinking stars. On those occasions Morgan would be somber and secretive when she returned, but only for a few hours, after which she would return to normal.

For Morgan, though, normal was different than for other people.

She would dance about the ship endlessly, singing to herself, sometimes with Shawn as a dancing partner and sometimes alone. She would converse with herself in a musical tongue that Shawn did not know. She would be alternately as serious as a wise old mother, and three times as knowledgeable as a Voice, and as giddy and giggly as a child of one season.

Sometimes Morgan seemed to know just who Shawn was, and sometimes she insisted on confusing her with that other Shawn Carin who had loved her during Gathering. She was very patient and very impetuous; she was unlike anyone that Shawn had ever met before.

"You're silly," Shawn told her once. "You wouldn't be so silly if you lived in Carinhall. Silly people die, you know, and they hurt their families. Everyone has to be useful, and you're not useful. Creg would make you be useful. You're lucky that you aren't a Carin."

Morgan had only caressed her, and gazed at her from sad gray eyes. "Poor Shawn," she'd whispered. "They've been so hard to you. But the Carins were always hard. Alynne House was different, child. You should have been born an Alynne." And after that she would say no more of it.

Shawn squandered her days in wonder and her nights in love, and she thought of Carinhall less and less, and gradually she found that she had come to care for Morgan as if she were family. And more, she had come to trust her.

Until the day she learned about the bitterblooms.

Shawn woke up one morning to find that the window was full of stars, and Morgan had vanished. That usually meant a long boring wait, but this time Shawn was still eating the food that Morgan had left out for her when the older woman returned with her hands full of pale blue flowers.

She was so eager; Shawn had never seen her so eager. She made Shawn leave her breakfast half eaten, and come across the room to the fur rug by the window, so that she could wind the flowers in Shawn's hair.

"I saw while you were sleeping, child," she said happily as she worked. "Your hair has grown long. It used to be so short, chopped off and ugly, but you've been here long enough and now it's better, long like mine. The bitterblooms will make it best of all."

"Bitterblooms?" Shawn asked, curious. "Is that what you call them? I never knew."

"Yes, child," Morgan replied, still fussing and arranging. Shawn had her back to her, so she could not see her face. "The little blue ones are the bitterblooms. They flower even in the bitterest cold, so that's why they call them that. Originally they came from a world named Ymir, very far off, where they have winters nearly as long and cold as we do. The other flowers are from Ymir too, the ones that grow on the vines around the ship. Those are called frostflowers. Deepwinter is always so bleak, so I planted them to make everything look nicer." She took Shawn by the shoulder and turned her around. "You look like me now," she said. "Go and get your mirror and see for yourself, Carin child."

"It's over there," Shawn answered, and she darted around Morgan to get it. Her bare foot came down in something cold and wet. She flinched from it and made a noise; there was a puddle on the rug.

Shawn frowned. She stood very still and looked at Morgan. The woman had not removed her boots. They dripped.

And behind Morgan, there was nothing to be seen but blackness and unfamiliar stars. Shawn was afraid; something was very wrong. Morgan was looking at her uneasily.

She wet her lips, then smiled shyly, and went to get the mirror.

Morgan magicked the stars away before she went to sleep; it was night outside their window, but a gentle night far from the frozen rigor of deepwinter. Leafy trees swayed in the wind on the perimeter of their landing field, and a moon overhead made everything bright and beautiful. A good safe world to sleep on, Morgan said.

Shawn did not sleep. She sat across the room from Morgan, staring at the moon. For the first time since she had come to Morganhall, she was using her mind like a Carin. Lane would have been proud of her; Creg would only have asked what took her so long.

Morgan had returned with a handful of bitterblooms and boots wet with snow. But outside had been nothing, only the emptiness that Morgan said filled the space between the stars. Morgan said that the light Shawn had seen in the forest had been the fires of her ship as it landed. But the thick vines of the frostflowers grew in and around and over the legs of that ship, and they had been growing for years.

Morgan would not let her go outside. Morgan showed her everything through the great window. But Shawn could not remember seeing any window when she had been outside Morganhall. And if the window was a window, where were the vines that should have crept across it, the deepwinter frost that should have covered it?

For the name of the metal hall was Morganhall, Tesenya told the children, and the family who lived there was the family named Liar, whose food is empty stuff made of dreams and air.



Shawn arose in the lie of moonlight and went to where she kept the gifts that Morgan had given her. She looked at them each in turn, and lifted the heaviest of them, the glass windwolf. It was a large sculpture, hefty enough so that Shawn used two hands to lift it, one hand on the creature's snarling snout, the other around its tail.

"Morgan!" she shouted.

Morgan sat up drowsily, and smiled. "Shawn," she murmured. "Shawn child. What are you doing with your windwolf?"

Shawn advanced and lifted the glass animal high above her head. "You lied to me. We've never gone anywhere. We're still in the ruined city, and it's still deepwinter."

Morgan's face was somber. "You don't know what you're saying." She got shakily to her feet. "Are you going to hit me with that thing, child? I'm not afraid of it. Once you held a sword on me, and

I wasn't afraid of you then, either. I am Morgan, full-of-magic. You cannot hurt me, Shawn."

"I want to leave," Shawn said. "Bring me my blades and my clothing, my old clothing. I'm going back to Carinhall. I am a woman of Carin, not a child. You've made a child of me. Bring me food too."

Morgan giggled. "So serious. And if I don't?"

"If you don't," Shawn said, "then I'll throw this right through your window." She hefted the windwolf for emphasis.

"No," Morgan said. Her expression was unreadable. "You don't want to do that, child."

"I will," Shawn said. "Unless you do as I say."

"You don't want to leave me, Shawn Carin, no you don't. We're lovers, remember. We're family. I can do magics for you." Her voice trembled. "Put that down, child. I'll show you things I never showed you before. There are so many places we can go together, so many stories I can tell you. Put that down." She was pleading.

Shawn could sense triumph; oddly enough, there were tears in her eyes.

"Why are you so afraid?" she demanded angrily. "You can fix a broken window with your magic, can't you? Even I can fix a broken window, and Creg says I'm hardly good for anything at all."

The tears were rolling down her naked cheeks now, but silently, silently.

"It's warm outside, you can see that, and there's moonlight to work by, and even a city. You could hire a glazier. I don't see why you are so afraid. It isn't as if it were deepwinter out there, with cold and ice, vampires gliding through the dark. It isn't like that."

"No," Morgan said, "No."

"No," Shawn echoed. "Bring me my things."

Morgan did not move. "It wasn't all lies. It wasn't. If you stay with me, you'll live for a long time. I think it's the food, but it's true. A lot of it was true, Shawn. I didn't mean to lie to you. I wanted it to be best, the way it was for me at first. You just have to pretend, you know. Forget that the ship can't move. It's better that way." Her voice sounded young, frightened; she was a woman, and she begged like a little girl, in a little girl's voice. "Don't break

the window. The window is the most magic thing. It can take us anywhere, almost. Please, please, don't break it, Shawn. Don't."

Morgan was shaking. The fluttering rags she wore seemed faded and shabby suddenly, and her rings did not sparkle. She was just a crazy old woman. Shawn lowered the heavy glass window. "I want my clothing, and my sword, and my skis. And food. Lots and lots of food. Bring it to me and maybe I won't break your window, liar. Do you hear me?"

And Morgan, no longer full of magic, nodded and did as she was told. Shawn watched her in silence. They never spoke again.

Shawn returned to Carinhall and grew old.

Her return was a sensation. She had been missing for more than a standard year, she discovered, and everyone had presumed that both she and Lane were dead. Creg refused to believe her story at first, and the others followed his lead, until Shawn produced a handful of bitterblooms that she had picked from her hair. Even then, Creg could not accept the more fanciful parts of her tale.

"Illusions," he snorted, "every bit of it illusion. Tesenya told it true. If you went back, your magic ship would be gone, with no sign that it had ever been there. Believe me, Shawn"

But it was never clear to her whether Creg truly believed himself. He issued orders, and no man or woman of family Carin ever went that way again.

Things were different at Carinhall after Shawn's return. The family was smaller. Lane's was not the only face she missed at the meal table. Food had grown very short while she had been away, and Creg, as was the custom, had sent the weakest and most useless out to die. Jon was among the missing. Leila was gone too, Leila who had been so young and strong. A vampire had taken her three months ago.

But not everything was sadness. Deepwinter was ending.

And, on a more personal level, Shawn found that her position in the family had changed. Now even Creg treated her with a rough respect. A year later, when thaw was well under way, she bore her first child, and was accepted as an equal into the councils of Carinhall. Shawn named her daughter Lane.

She settled easily into family life. When it was time for her to choose a permanent profession, she asked to be a trader, and was surprised to find that Creg did not speak against her choice. Rys took her as apprentice, and after three years she got an assignment of her own. Her work kept her on the road a great deal. When she was home in Carinhall, however, Shawn found to her surprise that she had become the favored family storyteller. The children said she knew the best stories of anyone. Creg, ever practical, said that her fancies set a bad example for the children and had no proper lesson to them. But by that time he was very sick, a victim of highsummer fever, and his opposition carried little weight. He died soon after, and Devin became Voice, a gentler and more moderate Voice than Creg. Family Carin had a generation of peace while he spoke for Carinhall, and their numbers increased from forty to nearly one hundred.

Shawn was frequently his lover. Her reading had improved a great deal by then, through long study, and Devin once yielded to her whim and showed her the secret library of the Voices, where each Voice for untold centuries had kept a journal detailing the events of his service

As Shawn had suspected, one of the thicker volumes was called *The Book of Beth, Voice Carin*. It was about sixty years old.

Lane was the first of nine children for Shawn. She was lucky. Six of them lived, two fathered by family and four that she brought back with her from Gathering. Devin honored her for bringing so much fresh blood into Carinhall, and later another Voice would name her for exceptional prowess as a trader. She traveled widely, met many families, saw waterfalls and volcanoes as well as seas and mountains, sailed halfway around the world on a Crien schooner. She had many lovers and much esteem. Jannis followed Devin as Voice, but she had a bitter unhappy time of it, and when she passed, the mothers and fathers of family Carin offered the position to Shawn. She turned it down. It would not have made her happy. Despite everything she had done, she was not a happy person. She remembered too much, and sometimes she could not sleep very well at night.

During the fourth deepwinter of her life, the family numbered two hundred and thirty-seven, fully a hundred of them children. But game was scarce, even in the third year after freeze, and Shawn could see the hard cold times approaching. The Voice was a kind woman who found it hard to make the decisions that had to be made, but Shawn knew what was coming. She was the second eldest of those in Carinhall. One night she stole some food - just enough, two weeks' traveling supply - and a pair of skis, left Carinhall at dawn, and spared the Voice the giving of the order.

She was not so fast as she had been when she was young. The journey took closer to three weeks than to two, and she was lean and weak when she finally entered the ruined city.

But the ship was just as she had left it.

Extremes of heat and cold had cracked the stone of the spacefield over the years, and the alien flowers had taken advantage of every little opening. The stone was dotted with bitterblooms, and the frostflower vines that twined around the ship were twice as thick as Shawn remembered them. The big brightly colored blossoms stirred faintly in the wind.

Nothing else moved.

She circled the ship three times, waiting for a door to open, waiting for someone to see her and appear. But if the metal noticed her presence, it gave no sign. On the far side of the ship Shawn found something she hadn't seen before - writing, faded but still legible, obscured only by ice and flowers. She used her longknife to shatter the ice and cut the vines, so she might read. It said:

**MORGAN LE FAY**

**Registry: Avalon 476 3319**

Shawn smiled. So even her name had been a lie. Well, it did not matter now. She cupped her gloved hands together over her mouth. "Morgan," she shouted. "It's Shawn." The wind whipped her words away from her.

"Let me in, Morgan. Lie to me, Morgan full-of-magic. I'm sorry. Lie to me and make me believe."

There was no answer. Shawn dug herself a hollow in the snow, and sat down to wait. She was tired and hungry, and dusk was close at hand. Already she could see the driver's ice blue eyes staring through the wispy clouds of twilight.

When at last she slept, she dreamt of Avalon.

# In the House of the Worm

For ages past remembering, the House of the Worm had been lost in decay, and that was as it should be, for decay is but one name of the White Worm himself. So the yaga-la-hai, the worm-children, only smiled and went on as always, though the tapestries rotted on the walls of their endless burrows and their numbers dwindled each year, though meat grew ever more scarce, and the very stone around them turned to dust. In the high burrows with slit windows, awash with the red dimness of the vast dying ember above, they came and went and lived their lives. They tended their torches and held their masques, and made the sign of the worm whenever they passed near the dark windowless burrows where the gounds were said to mutter and lie in wait (for the halls and tunnels of the House of the Worm were reputed to be infinite, descending as far below the earth as the black sky ascends above, and the yaga-la-hai claimed only a few of its many ancient chambers).

It was taught to the worm-children that the White Worm comes for all in the end, but he crawls most slowly, and in the long decay there is fine feasting and the bright sickly colors of rot. Such wisdom was enforced by the current manworm and his bronze knights, even as their ancestors had enforced it for generations untold. Thus did the House of the Worm endure, though the gounds might crawl below and the sun burn out above.

Every fourth year the brightest and wittiest and highest-born among the yaga-la-hai would gather in the Chamber of Obsidian to view the sun and feast in its dying rays. The chamber was the only place for such a brilliant masque. It was high in the House of the Worm, so that all the tunnels leading to it slanted upward, and the floor and ceiling and three of the walls were sheets of fused obsidian, cold and shiny as a mirror and dark as death. For the four-years-less-a-day that passed between the Sun Masques, the lesser-born worm-children, called torch-tenders, worked tirelessly in the chamber, polishing and rubbing, so that when the bronze knights came to fire the torches, their reflections would gleam in the black glass around them. Then the guests would assemble, a thousand strong in gay costumes and fantastic masks, and the obsidian would bend and distort their bright faces and graceful forms, until they were a whirling motley of demons dancing in a great black bottle.

And that was only part of the Chamber of Obsidian. There was more; there was the window. It occupied all of the fourth wall behind the sand-filled hollow where the Manworm coiled; crystal clear the window was, yet stronger than any glass they knew. Nowhere in the House of the Worm was there another window a fraction of its size. The glass, if glass it was, looked out on a dead and desolate plain where no wind stirred; all darkness there, all empty, though there were crumbling stone shapes near the sometimes-seen horizon that might or might not be ruins.

It was hard to tell; the light was very bad. The sun filled half the sky; from one end of the horizon to the other it arched, bulking high enough to touch the zenith. Above it was unending black sky, broken by a handful of stars. The sun itself was a softer black, the color of ash, except in the few places where it still lived. Rivers ran across it, twisting ribbons of glowing red, veins of fire across its tired face. The worm-children had studied them once, in the long-ago years when they played with telescopes, and each of the burning channels had once had a name, though most had been forgotten. Where the rivers met and joined, sometimes smoldering orange lakes could be seen, and there were other places where gleams of red and yellow pulsed beneath the ash-dark crust. Best of all were the seas, two huge oceans of angry red that grew smaller and darker with every masque; one up near the rim continued on the side never seen, and a second burned near the sun's waist and often outlined the maybe-ruins on the horizon.

From noon, when the Sun Masque commenced (all times were arbitrary with the worm-children, for the light was the same, day and night), until midnight, all the feasters would be masked, even the Manworm, and long curtains of heavy red velvet would be drawn across the great window, to hide the sun. Silent torch-tenders would bring out the feast on black iron trays, and arrange it on the long table: heavy mushrooms in cream sauce, subtly flavored puffballs, tiny slugs wrapped in bacon, fragrant green wine alive with struggling spiceworms, fried crawlers, roast hole-hogs from the Manworm's royal larder, hot mushroom bread, a thousand other delicacies. And, as a centerpiece, if they were lucky, a plump six-limbed gound-child (or two!), just below the age of puberty, basted with care and served whole, its meat white and juicy. The guests would eat until they could eat no more, joke and laugh through their veils and dominoes, then dance beneath the torches for hours on end while obsidian ghosts

mocked their movements in the walls and floor. When midnight finally came, the unmasking began. And when all had bared their faces, the bronze knights would carry the reigning Manworm to the fourth wall, and he would pull the curtain cord (if he still had hands, if not, the knights would pull it) and unmask the sun.

The Manworm that year was the Second Vermentor, fourteenth of his line to rule the yaga-la-hai from the High Burrow in the House of the Worm. He had reigned a dozen years already, and soon his time would be at an end, for the priest-surgeons had done their holy work all that while, and there was nothing left to purify but the too-human head that lolled atop the sinuous writhing torso. Soon he would be one with the White Worm. But his son was ready.

The bronze knight Groff, huge and stiff in armor, carried Vermentor to the window and acted as his hands. The velvet slid back smoothly, and the old sun was revealed as the Manworm intoned the ancient worship words and the worm-children gathered round to look.

Annelyn, surrounded by his friends and acolytes, was one of the closest to the glass, as was fitting. Annelyn was always to the front. He was a slim and glorious youth, tall and graceful. All the highborn yaga-la-hai had soft mocha skins, but Annelyn's was the softest of them all. Most of his fellows had blond or red-blond hair, but Annelyn's was the brightest yellow-gold; it crowned his head in delicate sculptured ringlets. Many worm-children had blue eyes, but none so blue and deep as Annelyn's.

He was the first to speak after the curtains were drawn. "The black parts grow," he observed to those around him, in a light, clear voice. "Soon our curtains will not be needed. The sun now masks itself." He laughed.

"It dies," said Vermyllar, a gaunt boy with hollow cheeks and flaxen hair who worried far too much. "My grandfather told me once that there was a time when the black plains were smoky red and the seas and rivers were white fire, painful to look upon." Vermyllar's grandfather had been second son of the Manworm, and thus knew all sorts of things that he passed on to his grandson.

"Perhaps it was so," Annelyn said, "but not in his time, I would wager, or even that of his grandfather." Annelyn had no blood ties with the line of the Manworm, no secret sources of knowledge, but he was always quite sure of his opinions, and his friends - Vermyllar and stout Riess and beautiful Caralee - thought him the wisest and wittiest of men. Once he had killed a groun.

"Don't you worry about the sun dying?" Caralee asked him, tossing blond curls easily as she turned to face him. She looked enough like Annelyn to be his sister-twin; perhaps that was why he wanted her so. "About the burrows growing cold?"

Annelyn laughed again, and Riess laughed with him. (Riess always laughed with Annelyn, though Annelyn suspected that the fat boy seldom understood the joke.) "The sun was dying long before I came into the House of the Worm, and it will continue dying long after I have left," he said, turning away from the window. He was splendid that night, in his costume of pale blue silk and spidergray with the crest of theta stitched above his breast. "As for the cold," Annelyn continued, as he led his three companions back toward the feasting table, "I don't believe that the old sun has anything to do with heat, one way or the other."

"It does," said Vermyllar, who had come in brown rags like a mushroom farmer. He and Caralee matched Annelyn stride for stride across the obsidian, their images hurrying at their feet. Riess puffed along behind, struggling to keep up in the mock armor of a bronze knight.

"Did your grandfather tell you that?" Annelyn asked. Riess laughed.

"No," Vermyllar said, frowning. "But notice, Annelyn, how the sun resembles a hot coal stolen from a firebox?"

"Perhaps," Annelyn said. He paused beside the wine-bowl and filled two cut-crystal goblets with the rich green wine, fishing in the bowl until he found two worms tied in a writhing knot. He scooped them into Caralee's drink, and she smiled at the proposition when he handed her the glass. The second goblet, with a single worm, he sipped himself as he turned back to Vermyllar. "If the sun is nothing but a large coal," Annelyn continued, "then we

need not worry, since we have plenty of smaller coals on hand, and the torch-tenders can always fetch up more from the dark.”

Riess giggled. He had set his knight's helm on the table and was now munching from a platter of spiced spiders.

“That may be true,” Vermyllar said. “But then you admit the sun is a coal, that it helps to warm the burrows.”

“No,” said Annelyn. “I merely conjectured. In fact, I think the sun is an ornament of sorts, set in the sky by the White Worm to provide us with light and an occasion for masques.”

Suddenly, startlingly, there was laughter, coarse and low. Annelyn's smile turned abruptly to a frown when he realized that whoever it was laughed not at his wit, but at him. He drew himself up and turned in annoyance.

When he saw who laughed, however, he only raised a glass (and a fine blond eyebrow) in mock salute.

The Meatbringer (so they called him - if he had a truer name, he did not use it) ceased his laughter; there was a silence. He was a low, broad man, a head shorter than Annelyn and uglier than any of the yaga-la-hai, with his straight white hair, mottled pink-brown skin, and enormous flat nose. His orange and crimson image etched by torchlight in the obsidian was taller and more handsome than the Meatbringer himself had ever been.

He had come to the Sun Masque alone and out of costume, horribly out of place, admitted only because of the groun-child he had provided. Instead of masque finery, he wore his familiar suit of milk-white leather, sewn from the skin of dead grouns, with a colorless half-cloak of woven grounhair. Throughout the House of the Worm his boast was known: that he dressed in the skin and hair of grouns he had himself slain. He was the Meatbringer, who went alone into deep burrows without windows.

Caralee looked at him very curiously. “Why did you laugh?” she asked.

“Because your friend is funny,” the Meatbringer said. His voice was too low, too coarse. Annelyn felt a trifle absurd, being insulted by a mottled man who grumbled in the manner of a torch-tender. And now a curious knot of people began to gather around them; the yaga-la-hai were always interested in the odd, and the Meatbringer was oddest of all. Besides, everyone had grown tired of viewing the sun.

“I'm always pleased to find someone who appreciates wit,” Annelyn said, studiously attempting to turn the Meatbringer's veiled insult into a compliment.

“I do appreciate wit,” the Meatbringer said. “I wish I could find some. This masque is witless.”

He had no subtlety, Annelyn decided. “Only in comparison,” he said. “You are perhaps accustomed to delightful banter with the grouns?”

Riess giggled, and the Meatbringer smiled savagely at him. “The grouns have more wit than your simpering friend, and more knowledge than you.”

There was stifled laughter around them, whether at the absurdity of the Meatbringer's words or at the insult, Annelyn could not be sure. “You know groun secrets, then?” he said lightly.

“They have them, yes. And I know them, yes. And more.”

“The grouns are animals,” Vermyllar put in.

“As are you,” said the Meatbringer.

Vermyllar flushed. “I wear rags tonight, but only for the masque. My grandfather was a son of the Manworm.”

“Better your grandfather than you,” the Meatbringer said.

This time Caralee laughed. Annelyn looked at her, horrified that she could find humor in such coarseness.

“You mock the honor?” he said. “The great knowledge? The responsibilities?”

“I have heavier responsibilities,” the Meatbringer said in a level voice. “As do the others who try to go down and bring back groun meat. The Manworm has only musty ritual duties that no one understands. As to his great knowledge, I have more of that too. The yaga-la-hai know nothing of themselves or of the House of the Worm except half-truths and distorted lies. And honor?” He gestured toward the window. Groff, in his intricately wrought rust-dark armor, still stood stiffly with the Manworm in his arms. Another of the bronze knights was closing the curtains; the dancing had resumed.

“Yes?” Annelyn prompted, blankly.

“The honor is all hideous pain,” the Meatbringer said, and as if to emphasize his statement, the Manworm suddenly lifted his head and his white body began to thrash wildly in Groff’s arms. “Under the knives again and again, each time waking as less of a man. And it ends in deformity and death. Honor?”

Now the crowd around them looked shocked, except for a handful who had listened to the Meatbringer before and knew his amusing irreverence. “The Manworm is purified,” Riess said. (Try as he might, he was dull and orthodox underneath, and they all knew it.) “He is becoming one with the White Worm!”

Annelyn shushed him; he thought of himself as inclined to the cynical and the shocking. “Perhaps you have a point about the honor,” he said to the Meatbringer. “Freethinkers like myself have also questioned the custom, but...”

Again the Meatbringer began to laugh at him, throwing his head back and roaring. Annelyn flushed darkly and drained his wine with a snap - worm and all - as he fought to stay calm.

“Freethinker!” the Meatbringer finally choked out when his laughter had subsided. “I doubt that you have ever had a free thought. You are nothing, less than the Manworm.” He pushed past Annelyn and began to fill his own goblet with wine.

“I have killed a groun,” Annelyn said, quickly, not thinking, regretting the words the instant they were spoken.

The Meatbringer simply turned on him, and grinned, and then everyone began to laugh. There was no need to comment; all of the worm-children knew that the Meatbringer had killed perhaps a hundred grouns, not one. Even Caralee joined the general laughter, though Vermyllar and Riess were mercifully silent. Tall as he was, Annelyn suddenly felt as if the Meatbringer towered over him. He glanced down and saw his own face looking up, foolish and shaken, from the cold obsidian.

The Meatbringer studied Caralee with approval. “Share my bed tonight,” he said suddenly, as blunt as any torch-tender. The Meatbringer had no shame. Annelyn looked up again, shocked. Caralee wore blue-and-spidergray, even as he did; clearly they were together. And he had given her the cup of the mating-worms!

She looked at Annelyn briefly, then seemingly dismissed him with a toss of her bright curls, turning toward the Meatbringer. “Yes,” she said, strange excitement in her voice. Then they went off together onto the vast black mirror of the dance floor to whirl and writhe and slide together in the intricate ancient patterns of the yaga-la-hai.

“He has humiliated us,” Annelyn said furiously to Riess and Vermyllar as he watched the Meatbringer clumsily parody Caralee’s graceful moves.

“We should go to the Manworm,” Vermyllar suggested.

Riess said nothing, but his round face was screwed up in agitation as he reached for another spiced spider.

“No,” Annelyn said. Beyond the sea of wriggling dancers in all their gorgeous colors, Groff had returned the Manworm to his sand pit. Squat torch-tenders were moving around the fringes of the chamber, snuffing two flames of every three. Soon the obsidian grew clouded by darkness, and the bright reflections faded to red streaks on the glass. In shadowed corners, a few bold couples had already commenced the unmasking-of-the-bodies; others soon would follow their example. Annelyn had planned to unmask Caralee. Now he was alone.

“Why not?” Vermyllar was demanding. “You heard him. He called me an animal, and I am the grandson of a man who might have been Manworm.”

Annelyn waved him quiet. “You will have your revenge,” he said. “But my way, my way.” His deep blue eyes stared across the chamber. The Meatbringer was leading Caralee off toward a corner. “My way,” he repeated. Then: “Come.” And he led them from the room.

\* \* \* \*

They met the next morning, early, amid the dust and fading tapestries of the seldom-used Undertunnel, which connected most of the main burrows of the yaga-la-hai before curving away on its long descent into infinity. Annelyn was the first to arrive. He was dressed all in shiny-smooth black, with a hood of the same color to hide his bright hair. His only concession to vanity was a gold theta, embroidered on his breast. A belt of black rope held both rapier and stiletto.

Riess soon materialized, in a tight-fitting shirt of mail and leather and a heavy cloak of spidergray. He and Annelyn sat together on a stone floor across from a black mouth that belched hot, moist air at them through a rusty grid. Light, such as there was, came from scattered torches set in bronze hands on the walls, and from the windows - narrow slits in the ceiling, twenty feet above their heads - that leaked a dim red radiance. The windows were set ten feet apart all along the Undertunnel, until it began to sink.

Once, as a boy, Annelyn had piled junk high in the middle of a burrow and climbed to look out, but there had been nothing to see - the glass, even as the stone of the walls, was thicker than a man is tall. It was fortunate that any light got through.

Vermyllar was late. Annelyn sat cross-legged, his eyes on the hanging tapestries whose images had all turned to mottled gray. Riess was very excited. He was talking about imaginative tortures they could inflict on the Meatbringer.

“When we catch him, we should hang him upside down by running cords through his ankles,” the stout youth suggested. “Then we can buy a pot of bloodworms from the surgeon-priests and set them all over his body to drink him dry.”

Annelyn let him prattle, and finally Vermyllar appeared, wearing black and gray and carrying a torch and a long dagger. The other two sprang up to greet him.

“I should not have come,” Vermyllar said. His face was very drawn, but he seemed to relax a bit in the presence of his friends. “I am the great-grandson of the Manworm himself,” he continued, sheathing his dagger while Riess took the torch from him, “and I should not listen to you, Annelyn. We will all be eaten by grooms.”

“The Meatbringer is not eaten by grooms, and he is only one while we are three together,” Annelyn said. He started down the Undertunnel, toward the endless gray where the bands of red light no longer striped the stone, and the others followed.

“Are you sure he comes this way?” Vermyllar asked. They passed another of the square black mouths, and their cloaks stirred and flapped in its warm breath. Vermyllar gestured at the opening. “Perhaps he climbs down one of those, to where the grooms live.”



“They are very sheer and very hot,” Annelyn told him, “and he would fall or burn if he went that way. Besides, many people have seen the Meatbringer come and go along the Undertunnel. I asked among the torch-tenders.”

They passed beneath the last window; ahead, the Undertunnel slanted down and the ceiling was featureless. Vermyllar stopped in the zone of light.

“Grouns,” he said. “Annelyn, there are grouns down there. Away from the windows.”

He licked his lips. “I have killed a groun,” Annelyn reminded him. “Besides, we have talked of this. We have our torch, and each of us is carrying matches. There are old torches all along the tunnel, so many can be lit. Besides, the grouns never come this high. No one has seen a groun in the Undertunnel for a lifetime.”

“People vanish every month,” Vermyllar insisted. “Mushroom farmers. Groun hunters. Children.”

Annelyn began to sound cross. “Groun hunters go deep, so of course they are caught. The others, well, who knows? Are you afraid of the dark?” He stamped a boot impatiently.

“No,” said Vermyllar, and he came forward to join them again. But he rested his hand on his dagger hilt.

Annelyn did not start again immediately. He walked over to the curving wall, and reached up, pulling a torch from a bronze hand. He lit it from the flames of the torch Riess was carrying, and suddenly the light was doubled. “There,” he said, handing the torch to Vermyllar. “Come.”

So they began to walk down the long dark burrow as it curved and sank, almost imperceptibly: past tapestries that hung in rotten threads and others that were thick tangles of matted fungus; past an endless series of torch-clutching hands (every other one empty, and only one in fifty alight); past countless bricked-up tunnel mouths and a few whose bricks had shattered or turned to dust; past the invisible warmth of the air ducts one after another. They walked in silence, knowing that their voices would echo, hoping that the dust beneath would muffle the sounds of their footsteps. They walked until they had lost sight of the last window, and for an hour after that. And finally they reached the spot where the Undertunnel came to an end. Ahead were two square doorways whose metal doors had long since crumbled into flakes of rust. Riess thrust a torch through one and saw only a few heavy cables, twisting around in tangles and sinking into the yawning darkness of a shaft that fell down and down. Startled, he pulled back and almost dropped the torch.

“Careful,” Annelyn warned.

“What is it?” Riess said.

“Perhaps a trap,” Vermyllar suggested. He thrust his own torch into the second doorway, and they saw a stone stair that descended rapidly. “See? There were two doors here, once. An enemy or a groun might choose the wrong one, and fall down that shaft to its death. It was probably just an air shaft that they put a door on.”

Annelyn moved over next to Riess. “No,” he said, peering into the shaft. “There are ropes. And this shaft is cold.” He shook his head, and his hood fell back, revealing blond curls that shone softly in the dancing torchlight. “No matter,” he said. “We will wait here. Deeper than this and we would meet grouns. Besides, I do not know where that stair leads. So better to wait, and let the Meatbringer lead us.”

“What?” Vermyllar was shocked. “You do not mean to take him here?”

Annelyn smiled. “Ha! That would be a child's revenge. No, we will follow him, deep into the country of the grouns. We will learn all his secrets, all the knowledge that he boasts of. We will see why he comes back and back again, always with meat, while other groun hunters vanish. Then we will kill him.”

“You didn't say that,” Riess objected, openmouthed.

“We've already come too far from the windows,” Vermyllar said, and started to go on.

Annelyn laughed lightly. "Child," he said to Riess. "I came this far when I was half your age. This was where I killed my groun." He pointed to the stairway. "He came out of there, scabbling on four of his legs, not the least afraid of my fire, and I met him with only my torch."

Vermyllar and Riess were both looking at the dark portal of the stairway. "Oh," said Riess.

"Really?" said another voice, from behind. Vermyllar dropped his torch, and pulled out his dagger. All three of them whirled.

On the edge of the light, a huge, red-bearded man dressed in black stood staring at them, a bronze ax on his shoulder. Without his armor, Annelyn hardly recognized him, but suddenly the memory came.

"Groff," he said.

The bronze knight nodded. "I have followed you all down the Undertunnel. You are very noisy." They said nothing. Vermyllar picked up his fallen torch. "So you mean to kill the Meatbringer?" Groff said.

"Yes," Annelyn said. "Do not interfere, Groff. I know the Meatbringer provides much grounmeat for the yaga-la-hai, but we shall do that too when we learn his secrets. The Manworm has no cause to take his side." His mouth was set stubbornly.

Groff chuckled, deep in his throat, and hefted his heavy ax. "Don't fret, little worm-child. You shall have your carrion. I too was sent to kill the Meatbringer."

"What?" Riess said.

"Did the Manworm order it?" Vermyllar asked eagerly.

"The Manworm thinks of nothing but his coming unity with the White Worm," Groff said. He smiled. "And of pain, perhaps. Perhaps he thinks of that. No, his advisers ordered it. The Meatbringer has too many mysteries about him. He is not truly of the yaga-la-hai, the advisers think, and he is not tranquil. He is ugly and disturbs things, and he lies. Moreover, since we first grew aware of the Meatbringer, two years ago, fewer and fewer groun hunters have returned from below, save him alone. Well, I have hunted grouns, once. I may not have been as deep as the Meatbringer, who says he has descended to where the bronze knights warred against the grouns a million years ago. I have not been that far, but I have run the groun-runs, and I am not frightened of dark burrows." He looked at Annelyn. "Did you truly meet a groun here?"

Annelyn felt the steady gaze of Groff's eyes, beneath their thick red brows. "Yes," he said, a little too quickly, afraid that somehow Groff knew the truth. The groun had been lying at the top of the stairs, mumbling its death rattle, when Annelyn had found it. The boy had watched, terrified, while the creature's six gangling limbs trembled fitfully (and briefly) and the moist sunken pools of flesh that the grouns had instead of eyes roamed back and forth, without purpose. When the carcass had been quite still, Annelyn had charred it with his torch, then dragged it back to the burrows of the yaga-la-hai.

Groff shook his head. "They seldom come past the grounwall," the bronze knight said. "During the last years of my hunting, they seldom came at all. The Meatbringer must truly go deep." He smiled. "But so shall we."

"We?" It was Vermyllar.

Groff nodded. "I am not averse to help, and Annelyn's idea is a good one. We will learn the Meatbringer's secrets before we kill him." He waved his ax in a broad gesture. "Down the stair."

The doorway loomed pitch-black and ominous, and Annelyn began to feel nervous. It was one thing to impress Riess and Vermyllar with his bold plan to descend to groun country, but no doubt in time they would have talked him out of it. Perhaps the three of them would have fallen upon the Meatbringer here beyond the light, true, but only a short way, and Annelyn had been here before. But to actually go down...

It was Vermyllar who protested. "No," he said. "I'm not going any deeper than this." He looked at Annelyn. "You kill the Meatbringer, or Groff can kill him, or Riess if he can, but he'll be just as dead without me along as with me. I'm going back."

"Down the stair," Groff said sternly. "I'll have no desertions."

Vermyllar stood fast. "My grandfather is a son of the Manworm," he said. "I do as I please." To Annelyn and Riess he made the sign of the worm, then with his torch in hand he started back the way they had come.

Groff made no move to stop him. "Down the stair," he repeated after Vermyllar's light had vanished behind a curve of the wall. They hurried to obey.

Down. The worst of all possible directions. Down. Where the grounds lay. Down. Away from light. Yet they went, and Annelyn remembered that even at the best of times, he disliked stairs. He was lucky, at that. Riess, holding the torch, had to go first.

At the foot of the stair was a narrow landing with two bricked-in doors, another gaping entrance to the still, cold shaft, and another stair. Down. There was another stair beyond that. Down. And another beyond that.

Finally they emerged.

"Put out the torch," Groff said. Riess complied.

They stood clustered on one end of a slender metal bridge that spanned a cavernous chamber a hundred times the size of the Chamber of Obsidian. Far, far above was a vast roof of glass panes (each of them the size of the one behind the Manworm's pit, Annelyn thought) set in a latticework of black metal. The sun loomed over it, with its oceans of fire and plains of ash, so they did not need the torch.

There were other bridges, Annelyn saw, five of them; slim threads that swung from one black wall to the other, above a pool of some sluggish liquid that stirred and made noises just below their feet. And there was a sixth, or had been, but now it was shattered, and the twisted ribbon of its span hung down into the moving blackness below them.

There was a smell. Strong, thick, and sickly sweet.

"Where are we?" Riess whispered.

"The Chamber of the Last Light," Groff said brusquely. "Or so it is called in the lore of the bronze knights. But groud hunters call it the groudwall. This is the last and deepest place where the old sun can peer in. The White Worm created it to keep the grounds from the burrows of his children, some say."

Annelyn walked to the rail of the bridge. "Interesting," he said casually. "Are there no other ways for the grounds to climb up, then?"

"No more," Groff told him. "Once. But bronze knights sealed them with bricks and blood. Or so it is said." He pointed his ax toward the shadows on the far side of the bridge. "Across."

The span was narrow, barely wide enough for two men to walk abreast. Annelyn stepped forward hesitantly, reaching out to the guardrail for support. It came away in his hand, a small piece of metal tubing, eaten through by rust. He looked at it, stepped backward, then chucked it away, off into the liquid.

"The damp," Groff said, unconcerned. "The bridge itself has rust holes, so be careful where you step." His voice was stern and inflexible.

So Annelyn found himself edging forward again, step by careful step, out above the sloshing blackness into the abyss of dim red light. The bridge creaked and moved beneath his feet, and more than once he felt something give

as he set down a tentative foot, so he was forced to pull back quickly and step somewhere else. Riess came after him, holding the useless rail tightly whenever there was a rail to hold. Groff cheerfully walked on the places the others had tested.

Halfway across, the bridge began to sway - slowly at first, then with greater speed. Annelyn froze, clutched for the rail, and looked over his shoulder at Groff.

The bronze knight swore. "Three is too much," he said. "Hurry!"

Not daring to run, Annelyn began to walk as quickly as he could, and as he did so the swaying got worse. He walked even faster, and behind him he could hear the others. At one point, there was a sudden snapping and a crunch, followed by a screech of pain. Then he ran, all but jumping the last few feet to the stone semicircle that anchored the bridge on the far side of the chamber. Only then, safe, did he turn back. Riess had hit a rust spot; his right leg had plunged right through the metal. Groff was helping him out.

"Hold it steady," the bronze knight shouted, and Annelyn went back to the stone precipice and steadied the shaking bridge as best he could.

Soon Groff joined him, supporting a limping Riess. The leather he wore had saved him from serious injury, but the jagged metal edges had still cut into his leg, and there was some blood.

While Groff tended to him, Annelyn looked about. The stone platform on which they stood was ringed by dark shapes, great square boxes that stood along its edge like a row of rotten teeth. He went to one. It was metal, scarred by rust and disuse, and studded by a dozen tiny glass windows, behind which was nothing but dust. There were holes in the boxes, too, and several of them had been smashed. Annelyn could make no sense of it.

Riess was on his feet again, looking shaken. "I dropped the torch," he said.

"There are others to be had," Groff said. "We could not have used ours, in any event. The Meatbringer would see its light. No, we must enter the groud-runs in the dark, and wait there until we see the light of his torch. Then we will follow that."

"What?" said Annelyn. "But Groff, that is madness. There will be gounds in the dark, perhaps."

"Perhaps," Groff replied. "Not likely, not this close to light, to the groudwall. Groud hunters, in my time and even before, had to go deeper to find prey. The upper runs are empty. But we will not go far." He pointed toward the wide black door that waited for them where the platform met the wall.

Annelyn drew his stiletto and went swiftly forward, not to look a coward. If a groud lurked in the blackness, he would be ready for it.

But there was nothing. Faintly, in the small light that still bled from the chamber, he saw the outline of three burrows, each darker than the one before.

"The left leads down," Groff said, "into the richer parts of the runs. The center is bricked-off and abandoned. We will wait there. We can watch the bridge, hidden by darkness, and follow the Meatbringer's torch when he passes."

He herded them forward, and they sat on the dusty stone to wait. The door to the Chamber of the Last Light faced them, like a dim red window; all else was black and silent. Groff sat unmoving, his ax across his lap and his legs crossed under him. Riess fidgeted. Annelyn put his back to the wall, so no gounds could creep up behind him, and toyed with his stiletto.

It was not long before he began to hear noises, soft mutters and low sounds, like the ugly voices of gounds grouping to attack them. But the tunnel was a solid blindness, and the harder he listened, the more the noise became blurred and indistinct. Footfalls? Or only Groff's breathing? Or perhaps it was the sound of the stirring liquid, not far off? Annelyn gripped his blade tighter. "Groff," he warned, but the other only silenced him.

He was remembering stories of how the grouns could see in total darkness, of how they padded up so quietly on soft white feet and wrapped their six long limbs around straying yaga-la-hai when the other noise began. Soft first, then louder; this could be no mistake. It was thin and ragged; it rose and fell, full of chokes and sobs. Groff heard it, too. Suddenly, silently, he was on his feet. Annelyn leaped up beside him, then Riess.

The bridge swayed slowly in the red window before them. Someone was coming.

The noise grew, and became more human. A voice, a real voice, warped by fear. Then Annelyn heard words: "... please ... not into the dark again ... grouns ... they'll ... can't do..." And then, very clearly, "My grandfather was a son of the Manworm."

They saw. Vermyllar was coming across the bridge. Behind him, holding a long knife half-seen in the light, was the Meatbringer, squat and ugly in his suit of grounskin.

"Quiet!" the Meatbringer said, and Vermyllar stumbled onto the safety of the stone, looking up fearfully at the black door that gaped before him.

Suddenly Annelyn felt Groff's hand on his chest, pushing, pushing. "Back," the knight whispered, oh-so-softly, and this time Annelyn gladly went deeper into the shadows. Something was wrong.

Something was very, very wrong.

Neither Vermyllar nor the Meatbringer was carrying a torch.

"Get up," the Meatbringer said. "Get up and walk. I'm not going to carry you."

Vermyllar rose unsteady and whimpering. "Don't," he said. "It's dark. I can't see. Don't."

The Meatbringer pricked him with the knife. "In and to the left," he said. "Feel if you can't see, animal. Feel." And Vermyllar went into the tunnel, groping for the wall, sobbing, seeming to look straight at Annelyn before he turned to the left. But the Meatbringer never glanced their way as he went by, prodding Vermyllar forward with his blade.

To Annelyn it seemed a solid hour that he stood in the black of the middle tunnel, but it could only have been minutes. Finally the sound of Vermyllar's protests and wails dwindled to a small noise down below them. Then Groff spoke. "No torch," he said, and even his stern voice seemed shaken. "The man's eyes are possessed by a groun."

"Are we going back?" Riess said.

"Back?" Groff was outlined in the red light of the door. "No. No. But we must see. A torch, we must have a torch. We will catch them. We know the way he went, and the Manworm's great-grandson was making much lament."

"Why does he want Vermyllar?" Annelyn said, in a whisper. His wits had fled him.

"I can conjecture," Groff said. "But we will see." He gave orders, and the three of them began to roam the small length of burrow, feeling for torch grips. Riess found nothing but an air duct, but Annelyn's hands finally closed over a familiar bronze fist. It held a torch.

While Riess lit it, Annelyn turned to Groff. "A fist, the work of the yaga-la-hai, here, in the groun-runs. How is that, Groff?"

"These were not always groun-runs. The worm-children carved these burrows, a million years ago. The grouns drove them upward in a great war, or so it is said. The burrows that have always been the grouns' are different. Now the grouns cluster below, and the yaga-la-hai above; both were created many and strong, and both we and

they have decayed, as all things great and small decay in the sight of the White Worm. So these tunnels and the Chambers of the Last Light and our Undertunnel are all empty where once they were full.”

Riess, holding the torch, made the sign of the worm.

“Come,” Groff said. “The burrow goes straight a long way, down and down, but it finally breaks, and we must not lose them.”

So they began to walk - Riess with the torch and Groff with his ax, Annelyn clutching his stiletto - and they made good speed. The burrow was utterly empty: a long, wide stretch of hot-mouthed air ducts and broken bronze fists that clutched at air. Twice they passed bones - whether groud or human Annelyn could not tell; the rest was all dark nothingness. Finally, when they reached a juncture where many tunnels met and branched, they could hear Vermyllar's weeping again, and they knew which way to choose.

They followed for a long time, losing the sound twice in the maze of interconnecting burrows, but each time quickly retracing their steps when the sobs began to grow faint. These, Annelyn realized with a shiver, were the groud-runs, the real things, and he was in them, descending to infinity. His blue eyes grew wide and sharp, and he watched everything in the flickering torchlight: the black beckoning squares of the tunnels they passed, the endless corroded fists, row on row, the carpets of dust that lay thick in some places and were strangely absent in others. Noises, too, he heard, as he had when they waited for the Meatbringer: soft mutters and softer footsteps, growls, the stirring of impossible cold winds in tunnels not chosen, and a dim, distant rumble like nothing he had ever imagined. Real noises, phantoms, fevers of a nervous brain? Annelyn did not know. He only knew that he heard them, so that the empty burrows seemed to fill with dark and unseen life.

There was no talk. They went down and around until Annelyn had lost track of their turnings. They descended twisted stone stairways, climbed down rusted ladders in echoing empty wells (always afraid that the rungs would snap), passed wide, slanted ramps, and vast galleries that swallowed the light of their torch, and furnished chambers where all the furniture was covered with dust and worm-rich rot.

Once they walked through a high-ceilinged room much like a mushroom farm; but here the water-runs were dry and empty, and the long, sunken growing tanks held only a foul-smelling fungus that glowed a faint and evil green. Another hall they found was rich with tapestries, but each of the hangings was a gray rag that came apart at the touch.

The noises went ahead of them. Always.

Groff spoke only once, when they had stopped at the end of a bricked-in tunnel and were preparing to descend another of the round, black wells. “There are no grounds left,” he muttered, more to himself than to them. “These are the places they once swarmed, and now they are empty.” He shook his head, and his face was troubled. “The Meatbringer goes deep.”

Neither Annelyn nor Riess replied. They found the rungs, and began to climb down. Then there were more tunnels.

Finally, though, they seemed to lose the way. At first the noise was ahead of them - Vermyllar's sobs, holding steady - but suddenly the sound grew less. Groff muttered something, and the three of them walked back to the last turning and chose another burrow. But they had gone only a few steps into the blackness when they lost the sound altogether. Back again they went, and into a third path; it proved silent and bricked-in.

“This was the right way,” Groff insisted when they returned yet again to the junction, “the way we went first, though the noise did dwindle.” He led them back, and they heard Vermyllar again, but once again the sound began to fade after they had followed it a short way.

Groff turned and paced down the tunnel. “Come,” he said, and Riess hurried to his side with the torch. The knight was standing next to an air duct, its breath warm around them. The torch flame danced. Annelyn saw that the duct had no gridding. Then Groff reached inside. “A rope,” he whispered.

Suddenly Annelyn realized that the sounds were coming from the shaft.

Groff fixed his ax to his belt, gripped the rope with both huge hands, and swung into the plunging dark. "Follow," he ordered; then, hand under hand, he vanished below. Riess looked at Annelyn, his eyes frightened, questioning.

"Spidersilk, no doubt," Annelyn said. "It will be strong. Put out the torch and come after." Then he, too, took the jerking rope.

The shaft was warm, but not as warm as Annelyn had imagined; he did not burn. It was also narrower than he had thought; when he grew tired, he could brace his knees against one side and his back against the other, resting for a moment. The rope had a life of its own, with Groff climbing below him and Riess above, but it was strong and new and easy to hold onto.

Finally, his feet kicked free; another level had been reached, and another grid was gone. Groff grabbed him and helped him out, and both of them helped struggling, panting Riess.

They were in a small junction, where three tunnels met at the huge metal doors of a great chamber. But Annelyn saw in a glance that the rope was the only way here; all three burrows were bricked-in. It was easy to see; the chamber doors were open, and light streamed out.

They watched from the shadows near the air duct, Groff crouching low with his ax in hand, Annelyn drawing his rapier.

The chamber was a large one, perhaps the size of the Chamber of Obsidian; there all resemblance ended. Inside, the Meatbringer had mounted a throne, firing two torches that slanted from brackets atop the backrest. Their flickering light mingled with a stranger radiance, a glowering purplish gleam that came from huge fungus-encrusted globes along the walls. Vermyllar was visible, sobbing incoherently, manacled to a wheeled bed close to the Meatbringer. From time to time his body shook as he strained fitfully against the shackles that held him down, but his captor ignored his struggles.

The rest of the chamber, in the curious mixed light, was like nothing Annelyn had ever encountered before. The walls were metal, time-eaten, rust-eaten, yet still bright in places. Panels of glass studded the high, dark flanks; a million tiny windows - most of them broken - winked at the flames. Along the side walls, fat transparent bubbles swelled obscenely near the ceiling. Some of these were covered by dripping, glowing growth; others were dry and broken; still others seemed full of some faintly moving fluid. A gulf of shadows and chaos lay between the walls. There were a dozen wheeled beds like the one Vermyllar was bound to, four huge pillars that rose to the ceiling amid a web of metal ropes and bars, a heavy tank of the sort the yaga-la-hai used for breeding foodworms, piles of clothing (some piles fresh, others covered by mold) and weapons and stranger things, metal cases with vacant glass eyes. In the center was the Meatbringer's throne, a high seat of green-black stone. A theta of some impossibly bright silver metal was sunk into the backrest, just above his head.

The Meatbringer had closed his eyes, and was leaning back on his throne. Resting, perhaps, Annelyn thought. Vermyllar still made noises; whimpers and groans and choking sounds, words that made no sense.

"He is mad," Annelyn whispered to Groff, certain that Vermyllar's noise would cover their speech. "Or he soon will be."

"Yes," Riess said, crawling close to him. "When are we going to save him?"

Groff turned his head to face Riess. "We are not," the bronze knight said, in a flat low voice. "He deserted us. He has no claim to my protection. It is better for the yaga-la-hai to watch and to follow, to see what the Meatbringer does with the great-grandson of a Manworm." His tone gave no room for appeal or argument.

Annelyn shivered, and moved away from Groff, who was once again watching intently with no flicker of movement. Briefly Annelyn had lost himself, allowed himself to trust and obey the older man, simply because Groff was a knight, because Groff knew the groun-runs. Suddenly he remembered his pride and his revenge.

Riess came to him. "Annelyn," he said, his voice trembling. "What can we do?"

"Vermyllar brought this on himself," Annelyn whispered. "But we shall rescue him, if we can." He had no idea how - it was one thing for Groff to face the Meatbringer with his great ax, but if the knight would not help...

Groff looked over his shoulder at them. He smiled.

Annelyn saw with a start that inside, the Meatbringer had risen. He was undressing, stripping off his suit of milk-white grounskin and his cloak of colorless groun-hair. He turned his broad back to them, a well-muscled expanse of mottled flesh, while he tossed his clothing over an arm of his throne and rummaged through a pile of other clothes.

"Groff," Annelyn said firmly, "we must save Vermyllar, useless though he is. He amuses me. There are two of us, you know, and only one of you, and you need our help." Riess, behind him, was making faint choking noises.

Groff looked at them again, and sighed. "Do either of you know the way back up?" he asked, simply.

Annelyn fell silent. He did not know the way back, he realized. They would be lost in darkness. "Riess," he started to whisper.

The Meatbringer pulled on new clothing and turned again toward Vermyllar. A knife was in his hand. He looked different. He wore a suit of fine mocha leather, and over his shoulders was draped a long cape of curling hair that glinted softly like spun gold in the firelight. He muttered something, deep in his throat, with a voice such as the grouns used in all the tales that Annelyn had ever heard.

Vermyllar was suddenly shockingly sane. "No," he shouted. "No! My grandfather was a son of the Manworm!"

The Meatbringer slit his throat, and stepped nimbly aside as the blood came out in spurts and the body twitched. He caught some of the blood in a cup, and drank it with obvious satisfaction. The rest darkened the bed and ran across the floor, one trickle coming toward the worm-children as if it knew where they lurked in the shadow.

When Vermyllar was quite still, the Meatbringer loosed his shackles, and hoisted the body up on one broad shoulder. Annelyn watched, frozen in shock, and it came to him suddenly how often the Meatbringer had walked among the yaga-la-hai, carrying a groun carcass in just that way.

Groff glanced quickly around when the Meatbringer started toward them. None of the burrows offered even the promise of concealment. "Down the rope," the knight whispered urgently.

"Down?" Riess asked.

"No," said Groff. "Too late. He would find us still climbing, and cut the rope." He shrugged and straightened and hefted his ax. "No matter. We know all we need. He is not of the yaga-la-hai, as those close to the Manworm suspected. He brings meat to both men and grouns, this Meatbringer."

Annelyn stood at Groff's side, rapier in hand, balancing nervously on the balls of his feet. Riess, trembling, yanked free a knife. The Meatbringer appeared in the doorway, Vermyllar's corpse slung over his shoulder.

The three worm-children were cloaked by shadows, in the darkest part of the junction, while the Meatbringer had just come from a well-lit chamber. It was no advantage. He looked straight at them.

"So," he said, and he shrugged, letting Vermyllar's body slide to the floor with a thunk. His own blade, long and just recently wiped clean of blood, materialized in his hand. "So," he said again. "Do the yaga-la-hai now come this deep?"

"Some," said Groff, lifting his ax lightly. Annelyn felt strangely light-headed and confident; bloodlust coursed through him. He would have his revenge, and Vermyllar's too. The Meatbringer could never stand before Groff.



He was so squat and ugly, while the bronze knight was a near-giant, invulnerable even without his armor. Besides, he was there, and Riess too, though Riess hardly counted.

“What do you want?” the Meatbringer said, in the coarse low voice Annelyn remembered so well from the masque.

“To quiet your torch-tending tongue,” Annelyn blurted, before Groff could answer. The Meatbringer looked at him for the first time, and chuckled.

“Who are you bringing meat to now?” Groff asked.

The Meatbringer chuckled again. “The grouns, of course.”

“Are you a man? Or a new kind of groun?”

“Both. Neither. I have walked black tunnels alone for a long time. I was born a torch-tender, yes. But a special kind. Like the grouns, I see in total darkness. Like the yaga-la-hai, I can live and see in light. Both sorts of meat are pleasing.” He showed a row of yellowed teeth. “I am flexible.”

“One other question, before I kill you,” Groff said. “The Manworm would know why.”

The Meatbringer laughed; his thick body shook and the cape of golden ringlets danced on his shoulders. “The Manworm! You want to know, Groff, not your mindless master. Why? Because among the yaga-la-hai I am something less than a man, because among grouns I am something less than a groun. I am the first of the Third People. The yaga-la-hai decline, as do the grouns, but I go among both and plant my seed,” he looked at Annelyn “in those like Caralee, and in the groun-women. Soon there will be others like me. That is why. And to know. I know more than your Manworm, or you, more than the Great Groun. You live lies, but I have seen and heard all who live in the House of the Worm, and I believe none of it. The White Worm is a lie, do you know that? And the Manworm. I think I even know how that came to be. A pleasant tale. Shall I tell you?”

“The Manworm is the living flesh of the White Worm,” Riess said in a shrill, almost hysterical voice. “The priests shape him in that image, purifying, making him more fit to lead.”

“And less fit to live,” the Meatbringer said. “Until the pain drives him mad or the surgery kills him. You, Groff? Do you believe that? Or you, freethinker? See. I do recall you.”

Annelyn flushed and brandished his rapier. Groff was a fierce bearded statue of bronze-made-flesh. “So it is in the lore of the bronze knights,” he said, “and we remember things the Manworm has forgotten.”

“It shocks me that the Manworm remembers anything,” the Meatbringer said. “But I have talked to knights, too, learned their secret lore, listened to stories of a long-ago war. The grouns remember better. They have legends of the coming of the yaga-la-hai, who changed all the high burrows. The grouns are the First People, you know. The worm-children they call the Second People. I was a great puzzle to them at first, with my four limbs and my eyes that see, neither First nor Second. But I brought them flesh and learned their tongue, and so taught them of the Third People. You mock groun secrets, and in truth they are as rotting as you, yet they know things. They remember the Changemasters, their great enemies and the greatest friends of the yaga-la-hai, who wore the theta as a sigil, and in times long gone made the spiders and the worms and a thousand other things. Here, where I live, was where they sculptured and shaped the stuff of life, so the yaga-la-hai might live. Here they fashioned the blood worms that still afflict the grouns, the light-hunger that drives them upward to their deaths if they catch it, and the huge white eaterworms that multiply and grow more terrible every day. You, all of you, have forgotten these things, but the Changemasters were gods greater than your White Worm could ever be. Grouns flinch before the theta. With good reason. The yaga-la-hai do not remember this room and the grouns had forgotten where it was, but I found it, and slowly I learn its secrets. I learned about your Manworm here. After the grouns had brought darkness to the burrows and killed most of the Changemasters, one was left. But he had lost all the runes, and he despaired. Still, he was the ruler. The yaga-la-hai followed him. And he remembered how worms, a thousand kinds of worms, had been men’s best weapons against the grouns, and he knew how worms flourished

better down here than men. So the last Changemasters trained the surgeon-priests in a few arts and had himself made into a great worm. Then he died. You see? He wanted to fashion the Third People. He was a Changemaster, but a poor one, an animal. Since then, all the leaders of the yaga-la-hai are fashioned into worms. But no Third People exist. Except for myself. As I learn more Changemaster secrets, I will shape the Third People, and they will not be like the Manworm.”

“You will shape nothing,” Groff said. He started forward, and torchlight ran up and down the sharp-honed blade of his ax.

“Oh?” said the Meatbringer. And suddenly he reached out, and seized the two great doors on either side of him, and swung them shut behind him, ducking beneath the whistling blade of Groff’s ax in the same fluid motion. The doors came together with a great rending clang.

Darkness.

And the Meatbringer.

Laughing.

Annelyn thrust wildly into the black with his rapier, at the spot where the Meatbringer had been last. Nothing. He pierced air. “Riess,” he called, frantic. “The torch, our torch.” He heard Groff’s ax swing again, and there was a jarring of metal, and a scream. A match blazed briefly; Riess, wide-eyed, held it in cupped hands. Then, before Annelyn could even get his bearings, a knife flashed in the small circle of flame and Riess’s round face disintegrated in a rush of blood and the match was falling and there was darkness again and laughing. The Meatbringer, the Meatbringer. Annelyn stood blind and helpless, rapier in limp fingers. Riess dead and Groff he didn’t know and the Meatbringer laughing and he was next, he Annelyn, and he couldn’t see....

The air duct was behind him. He dropped the rapier, stepped back, fumbled for the rope in the shaft. In the darkness, a sound like a butcher cutting meat; thick fleshy chopping, and groans. Annelyn found the rope and swung out, started to climb. Something grabbed his ankle. He reached down with one hand to yank loose the grip and suddenly the other hand couldn’t support him, and he was falling, falling, with one hand still on the rope and his palm burning, falling, plunging into infinite black. He threw his body back and smashed against one wall of the shaft, sliding a few feet as his knees came up and he wedged himself in painfully and took a firmer hold on the rope. Then he had it again, by both hands.

A chill went through him. The Meatbringer was up above him now. And he remembered what Groff had said, about cutting the rope. The Meatbringer would cut the rope. He would fall forever.

He kicked, and his foot met only metal. As fast as he could, he began to descend, hand under hand, down in total darkness, kicking every foot of the way. Finally his foot swung free; a new level, and the grid was gone!

He swung out and lay panting on the floor. He was a blind man now, he thought, and shuddered. Then he remembered. Matches. He had matches. All of them, he and Vermyllar and Riess, all of them had brought plenty of matches. But Riess had their torch.

Annelyn listened carefully. There was no noise from the shaft. He stood, his hand still shaking, and fumbled until he found his match box, his beautiful carved match box of fine metal and wood. He struck a match, and leaned into the air duct.

The rope was gone.

He moved his hand back and forth, just to be certain. But the rope was gone. Cut, no doubt, and fallen silently. He had no way of knowing how close he had come ... but the Meatbringer would know. The Meatbringer would know exactly where Annelyn was right now. And he would be coming.

The match burned his fingers. Startled, he blew it out, tossing it smoking down the shaft. Then he stood thinking.

The rope was cut. That meant – that meant there was no doubt left; the Meatbringer had won, Groff was dead up above. Yes. That meant there was no way back. No, wait. It only meant that that way back was closed, unless the Meatbringer dropped a new rope, and Annelyn could not guess when or if that would happen. But there must be other ways up, ways that passed by the Meatbringer's level and the Chamber of the Changemasters, as the Meatbringer had called them. He had to try to find his way up. He didn't remember the exact way they'd come - Groff had been right, yes - but he could tell up from down, and that might be enough. He had to start, before the Meatbringer found him. Yes.

First, he needed a torch.

He lit another match, held it high, and in its brief flicker looked around. A bronze fist, fingerless and torch-less, was just above his head to one side of the air duct. He could see little else; the match gave scant light. Then it went out, and there was no light at all again.

Annelyn considered. No doubt he would find another fist a few feet from this one, and another a few feet from that. One of them might have a torch he could use. He began to walk, one hand clutching his matches tightly, the other patting the unseen wall to make sure it was still there. When he thought he had come far enough, he struck another match. And saw another empty fist.

After he had wasted four of his matches, he tried a new method. He pocketed his match box and began to grope very carefully down the wall, feeling for the fists. He found eight of them that way, and a sharp stump of metal that cut his hand and had probably been a ninth. Each of them was empty, corroded.

Finally, in despair, he sank to the floor.

There would be no torches. He had come too deep. Down here, though the yaga-la-hai had held these burrows once, the grounds had ruled for endless ages. They hated torches. It was hopeless. Up in the Undertunnel, yes, and even in the border regions, the so-called groun-runs, yes. But not here.

Yet, without a torch, his matches were next to useless. They would never lead him out.

Perhaps he could make a torch, Annelyn thought. He tried to recall how torches were made. The shafts were generally wood. The crooked ones were cut from the bent yellow bloodfruit tree, after the leaves and the red-white berries had been put into the breeding tanks for the food-worms. And then there were the straight ones, longer and white, the shafts made by binding together thick strips from the stem of a giant mushroom and soaking them in - what? Something - until they were hard. And then something was wrapped around the end. A cloth, soaked in something-or-other, or a greasy bag of dry fungus, or something. That was what burned. But he didn't know the details. Besides, without a torch, how could he find a bloodfruit tree or a giant mushroom? And how could he find the right fungus, and dry it, if that was what you were supposed to do? No. He could not make a torch, no more than he could find one.

Annelyn was frightened. He began to shake. Why was he down here, why, why? He could be up among the yaga-la-hai, in flamesilk and spidergray, bantering with Caralee or munching spiced spiders at a masque. Now, instead of munching, he was likely to be munched. By the grounds, if they found him, or by the Meatbringer. He remembered vividly the way the Meatbringer had quaffed the cup full of Vermyllar's lifeblood.

The thought sent Annelyn to his feet. The Meatbringer would be coming for him. He must go somewhere, even if he could not see where. Frantic, with one hand he pulled loose his stiletto while with the other he felt for the reassuring wall, and he began to walk.

The burrow was endlessly black, and full of terrors. The wall was the only sanity, cool and firm beside him, with its fists and its air ducts where they should be. The rest - there were sounds around him, rustlings and scurrings, and he was never sure if he imagined them or not. Often, in the long walk toward nothing, he thought he heard the Meatbringer laughing, laughing just as he had at the Sun Masque so long ago. He heard it dimly and far-off, above him, below him, behind him. Once he heard it in front of him, and stopped, and held his breath and waited for an hour or perhaps a week without once moving, but there was no one there at all. After a time Annelyn saw lights

too; vague shadowy shapes and drifting globes and crouching things that glowed and ran away. Or did he only think he saw them? They were always distant, or just around some bend, or glowing behind him and not there when he turned to see. He spied a dozen torches, off ahead of him, burning bright and crackling with hope, but each was snatched away or snuffed before he could run to it. He found only empty bronze fists, when he found anything at all.

He was walking very fast now, even running, and his footsteps echoed deafeningly, as if an army of the yaga-lahai were trotting into battle. Annelyn didn't remember when he had begun to run; he was simply doing it, to keep ahead of the sounds, to reach the lights in front of him, and it seemed as if he had been doing it for a long while.

He had been running and running and running for what seemed like days when he lost the wall.

One moment his hand was on it, brushing the stone and the rusted teeth of the air-duct grills. Then nothing, and his hand was flailing in air, and he stumbled and fell.

It was dark. There were no lights. It was silent. There was no sound. The echoes had died. He was completely turned around. Where was he? What way had he been going? He had lost his knife.

He began to crawl, and finally he found the knife where it had dropped. Then he stood, his arms groping ahead of him, and walked toward where the wall should be. It wasn't there. He walked longer than he should have had to. Where had the wall gone? If this was only a junction, something should be there.

Annelyn had an idea. "Help!" he shouted, as loudly as he could. Echoes sounded, loud and then softer, bouncing, fading. His throat was very dry. He was not in a burrow. He had come out into some great chamber. He started to count his footsteps. He had reached three hundred, and lost count, when he finally came to a wall.

He felt it carefully, exploring it with his hands. It was very smooth; not stone at all, but some kind of metal. Parts of it were cool, others faintly warm, and there were one or two places - little spots no bigger than his fingernail - that seemed cold to the touch, almost icy. Annelyn decided to risk a match. Its brief flame showed him only a blank expanse of dull metal, stretching away to both sides of him. Nothing else. Nothing to indicate why some sections were warmer than others.

The match went out. Annelyn put the box away again, and began to follow the strange wall. The temperature patterns continued for a time, then stopped, then resumed again, then stopped. His footsteps echoed loudly. And his hand found no fists, no air ducts.

Exhausted at last, hoping that he had come far enough from the Meatbringer, he sank down to rest. He slept. And woke when something touched him.

The stiletto was beside him. Annelyn screamed and reached for it and struck all in the same instant, and he felt the blade cut something - cloth? Flesh? He didn't know. He was on his feet then, jabbing this way and that with his stiletto. Then, jumping around and whirling in circles, fighting vacant darkness, he began to fumble in his pocket for a match. He found one, and struck it.

The groun shrieked.

Annelyn saw it briefly in the light before it stepped back into the infinite black that surrounded him. A low crouching thing it was, covered by white skin and limp, colorless hair, dressed in gray rags. Its two rear limbs and one of its center pair were supporting it, and it was reaching for Annelyn with its two arms and the other center limbs. Its arms and legs and the middle limbs, whatever you should call them, were all too long by a good foot, and too thin, and this particular groun was holding something in one of them, a net or something. Annelyn guessed what that was for. Its eyes were the worst thing, because they weren't eyes at all; they were pits in the face where eyes should be, soft, dark, moist pits that somehow let the grouns see in total darkness.

Annelyn faced the groun for less than a second, then jumped forward, swinging the stiletto and throwing the match at the creature. But the groun was already gone, after one short shriek and a moment of indecision. He could

imagine it circling him, getting ready to cast that net, seeing everything he did although he could see nothing. He danced around inanely, trying to face all directions at once, and he lit another match. Nothing. Then he froze, hoping to hear the groun and stab it. Nothing. Grouns had big, soft, padded feet, he remembered, and they moved very softly.

Annelyn began to run.

He had no idea where he was going, but he had to go. He could not fight the groun, not without a torch or some light to see by, and it would get him if he stood still, but maybe he could outrun it. After all, he had hurt it with that first stab.

He ran through the darkness, his knife in one pumping fist, praying to the White Worm that he would not run into a wall, or the Meatbringer or a groun. He ran until he was breathless again. And then, quite suddenly, there was no floor beneath him.

He fell, screaming. Then the darkness drew deeper, deeper, and Annelyn had not even fear to light his way. He had nothing at all.

\* \* \* \*

He and Vermyllar were standing together outside the great iron doors to the High Burrow of the Manworm. Groff was there too, death-still in his bronze armor, standing the ancient guard: But on the other side of the chamber doors, no knight stood, only a huge stuffed groun. It was twice the size of an ordinary groun, hideous and white, its two upper limbs frozen in a menacing, grasping pose.

“A horrible thing,” Vermyllar said, shuddering.

Annelyn smiled at him. “Ah,” he said lightly, “but so easy to make it beautiful!”

Vermyllar frowned. “No. What are you talking of, Annelyn? You can't make a groun beautiful. My grandfather was a son of the Manworm, and I know. There is no way.”

“Nonsense,” said Annelyn. “It is simple. To make a groun supremely beautiful, cover him.”

“Cover him?”

“Yes. With mushroom sauce.”

And Vermyllar grimaced, then chuckled despite himself, and it was a very fine moment. Except ... except

... just then the big groun came alive and chased them down the tunnel and ate Vermyllar, while Annelyn fled screaming.

\* \* \* \*

The grouns were all around him, closing in slowly, their long thin arms groping and waving evilly as they advanced on him despite his torch. “No,” Annelyn kept saying, “no, you can't come any farther, you can't, you are afraid of light.” But the grouns, the eyeless blind grouns, paid no mind to his pleas or his torch. They came in and in, crouching and swaying, moaning rhythmically. At the last moment, Annelyn remembered that he had a skin of mushroom sauce at his belt, which would surely scatter them in terror, since everyone knew how grouns felt about mushroom sauce. But before he could reach it to throw at them, the soft white hands had him, and he was being lifted and carried off into the darkness.

\* \* \* \*

He was bound to a wheeled table, heavy metal shackles around his wrists and ankles, and there was pain, pain, horrible pain. He raised his head, slowly and with great difficulty, and saw that he was in the Chamber of the Changemasters. The Meatbringer, awash in the dim purplish illumination, was kneeling at the foot of the table, gnawing on his ankle. The cloak he wore looked strangely like Vermyllar.

\* \* \* \*

The visions faded. Annelyn was in darkness once more. He lay on a rough floor of rocks and dust and dirt, and sharp pieces of stone were jabbing him uncomfortably in a hundred places. His ankle throbbed. He sat up, and touched it, and finally satisfied himself that it was only turned, not broken. Then he checked the rest of his body. The bones all seemed intact, and his matches were still there, thank the Worm. But his knife was gone, lost somewhere in the run or the fall.

Where was he?

He stood, and felt his head brush a low ceiling. His ankle screamed at him, and he shifted his weight to the other foot as much as he could, and put out a hand to lean against the wall. It was all soft and crumbly, disintegrating under his touch. This was an odd burrow, a burrow of dirt instead of stone or metal. And uneven. Annelyn groped ahead hesitantly, took a step or two, and found that both ceiling and floor were woefully irregular.

Where was he?

Somehow he had fallen down here, he remembered. There had been a hole in the floor of the immense chamber, and he had been running from the groud, and suddenly he was here. Perhaps the groud had found him and carried him to this place, but that seemed unlikely. They would have killed him. No, more likely the hole had slanted at some point, and he had been knocked unconscious, and rolled down the slope. Something on that order. At any rate, there was no hole above his head now. Only dry, crumbling ceiling, and bits of rock that showered his head when he moved.

A new fear came to him then; this burrow was soft, so very soft and dry. What if it fell in on him? Then he would be truly trapped, with no way out, ever. But where could he go?

One thing was certain; he could not stay here. The air was hotter and thicker than he liked, and he had not noticed any air ducts in these dust-dry walls. And he was hungry, too. How long had he been down here? Was it only this morning that he and Riess and Vermyllar had set out down the Undertunnel? Or a week ago? When had he last eaten, or drunk? He wasn't sure.

Annelyn began to walk, limping and favoring his sore ankle, feeling his way before him, crouching half the time when the ceiling dropped lower. Twice he hit his head on overhanging spears of stone, despite his careful progress. The bumps on his skull distracted him from his aching ankle.

Before long, the passage began to change. The walls, once dry, became faintly moist and then distinctly damp. But they remained soft. Annelyn could sink his fist into them, and squeeze the cool soil between his fingers. His boots sank deep into the floor with every step, and made squishing, sucking sounds when he pulled them free. But the air was no cleaner; it was growing thicker and more heavy and Annelyn had begun to consider reversing his direction. He thought he smelled something.

He decided to strike a match.

The flame burned for only a minute, but that was long enough for Annelyn. Something dark and feral chattered behind him, and he turned in time to see it briefly before it slid into the darkness: an eyeless furred shadow on many legs. There was a spiderweb hanging on a slant from roof to wall just behind him; he had broken it in passing with a clumsy, wandering hand. The spider was absent, perhaps eaten by some other denizen of the burrow. The walls on both sides of him were pockmarked by what looked like wormholes of all sizes. He lifted one foot, and saw that his boot was covered by a dozen small gray slugs, busily trying to chew through the tough leather. Before his match guttered out, Annelyn had plucked most of them free. They clung and made soft pops

when he pulled them loose, and he crushed them between thumb and forefinger. Then he ate them. The taste was bitter, nothing like the subtle flavor of the fat slugs the yaga-la-hai served at their masques, and Annelyn reflected dourly that they might well poison him. But he was hungry, and the juices moistened his dusty throat.

His match burned out, and Annelyn decided to proceed. Here, at least, he had found life; behind him was only dry death. He could always turn around later if the air became much worse.

And it did become worse, as did the smell, which soon filled the burrow with a cloying sweetness that had Annelyn close to gagging. The sweetness of rot; ahead of him, something was dead in the tunnel.

He stumbled on, blind, wrinkling up his nose and trying to breathe through his mouth. He prayed to the White Worm that he could get past whatever had died.

Then he stepped in it.

One moment he was walking in damp clinging soil; the next, he felt something leathery split under his boot and he was ankle deep in mush and viscous liquid. The odor assaulted him with renewed vigor, fresh and horribly strong. Annelyn retched up the slugs he had just eaten and reeled backward, pulling free his foot.

When he had finished heaving, he leaned against the burrow wall, holding his nose, gasping, and with his free hand he found and struck a match. Then he bent forward, to see what it was. His hand was unsteady; he could hardly see anything but the match flame at first. He came closer.

The White Worm himself lay rotting in the burrow.

Annelyn drew back, frightened, and the match went out. But he lit another and recovered his nerve. Before he was finished, he had used at least ten matches; each served to illuminate only a part of the long carcass.

The worm - it was not the White Worm after all, Annelyn finally decided, though it was certainly bigger than anything he'd ever encountered - was far gone in its decay, past the peak of its ripeness, for which Annelyn was profoundly grateful. Even the ghost of its putrefaction was bad enough. Though shrunken in death, it filled the burrow three-quarters full, so that Annelyn had to hug the wall to squeeze by it. A thousand lesser worms and other wriggling things had feasted on its immense corpse, and a few still remained; Annelyn could see them crawling around inside, through the great worm's milky translucent skin.

The skin was part of the terror. Most of the monster's meat had decomposed into noxious fluids or had been consumed by the scavengers, but the skin was intact. It was like thick leather, cracked and brittle now, but still formidable. Not easy for an enemy to cut through. That was part of the terror, yes.

The mouth was another part. Annelyn saw it briefly by matchlight, and wasted a second match to be sure. It had teeth. Rings of them, five concentric rings each narrower than the one before, in a circular mouth large enough to swallow a man's head and shoulders. The inner rings were bone, ordinary bone, and that was bad enough, but the outermost ring, the greatest - the teeth were bluish black, glinting like

...like ... metal?

That was the second part of the terror.

The final part was its size. Annelyn measured it, match by match, step by step, struggling to get by, struggling not to choke. The worm was at least twenty feet long.

He wasted no more matches when the corpse was behind him. He plunged forward as quickly as he could, blundering noisily through the dark until the smell was only an unpleasant memory and he could breathe again. Sometime during his rush forward, Annelyn realized why this burrow was so strange. A wormhole. He giggled insanely. It must be a wormhole.

When the blackness was once again a clean blackness, he slowed down. There was nothing to do but press onward, after all.

He was remembering something strange the Meatbringer had said when he had been babbling about the Changemasters. Something about “huge white eaterworms, who multiply and grow more terrible every day.” It hadn’t made any particular sense then. Now, now it did. The Meatbringer had been talking of the Changemasters, of things they brought into the world to afflict the grounds. The thing that lay behind him was indeed an affliction. For the first time in his life, Annelyn felt sorrow for the grounds.

The burrow turned. He felt ahead of him and followed it around. Then Annelyn saw a light.

He blinked, but it did not vanish; it was a small thing, a purplish glow so dark it almost blended with the blackness, but by now his eyes were very sharp for any trace of light at all. Not hurrying, he began to walk toward it, never daring to hope.

The light did not fade. It swelled as he drew nearer, growing steadily larger though scarcely any brighter. He could see nothing by it, nothing but the light itself, so dim was its glow.

After a time he saw that it was round. The end of the burrow. The wormhole came out somewhere.

When it had grown to man size and was still there, only then did Annelyn take heart and begin to tremble. He ran the last few feet, to the glowing violet circle of freedom, the magic portal that would restore his vision. He held the burrow walls with both hands as he looked through, and down.

Then he was very still indeed.

Below him was a huge chamber, bigger than the Chamber of the Changemasters. His wormhole had come out high above the floor, a round gap in a hard stone wall. He could see a hundred other wormholes with a glance, and things moving in some of them, and he could imagine a hundred others. The ceiling, the walls, the floor, all were covered by thick fungus, like that in the Meatbringer’s throne room. Purple, purple, thick as a haze and ominous; the room was suffused with the vague glow of the omnipresent growth.

Annelyn barely noticed it.

There was a great tank, too, full of some liquid, and globes in the ceiling that dripped some other substance, and air ducts where ropes of fungus swayed in the hot breeze, but Annelyn took little note of them. He was watching the worms.

Eaterworms. Giants forty feet long, smaller ones like the corpse he had encountered, dead ones, and a million writhing younglings. The chamber was a nest of eaterworms, a breeding tank and nursery for the monsters. But not a prison. Not for creatures that could chew through stone, not for these nightmares with translucent flesh and iron teeth. Annelyn made the sign of the worm, then realized what he had done, and giggled. He was a dead man.

He stood despairing while shadowy shapes slid through the moist purple gloom beneath him.

But at last he began to think again. None of the things seemed to be coming toward him. He had escaped their notice, at least for now, and that fanned his tiny fire of hope. He would use whatever moments were left to him. His eyes strained, as he studied the bowl-like chamber.

Dimly, across the room, he saw lines running up and down the walls, bulging beneath the fungus, crossing on the ceiling, branching from the globes. Pipes, he thought, water pipes. The yaga-la-hai knew water pipes. But the knowledge was useless to him.

Other shapes, made vague and hulking by distance and growth, sat still on the floor. The worms moved over them, between them. Annelyn thought he saw metal, overgrown by purple, but he lost it quickly. No matter; it would do him no good.



On the curve of the right-hand wall, he could make out a gleam beneath a coat of fungus. His eyes followed it. There were outlines. More pipes? No. There was a design. It came clear. It was a theta, with wormholes all around it.

Annelyn touched the golden theta embroidered on his breast. Perhaps that was why the eaterworms had not attacked him. What was it that the Meatbringer had said? That the Changemasters had shaped the great worms and other horrors, that the Changemasters wore the theta, that they were the best champions of the yaga-la-hai and the worst enemies of the grounds.... Could it be that the monsters ate only grounds? That they thought him a Changemaster, and thus left him alone?

Annelyn couldn't believe it. A few strings of golden thread could not possibly stay those things. Annelyn looked at the right-hand wall again, then dismissed the subject from his mind.

He continued his examination of the murky chamber. And, one by one, he found the exits.

There were three of them, one on each wall. A fourth one, perhaps, lay below him, but the angle made it impossible to see. The doors to each were double, and they looked metallic. The one to the right was the closest; it lay just under the theta shape. He could make out its details, very faintly. He saw shafts, thick bars of metal running across the door, blocking it. Bolts.

Rusted in place, he thought. For how long? Impossible to move. Yet, what other answer was there? All the other ways out were wormholes; even those that looked vacant would be ground-black just a few feet away from this chamber. He would risk blundering into an eaterworm in the darkness. Anything would be better than that.

But if he stayed here, eventually he would starve, or the worms would finally notice him. He had to go either forward or back.

He knew what lay behind. The dead worm's hole was safe enough, but beyond it lay only the vast chamber and the grounds, the infinite empty blackness. He could never find the tunnel that had led him there. He would never get back.

Annelyn sighed. He had been so long in darkness. He was tired, and conscious of a change that lay like a weight on his shoulders. He had forgotten the Meatbringer and the question of revenge. He was doomed, no matter what he did. The grounds, the Changemasters, the Third People - what difference did any of it make?

Once, at a half-remembered masque, he had called himself a freethinker. But now the ancient worship words came back to him, the mockingly obscure rote that the Manworm had intoned so often, so wearily. It had always seemed odd, in parts meaningless. But now the phrases seemed to speak to him; they danced macabre dances in his head, and came bubbling to his lips. In a hopeless voice, he began to mouth them, very quietly, much as Riess (old fat dead Riess) might have done in his place.

"The White Worm has many names," he said, unmoving, "and the children of men have cursed them all in the centuries behind us. But we are the worm-children, and we do not curse them. He cannot be fought. His is the final power in the universe, and the wise man accepts his coming, to dance and feast in what time there is left.

"So praise the White Worm, whose name is Yaggalla. And grieve not, though our lights burn dim and die.

"So praise the White Worm, whose name is Decay. And grieve not, though our energy fades and fails:

"So praise the White Worm, whose name is Death. And grieve not, though life's circle tightens and all things perish.

"So praise the White Worm, whose name is Entropy. And grieve not, though the sun goes out.

"An ending comes. Feast. The ships are gone. Drink. The struggling times are over. Dance. And praise, praise, to the White Worm."

Silence; Annelyn eyed the long, pale wrigglers moving below. How foolish it was to prolong things. The struggling times were over. He would go forward.

He tried to grab a handhold in the fungus that fringed his wormhole, but there was no strength to it, and it ripped free in his hand. So nothing remained but to jump, and hope that his legs would not crack and splinter, hope that the beckoning carpet below would prove as comforting as it looked. Annelyn turned and lowered himself; he looked down past his feet, and when the floor seemed clear enough of writhing life, he dropped.

And landed jarringly, though he tried to flex his legs under him. The growth was thick, layers on layers, waist deep; it softened his fall, but it also sent his feet skidding out from under him, and he tripped and fell in a tangle of purple threads. When he rose, on edge but unhurt, bits of glowing fungus clung to his burrow-black clothing.

Abruptly his immunity ended. A worm the size of his leg slid toward him, its mouth rippling rhythmically. Annelyn kicked free and brought his boot down on the attacker, as savagely as he could. His damaged ankle reminded him forcefully that he should not be doing such things. But the worm was forced down through the living purple mat and squashed against the floor. Its skin did not seem as thick or as strong as that of its larger cousins.

Other worms were moving beneath the fungus, pale writhings that Annelyn barely saw. One of the giants had noticed him now; it moved toward him, over the sleeping body of another. Annelyn glanced around hurriedly; worms were converging from all sides.

But the wall was only a few feet away. And the fourth door, the one he had prayed would be there. It was shut and overgrown like the others, but he would not have to walk on a hundred worms to reach it.

He struggled over to it, and felt a sharp jolt of pain just as he collapsed against the metal. A small eaterworm was boring into his thigh. Annelyn ripped it loose, whirled it around his head, and flung it spinning across the length of the chamber, to splatter on the side of the large tank. He turned back to the exit, and wildly began to rip loose fungus. There were three bolts. With the heel of his hand he hammered upward at the topmost bolt, once, twice, three times, and the heavy metal shaft finally moved an inch.

Another smash, and the rust that had welded it to its brackets gave; it came free in his hands.

He turned, holding the length of metal like a club, and brought it down hard on the nearest of the eaterworms. The blow broke skin, but barely, barely; it was an old worm, as large as Annelyn. It oozed, and turned aside, colliding with one slightly larger. It did not die.

He could not fight them. He swung the club once more, then went back to the door. The middle bolt came free after three sharp knocks. The lowest shaft proved an illusion; it disintegrated into flakes of fungus-eaten rust when Annelyn wrapped his hands around it. Frantic, he pounded at the length of metal between the brackets until it fell apart, and the door was free. Something bit him. He screamed and pulled at the handles, and they came loose in his hands, but the door moved only a fraction of an inch.

Then he scabbled madly with his fingers, tearing loose a nail, wedging his hands into the slim black crack until he had purchase. He could feel the monsters behind him. With all his strength, he pulled backward.

The hinges screamed, the metal creaked, while fungus worked against him to keep the door shut. But it moved, it moved! An inch, two, then six all at once. That was enough for Annelyn. He flattened himself and held his breath and squeezed through, into the quiet dark beyond. Then he threw himself to the floor, rolling over and over and thrashing up and down, until the worm that had clung to him was only a slimy paste that coated his clothes.

When he got up, he struck a match. He did not look back at the purple hell beyond the narrow opening he had forced.

He was in a very small chamber, solid metal, round, dark. Before him was another door, also of metal, and round. In its center was a wheel.

His match went out. Fungus still hung from his besoiled garments and his fine blond hair, and more was scattered on the floor, glowing dimly. Annelyn pulled at the wheel. Nothing. He tried turning it, but it would not move. Beside it was a metal bar, in a slit. That refused to move also, until he put all his weight on it and forced it down. Then he could turn the wheel, though it spun slowly and with difficulty.

Annelyn was drenched in sweat, and the metal was moist with the wetness of his palms. But it was not rusted, he suddenly realized. It was dark and strong and cool, like something newly pulled from the forges of the bronze knights.

Hissing suddenly began, all around him. He stopped, startled, and looked over his shoulder, but none of the eaterworms had yet squeezed through, so he went back to the wheel. When it would turn no more, he pulled, and the door swung smoothly outward on its huge hinges. The hissing grew louder, and Annelyn was buffeted by a tremendous gush of moist air, rushing forward from behind him.

Then he was through, pulling the door shut. It was pitch dark again; the little fungus fragments that hung on him became worms - eyes in the blackness. But better this than risk the chamber of the eaterworms again.

His matches again. The match box rattled despairingly when Annelyn shook it. He counted the remaining matches by feeling with his fingers. A dozen left, if that; his fingers kept losing track, and he might have counted the same match twice. He chose one, grateful for its brief light.

He was standing less than a foot from a groun.

Annelyn moved, backward, in a leap. There was no sound. He came forward again, holding the flame before him like a weapon. The groun was still there. Frozen. And there was something between them. He touched it. Glass. Feeling infinitely easier, he began to move the match up and down. He lit another, and explored further.

A whole wall of grouns!

Annelyn briefly considered trying to shatter the glass and eat one of the imprisoned grouns, but discarded the idea. They were clearly stuffed; they had probably been here for more years than he had lived. And they were unusual grouns, at that. Males and females alternated, and each in the long row was partially flayed, a section of its skin peeled back to reveal inside. A different section on each groun, at that. There were also statues of grouns and groun skulls, and a six-limbed skeleton. The last groun was the most singular. Though colorless, its garments were as fine and rich as any of the yaga-la-hai. On its head was a metal helmet, such as a bronze knight might wear, all of black metal with a thin red window curving around the front for its eyes. And it held something, pointing it.

A tube of some sort, fashioned of the same black metal as the helmet. Strangest of all, both helmet and tube were emblazoned with silver thetas.

Annelyn used four of his matches examining the row of grouns, hoping to find something that would help him. He had so few left, but it was foolish to hoard them now. Finding nothing, he crossed the room, groping for the other wall. He tripped over a table, went around it, and collided with another. They were both empty. Finally he felt glass again.

This wall was full of worms.

Like the grouns, they were dead, or stuffed, or cased in the glass; Annelyn did not care which it was, so long as they did not move. A four-foot-long eaterworm dominated the display, but there were dozens of others as well. Most of them were unknown to him, though he had eaten worms all his life. They had one thing in common: they looked dangerous. A lot of them had teeth, which Annelyn found very disquieting. A few wore what looked like stinger's in their tails.

He explored the rest of the chamber; it was long and narrow, sheathed in metal, seemingly untouched by time, and capped by a large, wheeled door at each end. A lot of tables were scattered about, and metal chairs, but nothing of interest to Annelyn. Once he came across something shaped like a torch, but the shaft was metal and the head

glass, totally useless. Perhaps he could fill the glass part with the glowing fungus, he thought. He tucked the instrument under his arm. Other things he found as well, bulking pillars and shapes of metal and glass, vaguely like those he had seen shattered on the edge of the bridge in the Chamber of the Last Light, and in the Meatbringer's throne room. He could not fathom their purpose.

At length, his matches all but exhausted, he went back to the wall of the grouns. Something was nagging at him, pulling at the back of his brain. He looked again at the last groun in the row, then at the tube. That was being held almost like a weapon, Annelyn decided. And it bore a theta. It might be useful. He took the metal shaft of the thing-that-was-almost-a-torch, and smashed at the thick glass with a series of sharp blows. It cracked and cracked and cracked some more, but did not shatter. Finally, when his arm had begun to ache, Annelyn ripped through with his hands, clawing aside splinters of not-quite-glass that still hung maddeningly together. He grabbed the groun's tube, and began to play with its various bars and handles.

A few minutes later, he discarded it with disgust. Useless, whatever it had been.

Something still bothered him. He lit another match and considered the helmeted groun. A wrongness there....

It hit him. The helmet, the reddish window. But a groun had no eyes! Annelyn widened the gap he had made in the glasslike wall, and lifted the helmet from the dead groun's head.

This groun had eyes.

He moved his match very close. Eyes, all right; small and black, sunk deep in moist sockets, but definitely eyes. Yet this groun was the only eyed groun in the wall; the next one down, a heavy female, was eyeless, as were all the rest.

His match died. Annelyn tried on the helmet. Light was all around him.

He shouted, whirled, bobbed his head up and down. He could see! He could see the whole room, in a glance! Without a match, or a torch! He could see!

The walls were glowing, very faintly, smoky red. The metal pillars - eight of them, he saw now - were bright orange, though the other metallic shapes remained shadowed. The doors were dark, but yellowish light leaked around the edge of the one he had come through. It pulsed. The very air seemed to give a dim light, a ghostly glow that Annelyn found hard to pin down. The dead grouns and the worms opposite stood in rows like soot-gray statues, outlined by the illumination around them.

Annelyn's fingers found the theta on the crest of the helmet. He was wearing a rune of the Changemasters, clearly! But - but why had it been on a groun?

He considered the question for an instant, then decided that it did not matter. All that mattered was the helmet. He picked up his metal shaft again, a cool gray stick in the smoldering reddish chamber. The glass at its end had been broken into jagged shards by his efforts to smash through the window. That was fine. It would make an excellent weapon. Almost jauntily, Annelyn turned toward the far door.

The burrow beyond was dark, but it was a darkness he could deal with, a darkness he had dealt with every day of his life in the dimly lit tunnels of the yaga-la-hai; it was made of shadows and vague shapes and dust, not the total blackness he had wandered in since fleeing the Meatbringer. Of course, it was not really like that - once, hesitantly, he lifted the helmet and instantly went blind again - but he cared little, if he could see. And he could see. The cool stone walls were a faded red, the air faintly misty and alight, and the ducts he passed were orange-edged maws that spewed streams of reddish smoke out into the burrows, to curl and rise and dissipate.

Annelyn walked down the empty tunnel, for once imagining no sights and hearing no noises. He came to branchings several times and each time chose his way arbitrarily. He found shadowed stairways and climbed them eagerly, as far up as they would take him. Twice he detoured uneasily around the man-sized, dimly radiant pits he recognized as wormholes; one other time, he glimpsed a live eaterworm - a sluggishly moving river of smoke-dark

ice - crossing a junction up ahead of him. Annelyn's own body, seen through the helmet, glowed a cheerful orange. The bits of fungus that still hung from his tattered clothing were like chunks of yellow fire.

He had been walking for an hour when he first encountered a live groun. It was less bright than he himself, a six-limbed specter of deep red, a radiant wraith seen down a side burrow out of the corner of his eye. But soon Annelyn observed that it was following him. He began to walk closer to the wall, feeling his way as if he were blind, and the groun who ghosted him grew more bold. It was a large one, Annelyn observed, cloth hanging from it like a flapping second skin, a net trailing from one hand, a knife in the other. He wondered briefly if it could be the same groun he had met before.

When he reached a stairway, a narrow spiral between two branching corridors, Annelyn paused, fumbled, and turned: The groun came straight on toward him, lifting its knife, padding very quietly on its soft feet. Oddly, Annelyn discovered that he was not afraid. He would smash in its head as soon as it crept close enough.

He lifted his glass-edged club. The groun came nearer. Now he could kill it. Except, except - somehow he didn't want to. "Stop, groun," he said instead. He was not quite sure why.

The groun froze, edged backward. It said something in a low guttural moan. Annelyn understood nothing of it. "I hear you," he said, "and I see you, groun. I am wearing a rune of the Changemasters." He pointed at the theta stitched in gold on his breast.

The groun gibbered in terror, dropped its net, and began to run. Annelyn ruefully decided that he ought not to have drawn attention to his theta. On impulse, he decided to follow the groun; perhaps, in its fear, it would lead him to an exit. If not, he could always find his way back to the stair.

He pursued it down three corridors, around two turns, before he lost sight of it entirely. The groun had been running very quickly, while Annelyn was still getting an occasional twinge from his ankle, making it difficult to keep up. Yet he continued on after the groun had vanished, hoping to pick up the trail again.

Then the creature reappeared, running toward him. It saw him, stopped, glanced back over a shoulder. Then, seemingly determined, it resumed its headlong, four-legged gallop, one of its remaining limbs brandishing its knife.

Annelyn flourished his club, but the groun did not slow. Then inspiration struck. He reached into his pocket, and produced his last match.

The groun shrieked, and four long legs began to scabble madly on the burrow floor as it skidded to a halt. But it was not the only one surprised. Annelyn himself, dazzled by the coruscating brilliance that seemed to stab into his brain, choked and staggered and dropped the match. Both of them stood blinking.

But something else moved. A cold gray shadow was drifting down onto the groun, filling the tunnel like a wall of mist. The front of it rippled in and out, in and out, in and out.

Annelyn shook his head, and the eaterworm loomed clear.

Without thought, he jumped forward, swinging his club over the head of the groun. The blow glanced harmlessly off the worm's leathery skin. Then Annelyn drew back, kicked the groun to get it moving, and thrust his glass-edged pole into the contracting mouth of the attacker.

He was running then, the groun next to him, darting around narrow turns until he was certain that they'd lost the worm. They retraced their old footsteps, and the narrow stair appeared in their path.

The groun stopped, and swung to face him. Annelyn stood with empty hands.

The groun raised its knife, then cocked its head to one side. Annelyn matched the motion. That seemed to satisfy the creature. It sheathed the blade, squatted in the dust thick on the burrow floor, and began to sketch a map.

The groun's finger left glowing trails that lingered for a time, then faded rapidly. But the symbols it used meant nothing to Annelyn. "No," he said, shaking his head. "I cannot follow."

The groun looked up. Then it rose, gestured, and started up the stair, glancing back to see if Annelyn was behind it. He was.

They climbed that stair and another, walked through a series of wide burrows, pulled themselves up rust-eaten ladders through narrow wells. Then came more tunnels, the groun looking back periodically, Annelyn following docilely. He was nervous, but he kept telling himself that the groun could have killed him before; surely if that had been what it intended, it would have done so by now.

Other grouns moved through the burrows. Annelyn saw one, a skeletal red shape with a long sword and one missing limb, and then two together with knives crouching near a junction. They gave him ominous eyeless looks. Later, they passed whole crowds of grouns, some of them in long garments that dragged on the floor and shone softly in many colors. All gave him a wide berth. He saw worm-holes, too, most dark and cold, others ringed by faint halos that sent chills up his spine.

After more climbing and turning than Annelyn cared to remember, they came out into a large chamber. A dozen grouns sat over smoking bowls at long metal tables, shoveling food into their mouths. They regarded him impassively.

Annelyn caught the scent of food - a fungus mush, torch-tenders food - and was suddenly, ravenously hungry. But no one offered him a bowl. His guide spoke to another groun seated near the center of the table, a grossly fat individual with an enormous, misshapen head. Finally the huge groun - he must have weighed more than Groff, Annelyn thought - shoved aside his bowl of steaming food, rose, and came over to Annelyn. His head moved up and down, up and down, as he inspected the intruder. Four soft hands began to pat him all over, and Annelyn gritted his teeth and tried not to flinch. It wasn't as bad as he had expected. He found himself regarding the new groun almost like a person, instead of a thing.

The fat groun cocked his head to one side. Annelyn remembered and did the same. The groun joined four hands together in a huge fist, raised it, lowered it. Annelyn, with only two hands, did his best to mimic the gesture.

Then the groun held up one finger, and jabbed at his own chest with another hand. Annelyn started to imitate him, but the groun restrained him. This was something more than a vision test. Annelyn was still.

The groun held up two fingers on a hand of an upper limb, his two middle limbs went out to either side, and his great body shook. His opposing upper arm came up, and that hand flashed three fingers. The groun looked from one hand to the other and back again, then repeated the gesture. He looked at Annelyn, and was still.

Annelyn glanced from the groun's upper right hand: two fingers; to the upper left: three. The Meatbringer's words returned to him. He raised his own hand, and spread three fingers.

The groun lowered all his hands, and again the immense body quivered. He turned back to another of his kind, and they spoke together in their soft, mournful way. Annelyn could not follow their talk, but he hoped he had made himself understood.

Finally the leader turned and walked back around the table, seated himself, and returned to his bowl of fungus. Annelyn's erstwhile guide took him by the elbow, and beckoned him to follow. They went together from the chamber. The groun began leading him upward once more.

As they walked on and on, climbing one ladder after another and ascending stairways only to descend others, wandering through long burrows full of grouns shuffling and muttering, Annelyn grew increasingly conscious of his exhaustion. Whatever magic had kept him functioning until now was rapidly wearing off - his ankle hurt, his thigh hurt, his hands hurt, he was starved and parched and filthy, and he badly needed rest and sleep. But the groun showed no mercy, and Annelyn could only strive to keep up with his rapid pace.

Afterward, of all the burrows they passed through, only a few pictures lingered in his memory.

One time, the two of them walked down a narrow passage that was frightfully, eerily cold; the gloom was thick enough to cut, and Annelyn saw pipes, intensely black and throbbing, along the low ceiling. Wisps of ebony fog curled around them, then fell like slow streamers to the floor; Annelyn and the groun walked boot deep in chilled black mist. Under the pipes, wicked metal hooks curved outward. Most of them were empty, but two held the carcasses of rope-thin worms of a kind Annelyn had never encountered. A third held poor fat Riess, naked and dead, an obscene carving of obsidian, with a hook in the back of his neck so he dangled grotesquely. Annelyn started to make the sign of the worm, stopped himself, and shuffled by. If he had held up two fingers instead of three, he suspected, he might now occupy the hook right next to his one-time friend.

Two others chambers struck him forcefully, for both were among the largest open spaces he had ever seen. The first of these was so hot that sweat ran down his arms, while the orange glare of the air stung his eyes. It was a room so large he could barely see the far side. Pipes were everywhere, thick and thin, some strangely dark and others brilliant, like metal worms running over floor and walls and ceilings. The vast spaces above were filled by a web of thin bridges and ropes: up there, Annelyn glimpsed a thousand grouns, limber on six legs and born to the air, scampering up and down and around on the web, turning wheels and pushing bars, tending five immense shapes of metal that stood several levels high and burned with stabbing white light. His guide led him through the chamber on ground level, detouring through the maze of pipes, while the other grouns swung by and paid them little attention.

The second chamber, three levels higher and long minutes later, was just as huge, but desolate. No light here, no shapes of metal, no ropes or bridges; and the only groun Annelyn saw here was a lone, armed hunter who stood like a tiny red bug in the far distance across the room, and watched them as they passed. The floor and the walls were stone, dusty and dry and melancholy, but in places they were lined by a metal paneling that shone faintly with lights of many different hues. When Annelyn and his guide walked near one of these, he saw that a picture was glowing on the panel. It was an intricate, labored depiction of sword-swinging grouns battling a giant whose eyes were thetas and whose fingers were worms. He had to look hard and long to make sense of the scene, however; as with the tapestries of the yaga-la-hai, here too the colors were dim and fading, and rust had eaten black, flaking holes in some of the panels. One more thing Annelyn noted about the great, abandoned chamber: wormholes. The floor was full of them.

Afterward, they went straight for a long time. Annelyn noticed broken bronze fists on the walls then, and some of his weariness lifted. He was closer to home. The yaga-la-hai had lived here once.

Abruptly, the groun stopped. Annelyn stopped too.

They stood beside an air duct. It had no grill. Annelyn smiled wanly, leaned forward, and reached inside. His hand brushed rope.

The groun made an odd sweeping gesture, turned, and set off back the way he had come, moving rapidly on four limbs. Soon Annelyn was alone. He reached into the warm shaft, gripped the rope, and started to climb. This time he could see where he was going. The metal sides around him were a friendly reddish color, the air faintly misty and moving steadily upward, past him. When he was between levels, he could look up and down, and in both directions see the shadowed squares of exits.

He swung out one level up, and removed his helmet, cradling it under his arm. The great metal doors hung open. Annelyn stood in shadows, and let his eyes adjust to the pale, purple gloom. The fungus-encrusted globes still shone in the Chamber of the Changemasters, but the torches had been snuffed. Of the Meatbringer, he saw no sign. He waited until he was sure, then went inside.

The first thing he took up was a weapon. His own rapier was there, on top of a pile of rusting blades, and he reclaimed it with satisfaction. He tested Groff's great ax, lying up against the throne, but found it too heavy and awkward. Instead, he slid Vermyllar's dagger into his belt, and Riess's into a boot. If he were to blood the Meatbringer, it seemed appropriate to use those tools.

Then he wandered around the chamber, picking at things, exploring, searching for food. He finally found a cache of meat, strips salted and hung. Plenty of good white groun-meat, and some other kind as well. But Annelyn found he could eat none of it. He settled for a bowl of spiced spiders and a plate of mushrooms.

After eating, he rested on one of the wheeled beds, too tired to sleep, and too frightened. Instead, he scrutinized a book he had found lying open beside the throne. Its covers were heavy leather, impressed with the theta and a row of symbols, but the pages inside had not endured the long passage of time as well. Some were missing entirely, others were damp and overgrown by paper mold, and the few fragments still legible made no sense to Annelyn. The symbols were vaguely like the writing in the crumbling libraries kept by the Manworm; Annelyn had learned to read a little of it from Vermyllar, who in turn had learned the dark art from his grandfather. It did not help. He could puzzle out a word here, guess at one on the page following, and yet another, ten chapters on, but never two words together that made sense. Even the pictures were meaningless tangles of lines, depicting nothing that he recognized.

Annelyn set the book aside. Noises were coming from the air duct. He stood, took his helmet and rapier, and went outside the chamber doors to wait.

The Meatbringer emerged from the shaft, dressed in white grounskin with a colorless cloak. Ropes of spidersilk bound the body of a small male child to his back. The boy was of the yaga-la-hai.

Annelyn stepped forward.

The Meatbringer looked up, startled. He had begun to untie the knots that held his prey. Now his hand went to his knife. "So," he said. "You."

"Me," said Annelyn. His rapier was extended, his helmet cradled by his free hand.

"I searched for you," the Meatbringer said. "After I hung a new rope."

"I fled," said Annelyn, "knowing that you would search."

"Yes," the Meatbringer said, smiling. His knife came out, a whisper of metal on leather. "I feared you were lost. This is better. The grouns pay well for meat. Your friends, by the way, were delicious. Except for the knight. Unfortunately, he was quite tough."

"I wonder how you will taste," Annelyn said.

The Meatbringer laughed.

"I suspect your flesh would be foul," Annelyn continued. "I will not eat you. Better you be carrion for the eaterworms."

"So," said the Meatbringer. "More of your great wit." He bowed. "This meat I carry hampers me. May I cut it loose?"

"Certainly," said Annelyn.

"Let me place it inside, out of the way," the Meatbringer said. "So we might not trip over it."

Annelyn nodded, and circled warily to the side, suppressing a smile. He knew what the Meatbringer intended. The other took his knife and slit the knots that bound the child to his back, then placed the body on the far side of the door. He turned, framed by the purplish light.

Laughing, he said, "The yaga-la-hai and the grouns, you are so alike. Animals." He reached out and swung shut the wide doors, and again Annelyn's ears rang to the clang he had heard once, long ago.



“No,” Annelyn said. “Alike, yes. But not animals.” He put on his helmet. The thick darkness vanished like a mist.

The Meatbringer had danced silently and deftly to one side. A great grin split his face, and he advanced with stealthy steps, his knife ready to thrust and disembowel.

If Annelyn - like the late, unfortunate Groff - had tried a rush attack on the place where the Meatbringer had been, in the last instant of light, the thrust would have left him open and vulnerable to a fatal stab from the Meatbringer where he now was. It was a crafty, polished technique; but Annelyn could see. For once, darkness and deception were of no use. And Annelyn's rapier was longer than the Meatbringer's knife.

Quickly, easily, casually, Annelyn turned to face his enemy, smiled beneath his helmet, and lunged. The Meatbringer hardly had time to react; it had been years since he had fought on even terms. Annelyn ran him through the abdomen.

Afterward, he pushed the body down the air shaft, and prayed that it would fall eternally.

\* \* \* \*

The Masque of the Manworm was still in progress in the High Burrow when Annelyn returned to the yaga-la-hai. In the dusty libraries, men in dominoes and women in veils writhed and spun; the treasure rooms were open for viewing, the pleasure chambers open for other things; in the Highest Hall, the Second Vermentor lay beneath a thousand torches while the worm-children danced past him, and sang chants of his demise. The Manworm had no face now; he was one with the White Worm. Beside him, the priest-surgeons stood, in white smocks with scalpel-and-theta, as they had stood for a week. The Seventh Feast had just been laid.

Caralee was there, bright golden Caralee, and the bronze knights, and many who had once been friends of Annelyn. But most only smiled and made soft witticisms when he came striding unexpectedly through the doors.

Some, perhaps, did not recognize him. Only a short time ago, at the Sun Masque, he had been brilliant in silk and spidergray. Now he was painfully gaunt, cut and bruised in a dozen places, his eyes restless in dark hollows, and the only clothes he wore were black tatters that hung on him like a mushroom farmer's foul rags. His face was bare, without so much as a domino, and that set the guests to muttering, since the time of unmasking had not yet come.

Very soon they had more to mutter about. For Annelyn, this strange, changeling Annelyn, stood silently in the door, his eyes jumping from one mask to another. Then, still silent, he walked across the gleaming obsidian floor to the feasting table, seized an iron platter piled high with fine white grounflesh, and flung it violently across the room. A few laughed; others, not so amused, picked slices of meat from their shoulders. Annelyn went from the room.

Afterward, he became a familiar figure among the yaga-la-hai, though he lost his flair for dress and much of his fine wit. Instead, he spoke endlessly and persuasively of forgotten crimes and the sins of bygone eons, painting deliciously dark pictures of monster worms who bred beneath the House and would one day rise to consume all. He was fond of telling the worm-children that they ought to lie with grooms, instead of cooking them, so that a new people might be fashioned to resist his nightmare worms.

In the endless long decay of the House of the Worm, nothing was so prized as novelty. Annelyn, though considered coarse and most unsubtle, wove entertaining tales and had a spark of shocking irreverence. Thus, though the bronze knights grumbled, he was allowed to live.

# Tuf Voyaging: Prologue

CATALOG SIX  
ITEM NUMBER 37433-800912-5442894  
SHANDELLOR CENTER FOR THE  
ADVANCEMENT OF  
CULTURE AND KNOWLEDGE  
XENOANTHROPOLOGY DIVISION

item description: crystal voice coding  
item found: H'ro Brana (co/orde SQ, V7715, I21)  
tentative dating: recorded approx. 276 standard years ago  
classify under:  
    slave races, Hrangan  
    legends & myths, Hruun  
    medical  
    -disease, unidentified  
    trade bases, abandoned

Hello? Hello?

Yes, I see it works. Good.

I am Rarik Hortvenzy, apprentice factor, speaking a warning to whomever finds my words.

Dusk comes now, for me the last. The sun has sunk beneath the western cliffs, staining the land with blood, and now the twilight eats its way toward me inexorably. The stars come out, one by one, but the only star that matters burns night and day, day and night. It is always with me, the brightest thing in the sky but for the sun. It is the plague star.

This day I buried Janeel. With my own hands I buried her, digging in the hard rocky ground from dawn through late afternoon, until my arms were afire with pain. When my ordeal was done, when the last spadeful of this wretched alien dirt had been thrown upon her head, when the last stone had been placed atop her cairn, then I stood over her and spat upon her grave.

It is all her fault. I told her so, not once but many times as she lay dying, and when the end was near she finally admitted her guilt. Her fault that we came here. Her fault that we did not leave when we might have. Her fault that she is dead—yes, no doubt of it—and her fault that I shall rot unburied when my own time comes, my flesh a feast for the beasts of the dark, and the flyers and night-hunters we once hoped to trade with.

The plague star twinkles but little, shines down upon the land with a clear bright light. This is wrong, I told Janeel once; a plague star ought to be red. It ought to glower, to drape itself with scarlet radiance, to whisper into the night hints of fire and of blood. This clear white purity, what has that to do with plague? That was in the first days, when our charter ship had just set us down to open our proud little trade complex, set us down and then moved on. In that time the plague star was but one of fifty first-magnitude stars in these alien skies, hard even to

pick out. In that time we smiled at it, at the superstitions of these primitives, these backward brutes who thought sickness came from the sky.

Yet then the plague star began to wax. Night after night it burned more brightly, until it became visible even by day. Long before that time the pestilence had begun.

The flyers wheel against the darkening sky. Gliders, they are, and from afar they have a beauty. They call to my mind the shadowgulls of my homeplace, Budakhar upon the living sea, on the world Razyar. Yet here is no sea, only mountains and hills and dry desolation, and I know too that these flyers have small beauty when close at hand. Lean and terrible creatures they are, half as tall as a man, with skin like tanned leather pulled tight across their strange hollow bones. Their wings are dry and hard as a drumskin, their talons sharp like daggers, and beneath the great bony crest that sweeps back like a hooked blade from their narrow skulls, their eyes are a hideous red.

Janeel said to me they were sentient. They have a tongue, she said. I have heard their voices, thin keening screeching voices that scrape raw the nerves. I have never learned to speak this tongue, nor did Janeel. Sentient, she said. We would trade with them. Ho, they wanted no part of us or our trade. They knew enough to steal, yes, and that is where their sentience ended. Yet we and they have this much in common: death.

The flyers die. The night-hunters, with their massive twisted limbs and gnarly two-thumbed hands, with their eyes that burn in their bulging skulls like embers from a dying fire, ho, they die, too. They have a frightening strength, and those strange great eyes can see in the black when stormclouds cover even the plague star. In their caverns the hunters whisper of the great Minds, the masters they served once, the ones who will someday return and call on them to go forth to war once again. Yet the Minds do not come, and the night-hunters die—even as the flyers, even as those of the more furtive races whose bodies we find in the flint hills, even as the mindless beasts, even as the crops and trees, even as Janeel and I.

Janeel told me this would be a world of gold and gems for us; it is a world of death. H'ro Brana was the name in her ancient charts; I will not call it by that. She knew the names for all its peoples. I recall but one—Hruun. That is the true name of the night-hunters. A slave race, she said, of the Hrangans, the great enemy, gone now, defeated a thousand years past, their slaves abandoned in that long fall. It was a lost colony, she said, a handful of sentients eager for trade. She knew so much and I so little, but now I have buried her and spat upon her grave and I know the truth of it. If slaves they were, then bad slaves surely, for their masters set them upon a hell, beneath the cruel light of the plague star.

Our last supply ship came through half a year past. We might have gone. Already the plagues had begun.

The flyers crawled upon the mountain summits, tumbled from the cliffs. I found them there, their skin inflamed and oozing fluid, great cracks in the leather of their wings. Night-hunters came to us covered with livid boils, and from us they bought umbrellas in great number, to keep them safe from the rays of the plague star. When the ship landed, we might have gone. Yet Janeel said stay. She had names for these sicknesses that killed the flyers and night-hunters. She had names for the drugs that would cure these ills. To name a thing is to understand, she thought. We might be healers, gain their brutal trust, and our fortunes would be made. She bought all the medicines that ship carried, and sent for others, and we began to treat these plagues that she had named.

When the next plague came, she named it, too. And the next, and the next, and the next. Yet there were plagues beyond counting. First she ran out of drugs, and soon out of names as well, and this dawn I dug her grave. She had been a slender, active female, but in dying she grew very stiff and her limbs puffed up to twice their size. I had to dig a large grave to fit her rigid, swollen corpse. I have named the thing that killed her: Janeel's Plague, I call it. I have no skill at names. My own plague is different from hers, and has no name. When I move, a living flame runs through my bones, and my skin has gone gray and brittle. Each dawn when I wake I find the bedclothes covered with bits of my flesh that have fallen away from my bones, and stained with blood from the wet raw places beneath.

The plague star is huge and bright above me, and now I understand why it is white. White is the color of purity, ho, and the plague star purifies this land. Yet its touch corrupts and decays. There is a fine irony in that, is there not?

We brought many weapons, sold few. The night-hunters and the flyers can use no weapons against this thing that slays them, and from the first have put more faith in umbrellas than in lasers. I have armed myself with a flamer from our storeroom, and poured myself a glass of dark wine.

I will sit here in the coolness and talk my thoughts to this crystal and I will drink my wine and watch the flyers, the few who still live, as they dance and soar against the night. Far off, they look so like shadowgulls above my living sea. I will drink my wine and remember how that sea sounded when I was but a Budakhar boy who dreamed of stars, and when the wine is gone I will use the flamer.

(long silence)

I can think of no more words to say. Janeel knew many words and many names, but I buried her this morning.

(long silence)

If my voice is ever found...

(short pause)

If this is found after the plague star has waned, as the night-hunters say it will, do not be deceived. This is no fair world, no world for life. Here is death, and plagues beyond numbering. The plague star will shine again.

(long silence)

My wine is gone.

(end of recording)

# Tuf Voyaging: The Plague Star

“No,” Kaj Nevis told the others firmly. “That’s out. We’d be damned stupid to involve any of the big transcorps.”

“Oh, stuff and nonsense,” Celise Waan snapped back at him. “We have to get there, don’t we? So we need a ship. I’ve chartered ships from Starslip before, and they’re perfectly comfortable. The crews are polite and the cuisine is more than adequate.”

Nevis gave her a withering look. He had a face made for it—sharp and angular, with hair swept back hard and a great scimitar of a nose, his small dark eyes half-hidden by heavy black eyebrows. “For what purpose did you charter these ships?”

“Why, for field trips, of course,” Celise Waan replied. She plucked another cream ball from the plate in front of her, lifting it delicately between thumb and forefinger and popping it into her mouth. “I’ve supervised many important researches. The Center provided the funding.”

“Let me point out the nose on your damn face,” Nevis said. “This is not a field trip. We are not poking into the mating habits of primitives. We are not digging around for obscure knowledge that no sane person could possibly give a damn about, as you’re accustomed to doing. This little conspiracy of ours is about to go after a treasure of almost unimaginable value. If we find it, we don’t intend to turn it over to the proper authorities, either. You need me to see to its disposition through less-than-licit channels. And you trust me so little that you won’t tell where the damn thing is until we’re underway, and Lion here has hired a bodyguard. Fine, I don’t give a damn. But understand this—I am not the only untrustworthy man on ShanDellor. Vast profit is involved here, and vast power. If you’re going to continue to yammer at me about cuisine, then I’m leaving. I have better things to do than sit here counting your chins.”

Celise Waan snorted disdainfully. She was a big, round, red-faced woman, with a loud, wet snort. “Starslip is a reputable firm,” she said. “Besides, the salvage laws—”

“—are meaningless,” said Nevis. “We have one set of laws here on ShanDellor, another on Kleronomas, a third on Maya, and none of them mean a damn thing. And if ShanDi law did apply, we’d get only one-quarter the value of the find—if we got anything at all. Assuming this plague star of yours is really what Lion thinks it is, and assuming that it’s still in working order, whoever controls it will enjoy an overwhelming military superiority in this sector. Starslip and the other big transcorps are as greedy and ruthless as I am, I promise you. Furthermore, they are big enough and powerful enough so that the planetary governments watch them closely. In case it has escaped your notice, let me point out that there are only four of us. Five, if you count the hireling,” he said, nodding toward Rica Dawnstar, who favored him with an icy grin. “A big liner has more than five pastry chefs. Even on a small courier, we’d be outnumbered by the crew. Once they saw what we had, do you imagine for even a second that we’d be allowed to keep it?”

“If they cheat us, we’ll sue them,” the fat anthropologist said, with a hint of petulance in her voice. She plucked up the last cream ball.

Kaj Nevis laughed at her. “In what courts? On what world? That’s assuming we’re allowed to live, which is unlikely on the face of it. You are a remarkably stupid and ugly woman.”

Jefri Lion had been listening to the squabble with an uncomfortable expression on his face. “Here, here,” he interrupted at last. “Let’s have no name-calling, Nevis. No call for it. We’re all in this together, after all.” A short, square block of a man, Lion wore a chameleon cloth jacket of military cut, decorated with rows of ribbons from

some forgotten campaign. The fabric had turned a dusty gray in the dimness of the small restaurant, a gray that matched the color of Lion's bristling spade-shaped beard. There was a thin sheen of sweat on his broad, balding forehead. Kaj Nevis made him nervous; the man had a reputation, after all. Lion looked around to the others for support.

Celise Waan pouted and stared at the empty plate in front of her, as if her gaze could fill it with cream balls again.

Rica Dawnstar—"the hireling," as Nevis called her—leaned back in her seat with a look of sardonic amusement in her bright green eyes. Beneath her drab jumpsuit and silvery mesh-steel vest, the long, hard body looked relaxed, almost indolent. No concern of hers if her employers wanted to argue all night and all day.

"Insults are useless," Anittas said. It was hard to tell what the cybertech was thinking; his face was as much polished metal and translucent plastic as flesh, and only minimally expressive. The shiny bluesteel fingers of his right hand interlocked with the mocha-colored fleshy digits of his left; he studied Nevis with two shining silver-metal eyes that moved smoothly in black plastic sockets. "Kaj Nevis has made some valid points. He is experienced in these areas, where we are not. What is the use of having brought him into this affair if we are unwilling to listen to his counsel?"

"Yes, that's so," Jefri Lion agreed. "What do you suggest then, Nevis? If we must avoid the transcorps, how will we reach the plague star?"

"We need a ship," Celise Waan said, loudly stating the obvious.

Kaj Nevis smiled. "The transcorps have no monopoly on ships. That's why I suggested we meet here today, rather than at Lion's office. This dump is close to the port. The man we want will be here, I'm sure."

Jefri Lion looked hesitant. "An independent? Some of them have rather, uh, unsavory reputations, don't they?"

"Like me," Nevis reminded him.

"Still. I've heard rumors of smuggling, even piracy. Do we want to take that kind of a chance, Nevis?"

"We don't want to take any chances at all," Kaj Nevis said. "And we won't. It's a matter of knowing the right people. I know lots of people. The right people. The wrong people." He made a small gesture with his head. "Now, way in the back there, that dark woman with all the black jewelry. That's Jessamyn Caige, mistress of the *Free Venture*. She'd hire out to us, no doubt. At a very reasonable rate."

Celise Waan craned around to look. "Is she the one, then? I hope this ship of hers has a gravity grid. Weightlessness makes me nauseous."

"When are you going to approach her?" Jefri Lion asked.

"I'm not," Kaj Nevis told them. "Oh, I've used Jessamyn to move a cargo or two for me, but I won't take the risk of actually riding with her, and I'd never dream of involving her in anything this big. The *Free Venture* has a crew of nine—more than enough to handle me and the hireling. No offense, Lion, but the rest of you don't count."

"I'll have you know I'm a soldier," Jefri Lion said, in a wounded tone. "I've seen combat."

"A hundred years ago," Nevis said. "As I said, the rest of you don't count. And Jessamyn would as soon kill all of us as spit." The small, dark eyes regarded each of them in turn. "That's why you need me. Without me, you are just naive enough to engage Jessamyn, or one of the transcorps."

"My niece serves with a very successful independent trader," Celise Waan said.

“And who might that be?” Kaj Nevis inquired.

“Noah Wackerfuss,” she said, “of the *World of Bargains*.”

Nevis nodded. “Fat Noah,” he said. “That would be a lot of fun, I’m damn sure. I might mention that his ship is kept constantly in weightlessness. Gravity would kill the old degenerate—not that it matters. Wackerfuss isn’t especially blood-thirsty, that’s so. Fifty-fifty chance he wouldn’t kill us. He is, however, as greedy and as shrewd as they come. At the very least, he’d find a way to get a full share. At worst, he’d get it all. And his ship has a crew of twenty—all women. Have you ever asked your niece about the precise nature of her duties?”

Celise Waan flushed. “Do I have to listen to this man’s innuendoes?” she asked Lion. “This was my discovery. I won’t be insulted by this third-rate hoodlum, Jefri.”

Lion frowned unhappily. “Really now, enough of this squabbling. Nevis, there’s no need to flaunt your expertise. We brought you into this for good cause, I’m sure we all agree. You must have some idea of who we can engage to take us to the plague star, don’t you?”

“Of course,” Nevis agreed.

“Who?” prompted Anittas.

“The man is an independent trader, of sorts. Not a very successful one. And he’s been stuck on ShanDellor, for want of a cargo, for half of a standard year now. He must be getting desperate—desperate enough, I’d think, so that he’ll jump at this opportunity. He has a small, battered ship with a long, ridiculous name. It’s not luxurious, but it will take us there, which is all that matters. There’s no crew to worry about, only the man himself. And he—well, he’s a little ridiculous, too. He’ll give us no trouble. He’s big, but soft, inside and out. He keeps cats, I hear. Doesn’t much like people. Drinks a lot of beer, eats too much. I doubt that he even carries a weapon. Reports are that he barely scrapes by, flitting from world to world and selling absurd trinkets and useless little geegaws from this beat-up old ship of his. Wackerfuss thinks the man’s a joke. But even if he’s wrong, what can one man alone do? If he so much as threatens to report us, the hireling and I can dispose of him and feed him to his cats.”

“Nevis, I’ll have no talk like that!” Jefri Lion objected. “I won’t have any killing on this venture.”

“No?” Nevis said. He nodded toward Rica Dawnstar. “Then why did you hire her?” His smile was very nasty, somehow; her returning grin was pure mocking malice. “Just so,” Nevis said, “I knew this was the place. Here’s our man now.”

None of them except Rica Dawnstar was much versed in the art of subtle conspiracy; the other three all turned to stare at the door, and the man who had just entered. He stood very tall, almost two-and-a-half meters, and his great soft gut swelled out above his thin metal belt. He had big hands, a long, curiously blank face, and a stiff, awkward posture; everywhere his skin was as white as bleached bone, and it appeared that he had not a hair on him anywhere. He wore shiny blue trousers and a deep maroon shirt whose balloon sleeves were frayed at the ends.

He must have felt their scrutiny, for he turned his head and stared back, his pale face expressionless. He kept on staring. Celise Waan looked away first, and then Jefri Lion, and finally Anittas. “Who is he?” the cyborg demanded of Kaj Nevis.

“Wackerfuss calls him Tuffy,” Nevis said. “His real name, I’m told, is Haviland Tuf.”

Haviland Tuf picked up the last of the green star-forts with a delicacy that belied his great size, then straightened to regard the gaming board with satisfaction. The entire cluster was red; cruisers and dreadnaughts and star-forts and all the colonies, red everywhere. "I must claim the victory," he said.

"Again," said Rica Dawnstar. She stretched, to untie the knots that hours bent over the game had put in her limbs. She had the deadly grace of a lioness, and beneath her silver mesh-steel vest her needler was snug in its shoulder holster.

"Perhaps I might be so bold as to suggest another contest," said Haviland Tuf.

Dawnstar laughed. "No thanks," she said. "You're too good at this. I was born a gambler, but with you it's no gamble. I'm tired of coming in second."

"I have been most fortunate in the games we have played thus far," Haviland Tuf said. "Undoubtedly, my luck will have run its course by now, and you will obliterate my poor forces on your next attempt."

"Oh, undoubtedly," Rica Dawnstar replied, grinning, "but forgive me if I postpone the attempt until the boredom becomes terminal. At least I'm better than Lion. Right, Jefri?"

Jefri Lion was seated in a corner of the ship's control room, perusing a stack of old military texts. His chameleon cloth jacket had turned the same brown as the synthawood panelling of the bulkhead behind him. "The game does not conform to authentic military principles," he said, with a hint of annoyance in his voice. "I employed the same tactics that Stephen Cobalt Northstar used when the 13th Human Fleet enveloped Hrakkean. Tuf's counterthrust was completely wrong under the circumstances. If the rules had been written properly, it ought to have been routed."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. "You have the advantage of me, sir. You, after all, have the good fortune to be a military historian, and I am merely a humble trader. I lack your familiarity with the great campaigns of history. How fortunate for me that thus far, the deficiencies of the game itself, and my extraordinary fortune, have conspired to make up for my ignorance. Still, I would welcome the opportunity to strengthen my grasp of military principles. If you would care to assay the game once again, I will carefully study your subtle strategies so that I might in future incorporate a sounder, more authentic approach into my own poor play."

Jefri Lion, whose silver fleet had been the first eliminated in every game they had played during the past week, cleared his throat and looked uncomfortable. "Yes, uh, you see, Tuf," he began.

He was saved from embarrassment by a sudden shriek and stream of profanity that issued from the adjoining compartment. Haviland Tuf was on his feet at once; Rica Dawnstar was right behind him.

They emerged into the passageway just as Celise Waan staggered out of the living quarters, in pursuit of a small, fleet black-and-white form that went hurtling past them into the control room. "Catch it!" Celise Waan screamed at them. Her face was red and puffy and swollen, and she looked furious.

The door was small, Haviland Tuf large. "For what purpose, might I inquire?" he asked, blocking the way.

The anthropologist held out her left hand. There were three short, deep scratches across her palm, welling blood. "Look what it did to me!" she said.

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. "And what did you do to her?"

Kaj Nevis emerged from the living quarters with a thin, hard smile on his face. "She picked it up to toss it across the room," he said.



“It was on my bed!” said Celise Waan. “I wanted to take a little nap, and the damned creature was asleep on my bed!” She whirled to face Nevis. “And you, wipe that smirk off your face. It’s bad enough we all have to be cooped up together in this shabby little ship. I simply refuse to share what little space there is with this impossible man’s filthy little animals. And it’s your fault, Nevis. You got us into this! Now do something. I demand that you make Tuf get rid of those vicious pests, do you hear me, I demand it!”

“Excuse me,” Rica Dawnstar said from behind Tuf. He glanced back at her and moved aside. “Is this one of the vicious pests you had in mind?” Dawnstar asked, with a grin, as she stepped into the passageway. She was cradling a cat against her chest with her left hand, and petting it with her right. It was a huge tom with long, soft, gray hair and arrogant yellow eyes; it must have weighed twenty pounds, but Rica held it as easily as if it had been a kitten. “What do you propose Tuf do with old Mushroom here?” she asked as the cat began to purr.

“It was the other one that hurt me, the black-and-white one,” Celise Waan said, “but that one’s just as bad. Look at my face! Look at what they’ve done to me! I can scarcely breathe, and I’m breaking out all over, and whenever I try to get a little sleep I wake up with one of them on my chest. Yesterday I was having a little snack, and I put it down just for a moment, and when I came back the black-and-white one had knocked over my plate and was rolling my spice-puffs around in the dirt as if they were toys! Nothing is safe around these animals. I’ve lost two light pencils and my best pinky ring. And now this, this attack! Really, this is just intolerable. I must insist that these damned animals be put down in the cargo hold at once. At once, do you hear?”

“My hearing is quite adequate, thank you,” said Haviland Tuf. “If your missing property has not turned up by the end of our voyage, I will be most pleased to reimburse you for its value. Your request in regard to Mushroom and Havoc, however, I must regretfully deny.”

“I’m a passenger on this joke of a starship!” Celise Waan screamed at him.

“Must you insult my intelligence as well as my hearing?” Tuf replied. “Your status as a passenger here is obvious, madam; it is not necessary for you to point it out. Permit me to point out, however, that this small ship which you feel so free to insult is my home and my livelihood, such that it is. Furthermore, while you are undeniably a passenger here and therefore enjoy certain rights and prerequisites, Mushroom and Havoc must logically have substantially greater rights, since this is their permanent abode, so to speak. It is not my custom to take passengers aboard my *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*. As you have observed, the space available is scarcely adequate to my own needs. Regretfully, I have suffered various professional vicissitudes of late, and there is no gainsaying the fact that my supply of standards was veering toward inadequacy when Kaj Nevis approached me. I have bent all my efforts to accommodate you aboard this craft which you so malign, to the extent that I have given over my ship’s living quarters to your collective needs and made my own poor bed in the control room. Despite my undeniable need, I am now coming to deeply regret the foolish and altruistic impulse that bid me take this charter, especially as the payment I have received was barely sufficient to refuel and provision for this voyage and pay the ShanDi landing tax. You have taken grievous advantage of my gullibility, I fear. Nonetheless, I am a man of my word and will do my best to convey you to this mysterious destination of yours. For the duration of the voyage, however, I must require you to tolerate Mushroom and Havoc, even as I tolerate you.”

“Well, I never!” Celise Waan declared.

“I have no doubt,” said Haviland Tuf.

“I’m not going to put up with this any longer,” the anthropologist said. “There’s no reason we all have to be crammed up inside one room like soldiers in a barracks. This ship was not nearly this small from outside.” She pointed a pudgy arm. “Where does that door go?” she demanded.

“To the hold and cargo compartments,” Haviland Tuf said evenly. “There are sixteen of them. Even the smallest, admittedly, has twice the space of my meager living quarters.”

“Aha!” said Waan. “And are we carrying any cargo?”

“Compartment sixteen is packed with plastic reproductions of Cooglish orgy-masks, which I was unfortunately unable to sell on ShanDellor, a situation I lay entirely at the door of Noah Wackerfuss, who undercut my price and deprived me of my small hope of profit. In compartment twelve I store certain personal effects, miscellaneous equipment, collectibles, and bric-a-brac. The rest of the ship is quite empty, madam.”

“Excellent!” said Celise Waan. “In that case, we will convert the smaller compartments into private rooms for each of us. It should be a simple matter to move our bedding.”

“Quite simple,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Then do it!” snapped Celise Waan.

“As you wish,” said Tuf. “Will you be wanting to rent a pressure suit?”

“What?”

Rica Dawnstar was grinning. “The holds aren’t part of the life-support system,” she said. “No air. No heat. No pressure. No gravity, even.”

“Ought to suit you just fine,” Kaj Nevis put in.

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

Day and night are meaningless aboard a starship, but the ancient rhythms of the human body still made their demands, and technology had to conform. Therefore the *Cornucopia*, like all but the huge triple-shift warships and transcorp liners, had its sleep cycle—a time of darkness and silence.

Rica Dawnstar rose from her cot and checked her needler, from long force of habit. Celise Waan was snoring loudly; Jefri Lion tossed and turned, winning battles in his head; Kaj Nevis was lost in dreams of wealth and power. The cybertech was sleeping too, though it was a deeper sort of sleep. To escape the boredom of the voyage, Anittas had parked on a cot, plugged into the ship’s computer, and turned himself off. His cyberhalf monitored his biohalf. His breath was slow as a glacier and very regular, his body temperature down, his energy consumption cut to almost nothing, but the lidless silver-metal sensors that served him as eyes sometimes seemed to shift slightly, tracking some unseen vision.

Rica Dawnstar moved quietly from the room. Up in the control chamber, Haviland Tuf sat alone. His lap was full of gray tomcat; his huge pale hands moved over the computer keys. Havoc, the smaller black-and-white cat, was playing around his feet. She had gotten hold of a light pencil and was batting it to and fro on the floor. Tuf never heard Rica enter; no one heard Rica Dawnstar move unless she wanted them to hear.

“You’re still up,” she said from the door, leaning back against the jamb.

Tuf’s seat swiveled around and he regarded her impassively. “A most remarkable deduction,” he said. “Here I sit before you, active, busy, driven by the demands of my ship. From the scant evidence of your eyes and ears, you leap to the conclusion that I am not yet asleep. Your powers of reasoning are awesome.”

Rica Dawnstar sauntered into the room and stretched out on Tuf’s cot, still neatly made up from the previous sleep cycle. “I’m awake too,” she said, smiling.

“I can scarcely believe it,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Believe it,” Rica said. “I don’t sleep much, Tuf. Two or three hours a night. It’s an asset in my profession.”

“No doubt,” said Tuf.

“On board ship, though, it’s a bit of a liability. I’m bored, Tuf.”

“A game, perhaps?”

She smiled. “Perhaps of a different sort.” “I am always eager to learn new games.”

“Good. Let’s play the conspiracy game.”

“I am unfamiliar with its rules.”

“Oh, they’re simple enough.”

“Indeed. Perhaps you would be good enough to elaborate.” Tuf’s long face was still and noncommittal.

“You would never have won that last game if Waan had thrown in with me when I asked her to,” Rica said conversationally. “Alliances, Tuf, can be profitable to all parties concerned. You and I are the odd ones out here. We’re the hirelings. If Lion is right about the plague star, the rest of them will divide wealth so vast it’s incomprehensible, and you and I will receive our fees. Doesn’t seem quite fair to me.”

“Equity is often difficult to judge, and still more difficult to achieve,” said Haviland Tuf. “I might wish my compensation were more generous, but no doubt many could make the same complaint. It is nonetheless the fee that I negotiated and accepted.”

“Negotiations can be reopened,” suggested Rica Dawnstar. “They need us. Both of us. It occurred to me that if we worked together, we might be able to... ah... insist upon better terms. Full shares. A six-way split. What do you think?”

“An intriguing notion, with much to recommend it,” said Tuf. “Some might venture to suggest that it was unethical, true, but the true sophisticate retains a certain moral flexibility.”

Rica Dawnstar studied the long, white, expressionless face for a moment, and grinned. “You don’t buy it, do you, Tuf? Down deep, you’re a stickler for rules.”

“Rules are the essence of games, the very heart of them, if you will. They give structure and meaning to our small contests.”

“Sometimes it’s more fun just to kick over the board,” Rica Dawnstar said. “More effective, too.”

Tuf steepled his hands in front of his face. “Though I am not content with my niggardly fee, nonetheless I must fulfill my contract with Kaj Nevis. I would not have him speak poorly of me or the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*.”

Rica laughed. “Oh, I doubt that he’ll speak poorly of you, Tuf. I doubt that he’ll speak of you at all, once you’ve served your purpose and he’s discarded you.” She was pleased to see that her statement startled Tuf into blinking.

“Indeed,” he said.

“Aren’t you curious about all this? About where we’re going and why Waan and Lion kept the destination secret until we were aboard? About why Lion hired a bodyguard?”

Haviland Tuf stroked Mushroom's long gray fur, but his eyes never left Rica Dawnstar's face. "Curiosity is my great vice. I fear you have seen through to the heart of me, and now you seek to exploit my weakness."

"Curiosity killed the cat," said Rica Dawnstar.

"An unpleasant suggestion, but unlikely on the face of it," Tuf commented.

"But satisfaction brought him back," Rica finished. "Lion knows this is something huge. And hugely dangerous. To get what they want out of this, they needed Nevis, or somebody like Nevis. They have a nice four-way split set up, but Kaj has the kind of reputation that makes you wonder if he'll settle for a fourth. I'm here to see that he does." She shrugged, and patted her needler in its shoulder holster. "Besides, I'm insurance against any other complications that might arise."

"Might I point out that you yourself constitute an additional complication?"

She smiled icily. "Just don't point it out to Lion," she said, rising and stretching. "You think about it, Tuf. The way I see it, Nevis has underestimated you. Don't you go underestimating him. Or me. Never, never, never underestimate me. The time may come when you'll wish you had an ally. And it may come sooner than you'd like."

Three days shy of arrival, Celise Waan was complaining again over dinner. Tuf had served a spiced vegetable brouhaha in the manner of Halagreen; a piquant dish, but for the fact that this was the sixth such serving on the voyage. The anthropologist shoved the vegetables around on her plate, made a face, and said, "Why can't we have some real food?"

Tuf paused, speared a fat mushroom deftly with his fork, lifted it in front of his face. He regarded it in silence for a moment, shifted the angle of his head and regarded it from another angle, turned it around and regarded that aspect of it, and finally prodded it lightly with his finger. "I fail to grasp the nature of your complaint, madam," he said at last. "This mushroom, at least, seems real enough to my own poor senses. True, it is but a small sample of the whole. Perhaps the rest of the brouhaha is illusory. Yet I think not."

"You know what I meant," Celise Waan said in a shrill tone. "I want meat."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. "I myself want wealth beyond measure. Such fantasies are easily dreamed, and less easily made real."

"I'm tired of all these puling vegetables!" Celise Waan screeched. "Are you telling me that there is not a bit of meat to be had on this entire puling ship?"

Tuf made a steeple of his fingers. "It was not my intent to convey such misinformation, certainly," he said. "I am not an eater of flesh myself, but there is some small poor quantity of meat aboard the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, this I freely admit."

A look of furious satisfaction crossed Celise Waan's face. She glanced at each of the other diners in turn.

Rica Dawnstar was trying to suppress a grin; Kaj Nevis was not even trying; Jefri Lion was looking fretful. "You see," she told them, "I told you he was keeping the good food for himself." With all deliberation, she picked up her plate and spun it across the room. It rang off a metal bulkhead and dumped its load of spiced brouhaha on Rica Dawnstar's unmade bed. Rica smiled sweetly. "We just swapped bunks, Waan," she said.

“I don’t care,” Celise Waan said. “I’m going to get a decent meal for once. I suppose the rest of you will be wanting to share now.”

Rica smiled. “Oh no, dear. It’s all yours.” She finished up her brouhaha, cleaned her plate with a crust of onion bread. Lion looked uncomfortable, and Kaj Nevis said, “If you can get this meat out of Tuf, it’s all yours.”

“Excellent!” she proclaimed. “Tuf, bring me this meat!”

Haviland Tuf regarded her impassively. “True, the contract I made with Kaj Nevis requires me to feed you through the duration of this voyage. Nothing was said about the nature of the provender, however. Always I am put upon. Now I must cater to your culinary whims, it seems. Very well, such is my poor lot in life. And yet, now I find myself taken by a sudden whim of my own. If I must indulge your whim, would it not be equitable that you should similarly bend to mine?”

Waan frowned suspiciously. “What do you mean?” Tuf spread his hands. “It is nothing, really. In return for the meat you crave, I ask only a moment’s indulgence. I have grown most curious of late, and I would have that curiosity satisfied. Rica Dawnstar has warned me that, unsatisfied, curiosity will surely kill my cats.”

“I’m for that,” said the fat anthropologist.

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “Nonetheless, I must insist. I offer you a trade—food, of the type you have requested so melodramatically, for a poor useless nugget of information, the surrender of which costs you nothing. We are shortly to arrive in the system of Hro B’rana, your chartered destination. I would know why we travel there, and the nature of what you expect to find on this plague star of which I have heard you speak.”

Celise Waan turned to the others again. “We paid good standards for food,” she said. “This is extortion. Jefri, put your foot down!”

“Um,” said Jefri Lion. “There’s really no harm, Celise. He’ll find out anyway, when we arrive. Perhaps it is time he knew.”

“Nevis,” she said, “aren’t you going to do anything?”

“Why?” he demanded. “It doesn’t make a damn bit of difference. Tell him and get your meat. Or not. I don’t care.”

Waan glared at Kaj Nevis, and then even more fiercely at the cool pale face of Haviland Tuf, crossed her arms, and said, “All right, if that’s the way it has to be, I’ll sing for my supper.”

“A normal speaking voice will be quite acceptable,” said Tuf.

Celise Waan ignored him. “I’ll make this short and sweet. The discovery of the plague star is my greatest triumph, the capstone of my career, but none of you have the wit or the courtesy to appreciate the work that went into it. I am an anthropologist with the Shan Dellor Center for the Advancement of Culture and Knowledge. My academic specialty is the study of primitive cultures of a particular sort—cultures of colony worlds left to isolation and technological devolution in the wake of the Great War. Of course, many human worlds were so affected, and a number of these have been studied extensively. I worked in less well-known fields—the investigation of nonhuman cultures, especially those of former Hrangan slave worlds. One of the worlds I studied was Hro B’rana. Once it was a flourishing colony, a breeding ground for Hruun and dactyloids and lesser Hrangan slave races, but today it’s a devastation. Such sentients that still live there live short, ugly, brutal lives, although like most such decayed cultures, they also have tales of a vanished golden age. But the most interesting thing about Hro B’rana is a legend, a legend unique to them—the plague star.

“Let me stress that the devastation on Hro B’rana is extreme, and the underpopulation severe, despite the fact that the environment is not especially harsh. Why? Well, the degenerate descendants of both Hruun and dactyloid colonists, whose cultures are otherwise utterly different and very hostile to each other, have a common answer to that: the plague star. Every third generation, just as they are climbing out of their misery, as populations are swelling once again, the plague star waxes larger and larger in their nighttime skies. And when this star becomes the brightest in the heavens, then the season of plagues begins. Pestilences sweep across Hro B’rana, each more terrible than the last. The healers are helpless. Crops wither, animals perish, and three-quarters of the sentient population dies. Those who survive are thrown back into the most brutal sort of existence. Then the plague star wanes, and with its waning the plagues pass from Hro B’rana for another three generations. That is the legend.”

Haviland Tuf’s face had been expressionless as he listened to Celise Waan relate the tale. “Interesting,” he said now. “I must surmise, however, that our present expedition has not been mounted simply to further your career by investigating this arresting folk tale.”

“No,” Celise Waan admitted. “That was once my intent, yes. The legend seemed an excellent topic for a monograph. I was trying to get funding from the Center for a field investigation, but they turned down my request. I was annoyed, and justly so. Those shortsighted fools. I mentioned my annoyance, and the cause, to my colleague, Jefri Lion.”

Lion cleared his throat. “Yes,” he said. “And my field, as you know, is military history. I was intrigued, of course. I buried myself in the Center databanks. Our files are not nearly as complete as those at Avalon and Newholme, but there wasn’t time for a more thorough investigation. We had to act quickly. You see, my theory—well, it’s more than theory, really—I believe, in fact I’m all but certain, that I know what this plague star is. It’s no legend, Tuf! It’s real. It must be a derelict, yes, abandoned but still operational, still carrying out its programs more than a millennium after the Collapse. Don’t you see? Can’t you guess?”

“I admit to failure,” said Tuf, “lacking your familiarity with the subject at hand.”

“It’s a warship, Tuf, a warship in a long elliptical orbit around Hro B’rana. It’s one of the most devastating weapons Old Earth ever put into the void against the Hrangans, in its own way as terrible as that mythical hellfleet they talk about from those last days before the Collapse. But it has vast potential for good as well as ill! It’s the repository of the most advanced biogenetic science of the Federal Empire, a functioning artifact packed full of secrets lost to the rest of humanity.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf.

“It’s a seedship,” Jefri Lion finished, “a biowar seedship of the Ecological Engineering Corps.”

“And it’s ours,” said Kaj Nevis, with a small grim smile.

Haviland Tuf studied Nevis briefly, nodded to himself, and rose. “My curiosity is satisfied,” he announced. “Now I must fulfill my portion of the trade.”

“Ahhh,” said Celise Waan. “My meat.”

“The supply is copious, though the variety is admittedly small,” said Haviland Tuf. “I shall leave you the task of preparing the meat in a manner most pleasant to your palate.” He went to a storage locker, punched in a code, and removed a small carton, which he carried back to the table under his arm. “This is the only meat aboard my vessel. I cannot vouch for its taste or quality. Yet I have not yet received a complaint on either count.”

Rica Dawnstar burst into laughter and Kaj Nevis snickered. Haviland Tuf, neatly and methodically, removed a dozen cans of catfood from their carton, and stacked them in front of Celise Waan. Havoc leapt onto the table and began to purr.

“It’s not as big as I expected,” Celise Waan said, her tone as petulant as ever.

“Madam,” said Haviland Tuf, “the eyes can often deceive. My main viewscreen is admittedly modest, a bare meter in diameter, and this must of course diminish the size of any object displayed thereon. The ship itself is of sizable dimensions.”

Kaj Nevis came forward. “How sizable?”

Tuf folded his hands together atop the bulge of his stomach. “I cannot say with any precision. The *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices* is but a modest trading vessel, and its sensory instrumentation is not all that it might be.”

“Approximately, then,” Kaj Nevis snapped.

“Approximately,” Tuf repeated. “Regarded at the angle at which my viewscreen is now displaying it, with the longest axis taken as ‘length,’ the ship we are approaching would seem to be, approximately, some thirty standard kilometers long, approximately some five kilometers in width, approximately some three kilometers in height, but for the domed section amidships, which rises slightly higher, and the forward tower which ascends, approximately, one additional kilometer above the deck from which it rises.”

They had all gathered in the control room, even Anittas, who had been awakened from his computer-regulated sleep when they emerged from drive. A hush fell over them; even Celise Waan seemed briefly at a loss for something to say. All of them stared at the viewscreen, at the long black twisted shape that floated against the stars, here and there shining with faint lights and pulsing with unseen energies.

“I was right,” Jefri Lion muttered at last, to break the silence. “A seedship—an EEC seedship! Nothing else could possibly be so large!”

Kaj Nevis smiled. “Damn,” he said.

“The system must be vast,” Anittas said speculatively. “The Earth Imperials had a sophistication far beyond ours. It’s probably an Artificial Intelligence.”

“We’re rich,” burred Celise Waan, her many and varied grievances forgotten for the moment. She grabbed hold of Jefri Lion’s hands and waltzed him around in a circle, fairly bouncing. “We’re rich, rich, we’re rich and famous, we’re all rich!”

“This is not entirely correct,” said Haviland Tuf. “I do not doubt that you may indeed become wealthy in the near future; for the moment, however, your pockets contain no more standards than they did a moment ago. Nor do Rica Dawnstar and I share your prospects of economic advancement.”

Nevis stared at him hard. “Are you complaining, Tuf?”

“Far be it from me to object,” Tuf said in a flat voice. “I was merely correcting Celise Waan’s misstatement.”

Kaj Nevis nodded. “Good,” he said. “Now, before any of us get any richer, we have to get aboard that thing and see what kind of shape it’s in. Even a derelict ought to net us a nice salvage fee, but if that ship’s in working order, there’s no limit, no limit at all.”

“It is obviously functional,” Jefri Lion said. “It has been raining plagues on Hro B’rana every third generation for a thousand standard years.”

“Yeah,” said Nevis, “well, that’s true, but it’s not the whole story. It’s dead in orbit now. What about the drive engines? The cell library? The computers? We’ve got a lot to check. How do we get aboard, Lion?”

“A docking might be possible,” Jefri Lion replied. “Tuf, that dome, do you see it?” He pointed.

“My vision is unimpaired.”

“Yes, well, I believe that’s the landing deck under there. It’s as big as a spacefield. If we can get the dome to open, you can take your ship right in.”

“If,” said Haviland Tuf. “A most difficult word. So short, and so often fraught with disappointment and frustration.” As if to underline his words, a small red light came on beneath the main viewscreen. Tuf held up a long pale finger. “Take note!” he said.

“What is it?” asked Nevis.

“A communication,” Tuf proclaimed. He leaned forward and touched a much worn button on his lasercom.

The plague star vanished from the screen. In its place appeared a weary-looking face—that of a man of middle years, sitting in a communications room. He had deep lines in his forehead and graven down his cheeks, a full head of thick black hair, and tired blue-gray eyes. He was wearing a uniform out of a history tape, and on his head was a green billed cap emblazoned with a golden theta. “This is *Ark*,” he announced. “You have entered our defense sphere. Identify yourself or be fired upon. This is your first warning.”

Haviland Tuf held down his SEND button. “This is the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*,” he announced clearly, “Haviland Tuf commanding. We are harmless unarmed traders out of ShanDellor, *Ark*. Might we request permission to approach for docking?”

Celise Waan gaped. “It’s manned,” she said. “The crew is still alive!”

“A fascinating development,” Jefri Lion said, tugging at his beard. “Perhaps this is a descendant of the original EEC crew. Or perhaps the chronowarp was employed! To warp the very weave of the fabric of time, to hurry it or hold it still, yes, they could do even that. The chronowarp! Think of it!”

Kaj Nevis made a snarling sound. “A thousand damn years and you tell me they’re still alive? How the hell are we supposed to deal with that?”

The image on the viewscreen flickered briefly. Then the same tired man in the uniform of the Earth Imperials said, “This is *Ark*. Your ID is improperly coded. You are moving through our defense sphere. Identify yourself or be fired upon. This is your second warning.”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I must protest! We are unarmed and unprotected. We mean you no harm. We are peaceful traders, scholars, fellow humans. Our intentions are not hostile, and moreover, we lack any means of doing harm to a ship as formidable as your *Ark*. Must we be met with belligerence?”

The screen flickered. “This is *Ark*. You have penetrated our defense sphere. Identify yourself immediately or be destroyed. This is your third and final warning.”

“Recordings,” said Kaj Nevis, with some enthusiasm. “That’s it! No cold storage, no damned stasis field. There’s no one there. Some computer is playing recordings at us.”



"I fear you are correct," said Haviland Tuf. "The question must be asked: if the computer is programmed to play recorded messages at incoming ships, what else might it be programmed to do?"

Jefri Lion broke in. "The codes!" he said. "I have a whole set of Federal Empire codes and ID sequences on crystal chips in my files! I'll go get them."

"An excellent plan," said Haviland Tuf, "with but a single obvious deficiency, that being the time it will require to locate and utilize these encoded chips. Had we the leisure to accomplish this, I might applaud your suggestion. I fear we do not, alas. The *Ark* has just fired upon us."

Haviland Tuf reached forward. "I am taking us into drive," he announced. But as his long pale fingers brushed the keys, suddenly the *Cornucopia* shook violently. Celise Waan shrieked and went down; Jefri Lion stumbled into Anittas; even Rica Dawnstar had to grab the back of Tuf's chair to retain her footing. Then all the lights went out. Haviland Tuf's voice came out of the dark. "I fear I spoke too soon," he said, "or perhaps, more accurately, acted too tardily."

For a long moment, they were lost in silence and darkness and dread, waiting for the second hit that would spell an end to them.

And then the blackness ebbed a little; dim lights appeared on all the consoles around them, as the *Cornucopia's* instrumentation woke to a flickering half-life. "We are not entirely disabled," Haviland Tuf proclaimed from the command chair where he sat stiffly. His big hands stretched out over the computer keys. "I will get a damage report. Perhaps we shall be able to retreat after all."

Celise Waan began to make a noise; a high, thin, hysterical wailing that went on and on. She was still sprawled on the deck. Kaj Nevis turned on her. "Shut up, you damned cow!" he snapped, and he kicked her. Her wail turned into blubbing. "We're dead meat sitting here like this," Nevis said loudly. "The next shot will blow us to pieces. Damn it, Tuf, move this thing!"

"Our motion is undiminished," Tuf replied. "The hit we took did not terminate our velocity, yet it did deflect us somewhat from our previous trajectory toward the *Ark*. Perhaps that is why we are not being fired upon now." He was studying wan green figures that uncoiled across one of the smaller telescreens. "I fear my ship has suffered some incapacitation. Shifting into drive now would be inadvisable; the stress would undoubtedly rend us to pieces. Our life support systems have also taken damage. The projections indicate that we will run out of oxygen in approximately nine standard hours."

Kaj Nevis cursed; Celise Waan began to beat her fists on the deck. "I can conserve oxygen by shutting down once more," Anittas offered. Everyone ignored him.

"We can kill the cats," Celise Waan suggested.

"Can we move?" Rica Dawnstar asked.

"The maneuvering engines are still operable," Tuf said, "but without the ability to shunt into stardrive, it will take us approximately two ShanDish years to reach even Hro B'rana. Four of us can take refuge in pressure suits. The viral airpacs will recycle oxygen indefinitely."

"I refuse to live in a pressure suit for two years," Celise Waan said forcefully.

"Excellent," said Tuf. "As I have only four suits, and we are six in number, this will be of help. Your noble self-sacrifice will be long remembered, madam. Before we put this plan into motion, however, I believe we might consider one other option."

"And what's that?" Nevis asked.

Tuf swiveled about in his command chair and looked at each of them in the dimness of the darkened control room. “We must hope that Jefri Lion’s crystalline chip does indeed contain the proper approach code, so that we might effect a docking with the *Ark*, without being made the target of ancient weaponry.”

“The chip!” Lion said. It was hard to see him. In the darkness, his chameleon cloth jacket had turned a deep black. “I’ll go get it!” He went rushing back toward their living quarters.

Mushroom padded quietly across the room, and leapt up into Tuf’s lap. Tuf settled a hand on him, and the big tom began to purr loudly. It was somehow a reassuring sound. Perhaps they would be all right after all.

But Jefri Lion was gone for too long a time.

When they finally heard him return, his footsteps were leaden, defeated. “Well?” Nevis said. “Where is it?”

“Gone,” Lion said. “I looked everywhere. It’s gone. I could have sworn I had it with me. My files—Kaj, truly, I meant to bring it along. I couldn’t bring everything, of course, but I duplicated most of the important records, the things I thought might prove useful—material on the war, on the EEC, some histories of this sector. My gray case, you know. It had my little computer, and more than thirty crystal chips. I was going over some of them last night, remember, in bed? I was reviewing the material about the seedships, what little we know, and you told me that I was keeping you awake. I had a chip full of old codes, I know I did, and I really meant to bring it along. But it’s not there.” He came closer. They saw he was carrying the hand computer, holding it out almost as an offering. “I went through the box four times, and searched all the chips I had out on my bed, on the table, everywhere. It’s not here. I’m sorry. Unless one of you took it?” Jefri Lion glanced about the room. No one spoke. “I must have left the codes back on ShanDellor,” he said. “We were in such haste to leave, I...”

“You senile old fool,” said Kaj Nevis. “I ought to kill you right now, and save a little air for the rest of us.”

“We’re dead,” wailed Celise Waan, “we’re dead, dead, dead.”

“Madam,” said Haviland Tuf, petting Mushroom, “you continue to be premature. You are no more deceased now than you were wealthy a short time ago.”

Nevis turned to face him. “Oh? You have an idea, Tuf?”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Well?” prompted Nevis.

“The *Ark* is our only salvation,” Tuf said. “We must board her. Without Jefri Lion’s code crystal, we cannot move the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices* closer for a docking, for fear of being fired upon once again. This much is obvious. Yet an interesting concept has occurred to me.” He raised a finger. “Perhaps the *Ark* might display less hostility toward a smaller target—a man in a pressure suit, say, propelled by air jets!”

Kaj Nevis looked thoughtful. “And when this man reaches the *Ark*, what then? Is he supposed to knock on the hull?”

“Impractical,” admitted Haviland Tuf, “and yet I believe I have a method of dealing with this problem as well.”

They waited. Tuf stroked Mushroom. “Go on,” Kaj Nevis said impatiently.

Tuf blinked. “Go on? Indeed. I fear I must beg your indulgence. My mind is most distracted. My poor ship has suffered grievous harm. My modest livelihood lies ruined and devastated, and who will pay for the necessary

repairs? Will Kaj Nevis, soon to enjoy such wealth, shower me with largesse? I fear not. Will Jefri Lion and Anittas buy for me a new ship? Unlikely. Will the esteemed Celise Waan grant me a bonus above and beyond my fee to compensate for my great loss? She has already promised to seek legal redress against me, to have my poor vessel confiscated and my landing license revoked. How then am I to cope? Who will succor me?"

"Never mind about that!" Kaj Nevis said. "How do we get inside the *Ark*? You said you had a way!"

"Did I?" said Haviland Tuf. "I believe you are correct, sir. Yet I fear the weight of my woes has driven the concept from my poor, distracted mind. I have forgotten it. I can think of nothing but my sorry economic plight."

Rica Dawnstar laughed, and clapped Tuf soundly across his broad back.

He looked up at her. "And now I am roughly pummeled and beaten as well, by the fierce Rica Dawnstar. Please do not touch me, madam."

"This is blackmail," screeched Celise Waan. "We'll have you put in prison for this!"

"And now my integrity is impugned, and I am showered with threats. Is it any wonder I cannot think, Mushroom?"

Kaj Nevis snarled. "All right, Tuf. You win." He looked around. "Do I hear any objections to making Tuffy here a full partner? A five-way split?"

Jefri Lion cleared his throat. "He deserves at least that, if his plan works."

Nevis nodded. "You're in, Tuf."

Haviland Tuf rose with immense, ponderous dignity, brushing Mushroom from his lap. "My memory returns to me!" he announced. "There are four pressure suits in the locker, yonder. If one of you would be so kind as to don one and render me your aid, together we shall go to procure a most useful piece of equipment from storage compartment twelve."

"What the hell," Rica Dawnstar exclaimed when they came back, carrying their booty between them. She laughed.

"What is it?" demanded Celise Waan.

Haviland Tuf, who loomed large in his silver-blue pressure suit, lowered the legs to the ground and helped Kaj Nevis get it upright. Then he removed his helmet and inspected their prize with satisfaction. "It is a space-suit, madam," he said. "I would think that obvious."

It was a spacesuit, of sorts, but it was like no suit any of them had ever seen before, and clearly, whoever had constructed it had not had humans in mind. It towered over all of them, even Tuf; the ornate crest on the great beetle-like helmet was a good three meters off the deck, and almost brushed the top of the bulkhead. There were four thick double-jointed arms, the bottom two ending in gleaming, serrated pincers; the legs were broad enough to contain the trunks of small trees, and the footpads were great circular saucers. On the broad, hunched back were mounted four huge tanks; a radar antenna sprang from the right shoulder; and everywhere the rigid black metal of which it was constructed was filigreed in strange swirling patterns of red and gold. It stood among them like an armored giant of old.

Kaj Nevis jerked a thumb at the armor. "It's here," he said. "So what? How will this monstrosity help us?" He shook his head. "It looks like a piece of junk to me."

“Please,” said Tuf. “This mechanism, which you so disparage, is an antique rich with history. I acquired this fascinating alien artifact, at no small cost to myself, on Unqi when I passed through that sector. This is a genuine Unquin battlesuit, sir, represented to be of the Hamerün dynasty, which fell some fifteen hundred years ago, long before humanity reached the Unquish stars. It has been fully restored.”

“What does it do, Tuf?” asked Rica Dawnstar, always quick to come to the point.

Tuf blinked. “Its capabilities are many and varied. Two strike closest to home in regard to our present quandary. It has an augmented exoskeleton, and when fully charged will magnify the inherent strength of its occupant by a power of ten, approximately. Furthermore, its equipment includes a most excellent cutting laser, engineered to slice through duralloy of a thickness of one-half meter, or of plate steel of significantly greater thickness, when directly applied at zero range. In brief, this ancient battlesuit will be our means of entry into the ancient warship that looms as our only salvation.”

“Splendid!” said Jefri Lion, clapping his hands together in approval.

“It might work at that,” Kaj Nevis commented. “What’s the drill?”

“I must admit to some deficiency of equipment for deep space maneuvering,” Tuf replied. “Our resources include four standard pressure suits, but only two jetpacs. The Unquin battlesuit, I am pleased to report, has its own propulsion vents. I propose the following plan. I will don the battlesuit and make egress from the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, accompanied by Rica Dawnstar and Anittas in pressure suits and jetpacs. We will proceed to the *Ark* with all due speed. If we make the journey safely, we will use the battlesuit’s most excellent capabilities to gain entrance through an airlock. I am told that Anittas is expert in ancient cybernetic systems and obsolete computers. Very well, then. Once inside, he will no doubt have little trouble gaining control of the *Ark* and will supersede the hostile programming now in place. At that point, Kaj Nevis will be able to pilot my crippled ship in for a docking, and all of us will have attained safety.”

Celise Waan turned a vivid shade of red. “You’re leaving us to die!” she screeched. “Nevis, Lion, we must stop them! Once they’re on the *Ark*, they’ll blow us up! We can’t trust them.”

Haviland Tuf blinked. “Why must my morality be constantly assaulted by these accusations?” he asked. “I am a man of honor. The course of action you have suggested had never crossed my mind.”

“It’s a good plan,” said Kaj Nevis. He smiled, and began to unseal his pressure suit. “Anittas, hireling, suit up.”

“Are you going to let them abandon us here?” Celise Waan demanded of Jefri Lion.

“I’m sure they mean us no harm,” Lion said, tugging on his beard, “and if they did, Celise, how do you propose I stop them?”

“Let us move the battlesuit down to the main airlock,” Haviland Tuf said to Kaj Nevis while Dawnstar and the cybertech were suiting up. Nevis nodded, kicked his way free of his own pressure suit, and moved to help Tuf.

With some difficulty, they wrestled the huge Unquish suit down to the *Cornucopia's* main lock. Tuf shed his pressure suit and unbolted the armored entry port, then pulled over a stepstool and began to climb laboriously inside. “Just a moment, Tuffy,” Kaj Nevis said, grabbing him by the shoulder.

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I do not like to be touched. Unhand me.” He turned back and blinked in surprise. Kaj Nevis had produced a vibroknife. The slender, humming blade, which could slice through solid steel, was a blur of motion less than a centimeter from Tuf’s nose.

“A good plan,” Kaj Nevis said, “but let’s make one little change. I’ll wear the supersuit, and go with Anittas and little Rica. You stay here and die.”

“I do not approve of this substitution,” said Haviland Tuf. “I am chagrined that you too would truckle to unfounded suspicion of my motives. I assure you, as I have assured Celise Waan, that thought of treachery has never crossed my mind.”

“Funny,” said Kaj Nevis. “It crossed my mind. Seemed like a damn fine idea, too.”

Haviland Tuf assumed a look of wounded dignity. “Your base plans are undone, sir,” he announced. “Anittas and Rica Dawnstar have come up behind you. It is well known that Rica Dawnstar was hired to forestall just such behavior from you. I advise you to surrender now. It will go easier on you.”

Kaj Nevis grinned.

Rica had her helmet cradled under her arm. She observed the tableau, shook her pretty head slightly, and sighed. “You should have taken my offer, Tuf. I told you the time would come when you’d be sorry you didn’t have an ally.” She donned the helmet, sealed it, scooped up an airjet. “Let’s go, Nevis.”

Comprehension finally dawned on the broad face of Celise Waan. To her credit, this time she did not succumb to hysteria. She looked about for a weapon, found nothing obvious, and finally grabbed Mushroom, who was standing nearby and watching events with curiosity. “You, you, YOU!” she shouted, heaving the cat across the room. Kaj Nevis ducked. Mushroom yowled mightily and bounced off Anittas.

“Kindly cease flinging about my cats,” Haviland Tuf said.

Nevis, recovering quickly, brandished the vibroknife at Tuf in a most unpleasant fashion, and Tuf backed slowly away. Nevis paused long enough to scoop up Tuf’s discarded pressure suit and slice it deftly into a dozen long silver-blue ribbons. Then, carefully, he climbed into the Unquin battlesuit. Rica Dawnstar sealed it up after him. It took Nevis some time to figure out the alien control systems, but after about five minutes, the bulging faceplate began to glow a baleful blood red, and the heavy upper limbs moved ponderously. He switched to the lower, pincer arms experimentally while Anittas opened the inner door of the lock. Kaj Nevis lumbered in, clacking his pincers, followed by the cybertech and, lastly, Rica Dawnstar. “Sorry, folks,” she announced as the door was sliding shut. “It’s nothing personal. Just arithmetic.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “Subtraction.”

Haviland Tuf sat in his command chair, enthroned in darkness, watching the flickering instrumentation before him. Mushroom, his dignity much offended, had settled in Tuf’s lap, and was graciously allowing himself to be soothed. “The *Ark* is not firing on our erstwhile compatriots,” he told Jefri Lion and Celise Waan.

“This is all my fault,” Jefri Lion was saying.

“No,” said Celise Waan. “It’s his fault.” She jerked a fat thumb toward Tuf.

“You are not the most appreciative of women,” Haviland Tuf observed.

“Appreciative? What am I supposed to appreciate?” she said angrily.

Tuf made a steeple of his hands. “We are not without resources. To begin with, Kaj Nevis left us one functioning pressure suit,” he pointed out.

“And no propulsion systems.”

“Our air will last twice as long with our numbers diminished,” Tuf said.

“But will still run out,” snapped Celise Waan.

“Kaj Nevis and his cohorts did not use the Unquin battlesuit to destroy the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices* after their exit, as well they might have.”

“Nevis preferred to see us die a lingering death,” the anthropologist replied.

“I think not. More likely, in point of fact, he wished to preserve this vessel as a last refuge should his plan to board the *Ark* somehow miscarry,” Tuf mused. “In the nonce, we have shelter, provisions, and the possibility of maneuver, however limited.”

“What we have is a crippled ship that is rapidly running out of air,” said Celise Waan. She started to say something else, but just then Havoc came bounding into the control room, all energy and bounce, in hot pursuit of a bit of jewelry she’d sent rolling in before her. It landed by Celise Waan’s feet; Havoc pounced on it, and sent it spinning with a tentative swipe. Celise Waan yelped. “My glowstone ring! I’ve been looking for that! Damn you, you filthy thief.” She bent and snatched for the ring. Havoc closed with her, and she gave the cat a lusty blow with her fist. She missed. Havoc’s claws were more accurate. Celise Waan shrieked.

Haviland Tuf was on his feet. He snatched up the cat and the ring, tucked Havoc safely under his arm, and handed the ring stiffly to its bleeding owner. “Your property,” he said.

“Before I die, I swear I’m going to grab that creature by the tail and smash its brains on a bulkhead—if it has any brains.”

“You do not sufficiently appreciate the virtues of the feline,” said Tuf, retreating to his chair. He soothed Havoc’s feelings as he had earlier soothed Mushroom. “Cats are most intelligent animals. In fact, it is well known that all cats have a touch of psi. The primitives of Old Earth were known to worship them.”

“I’ve studied primitives who worship fecal matter,” the anthropologist said testily. “That animal is a filthy beast!”

“The feline is fastidiously clean,” Tuf said calmly. “Havoc herself is scarcely more than a kitten, and her playfulness and chaotic temperament remain undiminished,” he said. “She is a most willful creature, and yet, that is but part of her charm. Curiously, she is also a creature of habit. Who could fail to be warmed by the joy she takes in play with small objects left lying about? Who could fail to be amused by the foolish frequency with which she loses her playthings beneath the consoles in this very room? Who indeed. Only the most sour and stony-hearted.” Tuf blinked rapidly—once, twice, three times. On his long, still face, it was a thunderstorm of emotion. “Off, Havoc,” he said, gently swatting the cat from his lap. He rose, then sank to his knees with a stiff dignity. On hands and knees, Haviland Tuf began to crawl about the room and feel beneath the control consoles.

“What are you doing?” demanded Celise Waan.

“I am searching for Havoc’s lost toys,” said Haviland Tuf.

“I’m bleeding and we’re running out of air and you’re looking for cat toys!” she said in exasperation.

“I believe I have just stated as much,” Tuf said. He pulled a handful of small objects out from under the console, and then a second handful. After thrusting his arm all the way back and patting about systematically, he finally gave up, gathered his cache, dusted himself off, and began to sort the prizes from the dust. “Interesting,” he said.

“What?” she demanded.

“These are yours,” he said to Celise Waan. He handed her another ring and two light pencils. “These are mine,” he said, shoving aside two more light pencils, three red cruisers, a yellow dreadnaught, and a silver star-fort. “And this, I believe, is yours.” He held it out to Jefri Lion: a shaped crystal the size of a thumbnail.

Lion all but bounded to his feet. “The chip!”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

There was a moment of endless suspense after Tuf had lasered the docking request. A thin crack appeared in the middle of the great black dome, and then another, at cross angles to the first. Then a third, a fourth, more and still more. The dome split into a hundred narrow pie-shaped wedges, which receded into the hull of the *Ark*.

Jefri Lion let go of his breath. “It works,” he said, in a voice full of awe and gratitude.

“I reached that conclusion some time ago,” Tuf said, “when we successfully penetrated the defense sphere without being fired upon. This is merely a confirmation.”

They watched the proceedings on the viewscreen. Beneath the dome appeared a landing deck fully as large as the ports of many a lesser planet. The deck was pockmarked with circular landing pads, several of which were occupied. As they waited, a ring of blue-white light flicked on around one vacant pad.

“Far be it from me to dictate your behavior,” said Haviland Tuf, his eyes on his instruments, his hands in careful, methodical motion. “I would, however, advise that each of you strap in securely. I am extending the landing legs and programming us for a landing on the indicated pad, but I am uncertain how much damage the legs have sustained, uncertain even as to whether all three legs remain in place. Therefore I counsel caution.”

The landing deck yawned blackly beneath them. They began a stately descent into its cavernous depths. The illuminated ring of the landing pad loomed larger and larger on one viewscreen; a second showed the wan blue light of the *Cornucopia*'s gravity engines flickering off distant metal walls and the silhouettes of other ships. In a third, they saw the dome reassembling itself, a dozen sharp teeth grinding together once more, as if they had just been swallowed by some vast spacefaring animal. The impact was surprisingly gentle. They settled into place with a sigh and a whisper and only the smallest of bumps. Haviland Tuf killed their engines, and spent a moment studying the instruments and the scenes on his telescreens. Then he turned to face the others. “We are docked,” he announced, “and the time has come to make our plans.”

Celise Waan was busily unstrapping herself. “I want to get out of here,” she said, “find Nevis and that bitch Rica, and give them both a good piece of my mind.”

“A good piece of your mind might be considered an oxymoron,” said Haviland Tuf. “I think your proposed course of action unwise in the extreme. Our former colleagues must now be considered our rivals. Having just abandoned us to death, they shall undoubtedly be nonplussed to discover us still alive, and might very well take steps to rectify this contradiction.”

“Tuf is right,” Jefri Lion said. He was moving from one screen to another, peering at them with fascination. The ancient seedship had rekindled his spirit and his imagination, and he was bristling with energy. “It’s us against them, Celise. This is war. They’ll kill us if they can, have no doubt of it. We must be similarly ruthless! This is a time for clever tactics.”

“I bow to your martial expertise,” Tuf said. “What strategies do you suggest?”

Jefri Lion tugged on his beard. “Well,” he said, “well, let me think. What’s the situation here? They have Anittas. The man’s half-computer himself. Once he interfaces with the shipboard systems, he should be able to determine how much of the *Ark* is functional, yes, and perhaps to exercise some control over its functioning, too. That could

be dangerous. He might be trying it right now. We know they got aboard first. They may or may not know we're aboard. We have the advantage of surprise, perhaps!"

"They have the advantage of having all the weaponry," said Haviland Tuf.

"No problem!" said Jefri Lion. He rubbed his hands together eagerly. "This is a warship, after all. The EEC specialized in biowar, true, but this was a military vessel and I'm sure the crew had personal sidearms, that sort of thing. There's got to be an armory. All we have to do is find it."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf.

Lion was rolling now. "Our advantage, well, not to be immodest about it, but our advantage is me. Aside from what Anittas can discover from the computers, they'll be blundering about in the dark. But I've studied the old Federal Empire ships. I know everything about them." He frowned. "Well, everything that wasn't lost or classified, anyway. At least I know a few things about the general plans of these seedships. We'll have to find the armory first, and it should be close. It was standard procedure to store weaponry near the landing deck, for ground parties and such. After we're armed, we ought to look for—hmmnm, let me think—well, yes, the cell library, that's crucial. The seedships had vast cell libraries, cloning material from literally thousands of worlds preserved in a stasis field. We must discover if the cells are still viable! If the stasis field has failed, and the samples have decayed, all we have gained is a very large ship. But if the systems are still operational, the *Ark* is literally priceless!"

"While I appreciate the importance of the cell library," Tuf said, "it strikes me that a more immediate priority might be the location of the bridge. Making the perhaps unwarranted but nonetheless attractive assumption that none of the original crew of the *Ark* is alive after the passage of a millennium, we are then alone on this vessel with our enemies, and whichever party gains control of shipboard functions first will enjoy a rather formidable advantage."

"A good point, Tuf!" Lion exclaimed. "Well then, let's get to it."

"Right," said Celise Waan. "I want out of this cat trap."

Haviland Tuf raised a finger. "A moment, please. A problem presents itself. We are three in number, and possess only a single pressure suit among us."

"We're inside a ship," Celise Waan said in a voice that dripped sarcasm. "What do we need with suits?"

"Perhaps nothing," Tuf admitted. "It is true, as you imply, that the landing field seems to function as a very large airlock; my instruments indicate that we are now surrounded by an entirely breathable oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere, pumped in when the closure of the dome was complete."

"So what's the problem, Tuf?"

"No doubt I am being overcautious," Haviland Tuf said. "I admit to some disquiet, however. This *Ark*, though perhaps abandoned and derelict, is nonetheless dutiful. Witness the plagues it still regularly visits on Hro B'rana. Witness the efficiency with which it defended itself against our approach. We cannot know, as yet, why this ship was abandoned, nor how the last of the crew met their end, but it seems clear that it was their intent that the *Ark* live on. Perhaps the external defense sphere was only the first of several lines of automatic defense."

"An intriguing notion," said Jefri Lion. "Traps?"

"Of a particular kind. The atmosphere that awaits us may seethe with pestilence, plague, and biogenetic contagion. Dare we risk it? I would be more comfortable in a pressure suit, myself, though each of you is free to decide otherwise."



Celise Waan looked uncomfortable. "I should get the suit," she said. "We only have one, and you owe it to me, after the beastly way I've been treated."

"We need not enter into that discussion again, madam," said Tuf. "We are on a landing deck. Around us, I observe nine other spacecraft of varying design. One is a Hruun fighter, one a Rhiannese merchant; two are of designs unfamiliar to me. And five are plainly shuttlecraft of some sort, identical to each other, larger than my own poor vessel here, undoubtedly part of the *Ark's* own original equipment. It is my experience that spacecraft invariably are equipped with pressure suits. It is my intention, therefore, to don our single remaining suit, exit, and search these neighboring ships until I have found suits for each of you."

"I don't like it," Celise Waan snapped. "You get out, and we're still stuck here. "

"Such are the vicissitudes of life," Tuf said, "that each of us must sometimes accept that which he does not like."

The airlock gave them a bit of trouble. It was a small emergency lock, with manual controls. They had no difficulty opening the outer door, entering, and sealing it behind them. The inner door was another and more difficult proposition.

Atmosphere came flooding back into the large chamber as soon as the outer door was closed, but the inner door was jammed somehow. Rica Dawnstar tried it first; the huge metal wheel refused to turn, the lever would not depress.

"OUT OF MY WAY," Kaj Nevis said, his voice twisted into a rasping croak by the alien comm circuits built into the Unquin battlesuit, and boosted to deafening levels by external speakers. He trundled past her, the huge saucer feet ringing loudly on the deck, and the battlesuit's great upper arms seized the wheel and turned. The wheel resisted for a moment, then twisted and buckled, and finally came loose of the door entirely.

"Good work," Rica said over her suit speaker. She laughed.

Kaj Nevis growled something thunderously unintelligible. He seized the lever and tried to move it, and succeeded only in breaking it off.

Anittas moved closer to the stubborn inner lock mechanism. "A set of code buttons," he said, pointing. "The proper code sequence, if we knew it, would no doubt gain us entry automatically. There's a computer outlet, too. If I could interface, perhaps I could pull the correct code out of the system."

"WHAT'S STOPPING YOU?" Kaj Nevis demanded. His faceplate glowed balefully.

Anittas lifted his arms, turned his hands over helplessly. With the more obviously organic portions of his body covered by the silver-blue of his pressure suit, and his silver metallic eyes peering out through the plastic, he looked more like a robot than ever. Kaj Nevis, standing huge above him, looked like a much larger robot. "This suit," Anittas said, "is improperly designed. I cannot interface directly without removing it."

"REMOVE IT, THEN," Nevis said.

"Will that be safe?" asked Anittas. "I am unsure."

"There's air in here," Rica Dawnstar put in. She gestured toward the appropriate bank of indicators.

“Neither of you has removed your suit,” Anittas pointed out. “Were I to make a mistake, and open the outer door instead of the inner one, I might die before I could seal up again.”

“DON’T MAKE A MISTAKE,” Kaj Nevis boomed.

Anittas crossed his arms. “The air might be unhealthy. This ship has been derelict for a thousand standard years, Kaj Nevis. Even the most sophisticated system goes down from time to time, experiences failures and glitches. I am unwilling to risk my person.”

“OH?” Nevis thundered. There was a grinding sound. One of the lower arms came up slowly; the serrated metal pincer opened, seized Anittas about the middle, and pinned him against the nearest wall. The cybertech squawked protest. An upper arm came across, and a huge metal-gloved hand dug in under the collar of the pressure suit. It pulled. The helmet and the entire top of the suit came ripping off Anittas. His head almost came off, as well. “I LIKE THIS SUIT,” Kaj Nevis announced. He gave the cybertech a little squeeze with the pincer. Metal fabric tore and blood began oozing through. “YOU’RE BREATHING, AREN’T YOU?” Anittas was almost hyperventilating, in fact. He nodded. The battlesuit flung him to the floor. “THEN GET TO WORK,” Nevis told him.

That was when Rica Dawnstar began to feel nervous. She backed away casually, leaned against the outer door as far from Nevis as she could get, and considered the situation while Anittas removed his gloves and the shards of his ruined suit and slid the bluesteel fingers of his right hand into the waiting computer plugs. She had strapped her shoulder holster on over her pressure suit, so her needler would be accessible, but suddenly its presence didn’t seem entirely as reassuring as it usually did. She studied the thickness of the Unquin armor, and wondered if maybe she had been unwise in her choice of ally. A three-way split was much better than Jefri Lion’s small fee, to be sure. But what if Nevis decided he didn’t like a three-way split?

They heard a sharp, sudden pop and the inner door began to slide open. Beyond was a narrow corridor leading down into blackness. Kaj Nevis moved to the doorway and peered into the dark, his glowing red faceplate throwing scarlet reflections on the walls. Then he turned ponderously. “YOU, HIRELING!” he boomed at Rica Dawnstar, “GO SCOUT IT OUT.”

She came to a decision. “Aye, aye, bossman,” she said. She drew her needler, moved quickly to the door and down the corridor, followed it about ten meters to a cross-corridor. From there she looked back. Nevis, hugely armored, filled the airlock door. Anittas stood beside him. The cybertech, normally so silent, still, and efficient, was shaking. “Stay right there,” Rica called back to them. “It’s not safe!” Then she turned and picked a direction at random and began to run like hell.

It took Haviland Tuf much longer than he had anticipated to locate the suits. The nearest of the other spacecraft was the Hruun fighter, a chunky green machine bristling with weaponry. It was sealed up securely, however, and although Tuf circled it several times and studied the various instruments that seemed designed to command access, none of his tugging, prodding, pushing, or fiddling produced the desired result, and he was forced to give it up finally and proceed onward.

The second ship, one of the strange ones, was wide open, and he wandered through it with a certain amount of intellectual fascination. Its interior was a maze of narrow corridors whose walls were as irregular and pebbly as a cave, and soft to the touch. Its instruments were incomprehensible. Its pressure suits, when he located what looked to be pressure suits, might have been functional, but could never have been worn by anyone over a meter tall or bilaterally symmetrical.

The Rhiannese merchant, his third try, had been gutted; Tuf could locate nothing useful.

Finally, there was nothing to be done for it but to hike all the way to one of the five distant shuttlecraft that stood side by side, snug in custom launching berths. They were big ships, larger than the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, with black pitted hulls and rakish wings, but they were clearly of human design and seemingly in good repair. Tuf finally puzzled his way into one of them, whose berth bore a metal plate with an engraved silhouette of some fanciful animal and a legend proclaiming it to be named Griffin. Pressure suits were located where they should have been located. They were in excellent shape, considering that they were a thousand years old, and quite striking as well: a deep green in color, with golden helmet, gloves, and boots, and a golden theta emblazoned upon the breast of each. Tuf selected two of them and carried them back across the echoing twilight plain of the landing deck, to where the scarred, crippled teardrop that was his *Cornucopia* squatted on its three splayed legs.

When he got to the base of the ramp that led up to the main lock, he almost stumbled over Mushroom.

The big tom was sitting on the deck. He got up and made a plaintive noise, rubbing himself against Tuf's booted leg.

Haviland Tuf stopped for an instant and stared down at the old gray tom. He bent awkwardly, gathered up the cat, and stroked him for a time. When he climbed the ramp to the airlock, Mushroom followed, and Tuf found it necessary to shoo him away. He cycled through with a pressure suit under each arm.

"It's about time," Celise Waan said when Tuf entered.

"I told you Tuf hadn't abandoned us," Jefri Lion said.

Haviland Tuf let the pressure suits fall to the deck, where they lay like a puddle of green and gold. "Mushroom is outside," Tuf said in a flat, passionless voice.

"Well, yes," Celise Waan said. She grabbed a suit and began squeezing into the green metallic fabric. It bound her tightly about the middle; the members of the Ecological Engineering Corps had seemingly been less fleshy than she. "Couldn't you have gotten me a larger size?" she complained. "Are you sure these suits still work?"

"The construction seems sound," Tuf said. "It will be necessary to infuse the airpacs with whatever living bacteria remain from the ship's cultures. How did Mushroom come to be outside?"

Jefri Lion cleared his throat uncomfortably. "Uh, yes," he said. "Celise was afraid you weren't coming back, Tuf. You were gone so long. She thought you'd left us here."

"A base and foundless suspicion," said Tuf.

"Uh, yes," said Lion. He looked away, reached for his own suit.

Celise Waan pulled on a golden boot, sealed it. "It's your fault," she said to Tuf. "If you hadn't been gone so long, I wouldn't have gotten restless."

"Indeed," said Tuf. "What, might I venture to ask, has your restlessness to do with Mushroom?"

"Well, I thought you weren't coming back, and we had to get out of here," the anthropologist said. She sealed up her second boot. "But you made me nervous, you know, with all your talk of plagues. So I cycled the cat through the airlock. I tried to get that damned black-and-white one, but it kept running away and hissing at me. The gray one just let me pick it up. I dumped it out and we've been watching it through the screens. I figured we could see whether or not it got sick. If it didn't show any symptoms, well, then probably it would be safe for us to risk coming out."

"I grasp the principle," said Haviland Tuf.

Havoc came bounding in the room, playing with something. She saw Tuf and headed toward him, walking with a pronounced kittenish swagger.

"Jefri Lion," said Tuf, "if you would, please apprehend Havoc, take her back to the living quarters, and confine her there."

"Uh, certainly," Lion said. He caught up Havoc as she went by him. "Why?"

"I would prefer henceforth to keep Havoc secure and separated from Celise Waan," Tuf said.

Celise Waan, helmet cradled under her arm, made a noise of derision. "Oh, stuff and nonsense. The gray one is fine."

"Permit me to mention a concept with which you are perhaps unfamiliar," said Haviland Tuf. "It is referred to as an incubation period."

"I'm going to kill that bitch," Kaj Nevis threatened as he and Anittas made their way down a dark hallway. "Damn her. You can't get a decent mercenary anymore." The battlesuit's huge head turned to search for the cybertech, the faceplate glowing. "Hurry up."

"I cannot match your strides," Anittas said as he hurried up. His sides ached from the effort of keeping up with Nevis's pace; his cyberhalf was strong as metal and quick as electronic circuitry, but his biohalf was poor tired wounded flesh, and blood still oozed from the cuts Nevis had opened around his midsection. He was feeling dizzy and hot, as well. "It's not far now," he said. "Down this corridor and to the left, third door. It is a substantial substation. I felt it when I was plugged in. I will be able to meld with the main system." And rest, he thought. He was incredibly weary, and his biohalf ached and throbbed.

"I WANT THE DAMN LIGHTS ON," Nevis commanded. "AND THEN I WANT YOU TO FIND HER FOR ME. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

Anittas nodded, and pushed himself harder. Two small hot pinpoints of red burned on his cheeks, unseen by his silver-metal eyes, and for an instant his vision blurred and wavered, and he heard a loud buzzing in his ears. He stopped.

"WHAT'S WRONG NOW?" Nevis demanded.

"I am experiencing some loss of function," Anittas said. "I must reach the computer room and run a check on my systems." He started forward again, and staggered. Then his balance deserted him totally, and he fell.

Rica Dawnstar was positive that she had lost them. Kaj Nevis was pretty formidable in his giant metal monkey suit, no doubt of that, but he was anything but silent. Rica had eyes like one of Tuf's cats, another advantage in her profession. Where she could see, she ran; in the corridors that were totally black, she felt her way along, as quickly and quietly as she could. Down here the *Ark* was a maze of rooms and hallways. She threaded her way through the labyrinth, turning and twisting and turning once again, doubling back on herself, and listening carefully as Nevis's clanging tread grew steadily fainter and finally faded altogether.

Only then, when she knew she was safe, did Rica Dawnstar begin to explore the warren in which she found herself. There were light plates set in the walls. Some responded to the touch of her hand, others did not. She lit her way wherever she could. The first section she passed through was residential—small sleeping rooms off narrow corridors, each with a bed, desk, computer console, and telescreen. Some rooms were empty and sterile; in others she found beds unmade and clothing strewn across the floor.

Everything was neat and clean. Either the residents had just moved out the night before, or the *Ark* had kept this whole portion of the ship sealed and inviolate and in repair, until their approach had somehow activated it.

The next section had not been so fortunate. Here the rooms were full of dust and debris, and in one she found an ancient skeleton, a woman, still asleep in a bed that had collapsed into shapeless decay centuries before. What a difference a little air can make, Rica thought.

The corridors led into other corridors, wider ones. She peered into storage rooms, into chambers full of equipment and others packed with empty cages, into spotless white laboratories in endless succession that lined the sides of a corridor as wide as the boulevards of Shandicity. That led her, eventually, to a junction with an even grander corridor. She hesitated, unsure for a moment, and drew her needler. This way to the control room, she thought to herself—or to something important, at any rate. She stepped out onto the main way, spotted something in the corner; dim shapes, hunched down into little niches in the wall. Cautiously, Rica moved toward them.

When she got close, she laughed and bolstered her weapon. The dark shapes were a row of scooters of some kind—small three-wheeled vehicles, each with two seats and big soft balloon tires. They were set into charging-slots in the walls.

Rica pulled one out, swung herself lithely into the driver's seat, flicked on the power. The gauges registered a full charge. It even had a headlight, which cut through the dark and the shadows ahead quite nicely, thank you. Grinning, she rolled off down the broad corridor. She wasn't going very fast, but what the hell, at least she was getting there.

Jefri Lion led them to an armory. It was there that Haviland Tuf killed Mushroom.

Lion was flashing a hand torch over the room in swift, excited arcs, exclaiming at the stockpile of laser rifles, projectile weapons, screechguns, and light-grenades. Celise Waan was complaining that she had no familiarity with weapons, and didn't think she could kill anybody anyway. She was a scientist and not a soldier, after all, and she thought all this was barbaric.

Haviland Tuf held Mushroom cradled in his arms. The big tomcat had purred loudly when Tuf had re-emerged from the *Cornucopia* and scooped him up, but no longer. Now he was making a pitiful sound, half mewing, half choking. When Tuf tried to stroke him, the long, soft gray fur came out in clumps. Mushroom screeched. Something was growing inside his mouth, Tuf saw; a web of fine black hairs crept from a black fungoid mass. Mushroom howled again, more loudly, and struggled to get free, wielding his claws uselessly against the metal of Tuf's suit. His big yellow eyes were covered with film.

The others had not noticed; their minds were on larger concerns than the cat that Tuf had voyaged with all his life. Jefri Lion and Celise Waan were arguing with each other. Tuf held Mushroom very still, despite the tom's struggles. He stroked him one last time and spoke soothingly to him. Then, in a single swift clean motion, he snapped the cat's neck.

"Nevis has already tried to kill us," Jefri Lion was saying to Celise Waan. "I don't care what your qualms are, really, you must do your part. You can't expect Tuf and me to carry the whole burden of our defense." Behind the thick plastic faceplate of his pressure suit, Lion frowned. "I wish I knew more about that battlesuit that Nevis is wearing," Lion said. "Tuf, will laser fire cut through that Unquin armor? Or would some kind of explosive

projectile be more effective? A laser, I would think. Tuf?” He turned around, swinging the hand torch back and forth so shadows danced wildly against the chamber walls. “Tuf, where are you? Tuf?”

But Haviland Tuf was gone.

The door to the computer room refused to open. Kaj Nevis kicked it. The metal buckled inward in the center and the top of the door popped free of the frame. Nevis kicked it again, and again, his massive armored foot slamming with awful force against the thinner metal of the door. Then he shoved the crumpled remains of the barrier out of his way and entered, with Anittas cradled in his stiff lower arms. “I LIKE THIS DAMNED SUIT,” he said.

Anittas groaned.

The substation was filled with a thin subsonic humming, a buzz of anxiety. Tiny colored lights blinked on and off like fireflies.

“In the circuit,” Anittas said. His hand flailed about weakly in what could have been either a gesture or a spasm. “Get me in the circuit,” he repeated. The parts of him that were still organic looked terrible. His skin was covered with beads of black sweat; tiny drops of moisture as shiny as liquid ebony oozed from every fleshy pore. Mucus ran freely from his nose, and he was bleeding from his single organic ear. He couldn’t stand or walk and his speech seemed to be deteriorating as well. The dull red glow from the battlesuit’s helmet gave him a deep crimson caul that made him look even worse. “Hurry,” he told Nevis. “The circuit, please, get me in the circuit.”

“SHUT UP OR I’LL DUMP YOU HERE,” Nevis answered. Anittas shuddered, as if the magnified volume of Nevis’s voice was a physical assault. Nevis scanned the room until he found the interface station. He lugged the cybertech over there, and dropped him down in a white plastic chair that seemed to flow out of the console and deck. Anittas screamed. “SHUT UP!” Nevis repeated. He picked up the cybertech’s arm clumsily, almost ripping it out of its socket. It was hard to gauge his strength in this damned suit, and fine manipulation was even harder, but he wasn’t about to take it off—he liked this suit, yes he did. Anittas screamed again. Nevis ignored him, spread the tech’s bluesteel fingers, jammed them into the interface. “THERE!” he said. He stepped back.

Anittas slumped forward, his head slamming against the metal and plastic of the console. His mouth gaped open. Blood dripped out, mingled with some thick black fluid, almost like oil. Nevis scowled. Had he gotten him there too late? Had the goddamned cybertech gone and croaked on him?

Then the lights blinked on, and the thin wild humming rose in pitch, and all the tiny little colored lights flashed on and off, on and off, on and off. Anittas was in the circuit.

Rica Dawnstar was rolling down the main way, feeling almost jaunty despite everything, when the blackness ahead of her became a blaze of light. Overhead, the ceiling panels stirred from long slumber, one after another, racing down the kilometers, turning the night into a day so bright it hurt her eyes for a moment.

Startled, she braked to a halt, and watched the wave of light recede into infinity. She glanced behind her. Back from where she’d come, the corridor was still filled with darkness.

She noticed something that hadn’t been obvious before, in the dark. Set into the corridor floor were six thin parallel lines, translucent plastic guide-strips in red, blue, yellow, green, silver, purple. Each no doubt leading somewhere. Pity she didn’t know which led where.

But as she watched, the silver tracery began to glow with an inner light. It stretched out in front of her, a thin, scintillating silvery ribbon. Simultaneously, the overhead panel just above her darkened. Rica frowned, and edged her scooter forward a couple of meters, out of the shadows and back into the light. But when she paused, that light went out as well. The silver ribbon in the floor throbbed insistently. "All right," Rica said, "we'll do it your way." She gunned her scooter and moved down the corridor, as the lights winked out behind her.

"He's come!" Celise Waan screeched when the corridor lit up. She seemed to jump a good meter in the air.

Jefri Lion stood his ground and scowled. He was holding a laser rifle in his hands. A high-explosive dart-pistol rode in a holster on one hip and a screechgun on the other. A huge two-man plasma cannon was strapped securely to his back. He wore a bandolier of mindbombs over his right shoulder, a bandolier of light-grenades over his left, and a large vibroknife sheathed on his thigh. Inside his golden helmet, Lion was smiling, his blood pounding. He was ready for anything. He hadn't felt this good in over a century, since the last time he saw action with Skaeglay's Volunteers against the Black Angels. To hell with all that dusty academic stuff. Jefri Lion was a man of action, and now he felt young again.

"Be quiet, Celise," he said. "No one's come. It's just us. The lights came on, that's all."

Celise Waan seemed unconvinced. She was armed, too, but she kept dragging the laser rifle along the deck because she said it was too heavy, and Jefri Lion was half afraid of what would happen if she tried to arm and throw one of her light-grenades. "Look," she pointed, "what's that?"

The floor had two bands of colored plastic inset into it, Jefri Lion saw. One was black, one orange. Now the orange one lit up. "It's some sort of computerized guideway," he pronounced. "Let's follow it."

"No," Celise Waan said.

Jefri Lion scowled. "Listen here, I'm the commander and you'll do what I say. We can handle anything we might meet. Now move along."

"No!" Celise Waan said stubbornly. "I'm tired. It's not safe. I'm staying right here."

"I'm giving you a direct order," said Jefri Lion impatiently.

"Oh, stuff and nonsense. You can't give me orders. I'm a full Wisdom and you're only an Associate Scholar."

"This isn't the Center," Lion said with irritation. "Are you coming?"

"No." She sat down in the middle of the corridor and crossed her arms.

"Very well, then. Good luck to you." Jefri Lion turned his back on her and began to follow the orange guide-light alone. Behind him, immobile, his army stubbornly and sullenly watched him depart.

Haviland Tuf had come to a strange place.

He had wandered down endless dark, narrow corridors, carrying Mushroom's limp body, hardly thinking, without plan or destination. Finally, he had emerged from one such corridor into what seemed to be a large cavern. The walls fell away on all sides of him. He was swallowed by empty darkness, and his bootsteps sent echoes ringing

off distant walls. There were sounds in the dark—a low humming, at the threshold of hearing, and a louder sound, a liquid sound, like the ebb and flow of some endless underground ocean. But he was not underground, Haviland Tuf reminded himself. He was lost aboard an ancient starship called *Ark*, and surrounded by villains, and Mushroom was dead by his own hand.

He walked on. How long he could not say. His footsteps rang. The floor was level and bare and seemed to go on forever. Finally he walked right into something in the dark. He was moving slowly, so he was not hurt, but he dropped Mushroom in the collision. He groped ahead, tried to determine what sort of object had stopped him, but it was hard to tell through the fabric of his gloves. It was large and curved.

That was when the lights came on.

For Haviland Tuf, there was no explosion of light; what illumination existed in this place was dim, murky, subdued. As it shone down from above, it cast ominous black shadows everywhere, and gave the lighted areas a curious greenish cast, as if they were covered with some radiant moss.

Tuf gazed about. It was more a tunnel than a cavern, perhaps. He had walked all the way across it, a distance of at least a kilometer, he judged. But its breadth was nothing to its length, it must run the full length of the ship, along its major axis, for it seemed to vanish into dimness in both directions. The ceiling above was a shroud of green shadows; high, high overhead, echoes rang off its dimly seen curves. There were machines, a good many machines—computer substations built into the walls, strange devices the like of which Haviland Tuf had never seen, flat worktables with waldoes and microhands built into them. Yet the main feature of this huge, echoing shaft was the vats.

Everywhere there were vats. They lined both walls as far as the eye could see in either direction, and a few even bulged down from the ceiling. Some of the vats were immense, their swollen translucent walls large enough to contain the *Cornucopia*. Elsewhere they were cells the size of a man's hand, thousands of them, ascending from floor to ceiling like plastic honeycombs. The computers and work-stations dwindled into insignificance beside them, small details easily overlooked. And now Haviland Tuf discerned the source of the liquid sound he had heard. Most of the vats were empty, he saw through the greenish gloom, but a few—one here, one there, two farther on—seemed to be full of colored fluids, bubbling, or stirred by the feeble motions of half-seen shapes within.

Haviland Tuf regarded the vista before him for a long time, its scale making him feel very small. Yet finally he turned away, and bent to pick up Mushroom once again. As he knelt, he saw what he had walked into in the dark: a vat, a medium-large one, its transparent walls curving away from him. This vat was full of a thick, murky yellowish liquid, shot through with moving swirls of red. Tuf heard a faint gurgling, and felt a slight vibration, as if something were stirring inside. He leaned closer, peered in, and then craned his head up.

Within, floating, unborn and yet alive, the tyrannosaur stared down at him.

In the circuit there was no pain. In the circuit he had no body. In the circuit he was mind, pure sweet white mind, and he was part of something vast and powerful and infinitely greater than himself, greater than any of them. In the circuit he was more than human, more than cyborg, more than mere machine. In the circuit he was something like a god. Time was nothing in the circuit; he was as swift as thought, as swift as silicon circuitry opening and closing, as swift as the messages that raced along superconductive tendons, as swift as the flash of microlasers weaving their invisible webs in the central matrix. In the circuit, he had a thousand ears and a thousand eyes and a thousand hands to ball into fists and strike with; in the circuit he could be everywhere at once.

He was Anittas. He was *Ark*. He was cybertech. He was more than five hundred satellite stations and monitors, he was twenty Imperial 7400s ruling the twenty sectors of the ship from twenty scattered substations, he was Battlemaster, Codebreaker, Astrogator, Drive Doctor, Medcenter, Ship's Log, Librarian, Bio-Librarian,



Microsurgeon, Clonetender, Maintenance and Repair, Communications, and Defense. He was all the hardware and all the software and all the back-up systems and all secondary and tertiary back-ups. He was twelve hundred years old and thirty kilometers long and the heart of him was the central matrix, barely two meters square and all but infinite in size. He touched here and there and everywhere and moved on, his consciousness racing down the circuits, branching, dancing, riding on the lasers. Knowledge raced through him in a torrent, like a great river running wild, with all the cool steady sweet white power of a high voltage cable. He was *Ark*. He was Anittas. And he was dying.

Down deep in his bowels, down in the ship's intestines, down at substation seventeen by airlock nine, Anittas let his silver-metal eyes track and focus on Kaj Nevis. He smiled. On his half-human face, it was a grotesque expression. His teeth were chrome steel. "You fool," he said to Nevis .

The battlesuit took one threatening step closer. A pincer raised itself with a grinding, metallic sound, opened and closed. "WATCH YOUR MOUTH."

"Fool I said and fool it is," Anittas told him. His laughter was a horrible sound; it was full of pain and metallic echoes, and his lips were bleeding freely, leaving wet red smears on those shining silver teeth. "You killed me, Nevis , and for nothing—for impatience. I could have given it all to you. It's empty, Nevis. The ship is empty, they're all dead. And the system is empty, too. I'm alone in here. No other mind in the circuit. It's an idiot, Kaj Nevis. The *Ark* is an idiot giant. They were afraid, those Earth Imperials. They'd achieved true Artificial Intelligence. Oh yes, they had their great AI warships, their robot fleets, but the AIs had minds of their own, and there were incidents. It's in the histories—there was Kandabaer and the action off Lear and the revolt of Alecto and Golem. The seedships were too powerful, they knew that as they built them. The *Ark* had duties for two hundred—strategists and scientists and eco-engineers and crew and officers—and she could carry more than a thousand soldiers, too, and feed all of them, and operate at full capacity, and lay waste to worlds, oh yes. And everything worked through the system, Nevis , but it's a safe system, a big system, a sophisticated system, a system that can repair itself and defend itself and do a thousand things at once—if you tell it to. The two hundred crewmen made it efficient, but you could run it with only one, Nevis. Not efficiently, no, not at anything near full capacity, but you could do it. It can't run itself—it's got no mind, no AI, it waits for orders—but one man can tell it what to do. One man! I could have done it easily. But Kaj Nevis got impatient and killed me."

Nevis moved still closer. "YOU DON'T SOUND DEAD TO ME," he said, opening and closing his pincer with a sudden menacing snap.

"But I am," said Anittas. "I am sucking power from the system, boosting my cyberhalf, giving myself back a speech capacity. But I'm dying all the while. Plagues, Nevis. The ship was horribly undermanned in its last days, only thirty-two left, and there was an attack, a Hruun attack. They broke the code, opened the dome, and landed. They stormed up the halls, more than a hundred of them. They were winning, threatening to take the ship. The defenders fought them every step of the way. They sealed off whole sectors of the *Ark*, evacuated all the air, turned off all the power. They got a few that way. They set up ambushes, fought them meter for meter. There are still places that are battle-scarred, dysfunctional, beyond the *Ark*'s repair capacities. They let loose plague and pestilence and parasite, and from their vats they summoned their pet nightmares, and they fought, and died, and won. In the end all the Hruun were dead. And you know what, Kaj Nevis? All but four of the defenders were dead as well. One of those was grievously wounded, two others sick, and the last was dead inside. Would you like to know their names? No, I thought not. You have no curiosity, Kaj Nevis. It is no matter. Tuf will want to know, as will the ancient Lion."

"TUF? LION? WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? THEY'RE DEAD, BOTH OF THEM."

"Incorrect," Anittas said. "They are both aboard even now. Lion has found the armory. He's a walking arsenal, and he's coming for you. Tuf has found something even more important. Rica Dawnstar is following the silver trace to the main control room, the captain's chair. You see, Kaj Nevis, the gang's all here. I have awakened every part of the *Ark* that remains functional, and I am leading them all by the hand."

“STOP IT, THEN,” Nevis commanded. He did not hesitate. The great metal pincer reached out and embraced Anittas about his biometal throat. Black sweat oozed down onto the pincer’s serrated blade. “STOP THEM RIGHT NOW.”

“I have not completed my story, Kaj Nevis,” the cybertech said. His mouth was a smear of blood. “The last Imperials knew they could not go on. They shut down the ship, gave it up to vacuum and silence and the void. They made it go derelict. Yet not entirely, you see. They feared another attack, by the Hruun or perhaps, in time, others yet unknown. So they told the *Ark* to defend itself. They armed the plasma cannon and external lasers and kept the defense sphere functional, as we learned to our sorrow. And they programmed the ship to take a terrible vengeance for them, to return again and again and again to Hro B’rana, whence the Hruun had come, and to deliver its gift of plague and pestilence and death. To guard against the Hruun building up immunity, they subjected their plague tanks to constant radiation, to encourage endless mutation, and they established a program for automatic genetic manipulation to fashion ever newer and more deadly viruses.”

“I DON’T GIVE A DAMN,” Kaj Nevis said. “HAVE YOU STOPPED THE OTHERS? CAN YOU KILL THEM? I WARN YOU, DO IT NOW OR YOU’RE DEAD.”

“I am dead anyway, Kaj Nevis,” Anittas said, “I’ve told you that. The plagues. They left a secondary defense in place. Should the ship be breached once again, the *Ark* was programmed to wake itself, to fill the corridors with atmosphere, oh-yes, but an atmosphere tainted by a dozen different disease vectors. The plague tanks have been churning and boiling for a thousand standard years, Kaj Nevis, mutating again and again. There is no name for what I have contracted. Some kind of spore, I think. There are antigens, medicines, vaccines—the *Ark* has been manufacturing those, as well—but it’s too late for me, too late by far. I breathed it in, and it’s eating my biohalf alive. My cyberhalf is inedible. I could have given us this ship, Kaj Nevis. Together we might have had the power of a god. Instead we die.”

“YOU’LL DIE,” Nevis corrected. “AND THE SHIP IS MINE.”

“I think not. I have kicked the idiot giant soundly, Kaj Nevis, and it is awake again. Still an idiot, oh yes, but awake, and ready for orders you have neither the knowledge nor the capacity to give. I am leading Jefri Lion straight here, and Rica Dawnstar is ascending toward central control even now. And more—”

“NO MORE,” Nevis said curtly. The pincer crunched through metal and bone and took the cybertech’s head clean off with a single swift snap. The head bounced off Anittas’s chest, hit the floor, and rolled. Blood jetted from the neck, and a thick protruding cable gave a final futile hiss and threw off a blue-white spark before the body sagged against the computer console. Kaj Nevis drew back his arm and swung, smashing the console again and again, until it was a ruin and hundreds of shards of plastic and metal were scattered over the floor.

There was a high, thin whirring sound.

Kaj Nevis turned, faceplate glowing a bright bloody red, searching for the source.

On the floor, the head was looking at him. The eyes, the shiny silver eyes, tracked and focused. The mouth split into a wet grin. “And more, Kaj Nevis,” the head said to him. “I have activated the final line of defense programmed by those last Imperials. The stasis field is down. The nightmares are waking up now. The guardians are about to come forth and destroy you.”

“DAMN YOU!” Nevis shouted. He set a huge, flat foot atop the cybertech’s head, and brought down all his weight. Steel and bone alike crunched under the impact, and Nevis worked his foot back and forth, back and forth, grinding away until there was nothing beneath his heel but a red-gray paste spotted by flakes of white and silver.

And then, at last, he had silence.

For a long ways, two kilometers or more, the six traces in the floor ran parallel, although only the silver was alive and glowing. The red broke away first, veering off to the right at a junction. The purple terminated a kilometer farther on, at a wide door that proved to be the entrance to a spotless automated kitchen-mess hall complex. Rica Dawnstar was tempted to pause and explore a bit more, but the silver trace was throbbing and the overhead lights were going out one by one, urging her onward, down the main way.

Finally she came to the end. The broad corridor she was following curved gradually to the left and met another corridor just as grand. Their terminus was a huge wheel from which a half dozen lesser hallways branched off like spokes. The ceiling was high above her. Looking up, Rica spotted at least three other levels, connected with catwalks, bridges, and great circling balconies. At the hub of the wheel was a single large shaft that ascended from floor to ceiling—an elevator, clearly.

The blue trace followed one spoke, the yellow a second, the green a third. The shining silver guideway led straight to the elevator doors. The doors opened at her approach. Rica drove her scooter right to the base of the shaft, stopped, dismounted, hesitated. The elevator beckoned. But it looked awfully enclosed in there.

She hesitated too long. All the lights went out.

There was only the silver trace, a single thin line like a finger, pointing straight ahead. And the elevator itself, its lights still blazing.

Rica Dawnstar frowned, drew her needler, and stepped inside. “Up, please,” she announced. The doors closed and the elevator began to ascend.

Jefri Lion walked with a spring in his step, despite the weight of the weapons he was carrying. He felt even better since leaving Celise Waan behind; that woman was nothing but a nuisance anyway, and he doubted that she’d be of much use in a skirmish. He had considered the possibility of stealth, and rejected it. He was not afraid of Kaj Nevis and his battlesuit. Oh, it was formidably armored, he had no doubt of that, but after all, it was of alien manufacture, and Lion was armed with the deadliest weaponry of the Earth Imperials, the height of the technological and military prowess of the Federal Empire of Old Earth as it had been before the Collapse. He’d never even heard of the Unquish, so what kind of armigers could they be? No doubt some obscure Hrangan slave race. He would deal with Nevis in short order if he found him, and with that treacherous Rica Dawnstar, too—her and that stupid needler. He’d like to see how a needler could possibly stand up against a plasma cannon. Yes, he’d like to see that.

Lion wondered what plans Nevis and his cohorts were making for the *Ark*. Something illegal and immoral, no doubt. Well, it made no matter, because he was going to take this ship—he, Jefri Lion, Associate Scholar in Military History at the ShanDellor Center, and one-time Second Tactical Analyst of the Third Wing of Skaeglay’s Volunteers. He was going to capture an EEC seedship, perhaps with Tuf’s help if he could find him, but he would do it in any event. Afterwards, there would be no selling of this treasure for crass personal gain. No, he would take the ship all the way to Avalon, to the great Academy of Human Knowledge, and turn it over to them with the proviso that he remain in charge of its study. It was a project that would last him the rest of his life, and when it ended Jefri Lion, scholar and warrior, would be spoken of in the same breath as Kleronomas himself, who had made the Academy what it was.

Lion strode down the center of the corridor with his head thrown back, following the orange trace, and as he walked he began to whistle a jaunty marching tune that he had learned in Skaeglay’s Volunteers a good forty years ago. He whistled and walked, walked and whistled.

Until the trace died out.

Celise Waan sat on the deck for a long time, her arms crossed tightly against her breasts, her face set in a petulant frown. She sat until the sound of Lion's footsteps had faded away entirely. She sat and brooded on all the insults and wrongs she had been forced to endure. They were all impossible, every one of them. She should have known better than to throw in her lot with such an unpromising and disrespectful crew. Anittas was more machine than man, Rica Dawnstar was an insolent little wretch, Kaj Nevis was no better than a common criminal, and Haviland Tuf was just unspeakable. Even Jefri Lion, her colleague, had proved unreliable in the end. The plague star washer discovery, and she had let them in on it, and what had it gotten her? Discomfort, rudeness, and finally abandonment. Well, Celise Waan didn't intend to stand for it anymore. She had decided not to share the ship with any of them. It was her find, and she would go back to Shandicity and claim it under the salvage laws of ShanDellor, as was her right, and if any of her wretched companions had any complaints, they would have to take her to litigation. Meanwhile, she didn't intend to talk to any of them, not ever again.

Her rear was getting sore and her legs had begun to fall asleep. She had been sitting in one position for a long time. Her back ached, too, and she was hungry. She wondered if there was any place she could get a decent meal aboard this derelict. Perhaps there was. The computers seemed to be working, and the defense systems, and even the lights, so perhaps the commissary was functioning as well. She got up and decided to go see.

It was obvious to Haviland Tuf that something was happening.

The noise level in the great shaft was rising, slowly but appreciably. He could make out a low humming sound quite distinctly, and those gurgling sounds were more noticeable as well. And in the tyrannosaur vat, the suspension fluid seemed to be thinning and changing colors. The red swirls had faded or been sucked away, and the yellow liquid grew more transparent with every passing moment. Tuf watched a waldo unfold from one side of the vat. It appeared as though it was giving the reptile an injection, though Tuf had difficulty observing the details, since the lighting was poor.

Haviland Tuf decided on a strategic retreat. He backed away from the dinosaur vat, and began to walk down the shaft. After he had come only a short way, he came upon one of the computer stations and work areas he had observed. Tuf paused.

He had experienced little difficulty discerning the nature and purpose of this chamber he had chanced upon. The *Ark* had at its heart a vast cell library, containing tissue samples from literally millions of different kinds of plant and animal and viral lifeforms from an uncounted number of worlds, or so Jefri Lion had informed him. These samples were cloned, as the ship's tacticians and eco-engineers deemed appropriate, and so the *Ark* and its lost sister ships could send forth disease to decimate a world's population, insects to devastate its crops, fast-breeding armies of small animals to wreak havoc on the ecology and food chain, or even terrible alien predators to strike fear into the heart of the enemy. Yet everything began with the cloning.

Tuf had found the cloning room. The work areas included equipment obviously intended for complex microsurgery, and the vats were undoubtedly where the cell samples were tended and grown to maturity. Lion had told him about the chronowarp as well, that vanished secret of the Earth Imperials, a field that could literally warp the fabric of time itself, albeit only in a small area, and at vast cost in energy. That way the clones could be brought to maturity in hours, or held, unchanging and alive, for millennia.

Haviland Tuf considered the work area, the computer station, and Mushroom, whose small body he still carried.

Cloning began with a single cell.

The techniques were no doubt stored in the computer. Perhaps there was even an instruction program. "Indeed," Haviland Tuf announced to himself. It seemed quite logical. He was no cybertech, to be sure, but he was an intelligent man who had operated various types of computer systems for virtually his entire lifespan.

Haviland Tuf stepped up to the work station, deposited Mushroom gently beneath the hood of the micro-screen, and turned on the computer console. He could make no sense of the commands at first, yet he persisted.

After a few minutes he was intent on his labors—so intent that he did not notice the loud gurgling sound behind him when the thin yellow fluid in the dinosaur vat began to drain away.

Kaj Nevis smashed his way out of the system substation looking for something to kill.

He was angry—angry at himself for being impatient and unthinking. Anittas could have been useful; Nevis just hadn't considered the possibility of contagion in the ship's air. The damn cybertech would have had to have been killed eventually, of course, but that would not have been difficult. And now everything was falling apart. Nevis felt secure in the battlesuit, but still uneasy. He didn't like hearing that Tuf and the others had somehow gotten aboard. Tuf knew more about this damn suit than he did, after all; maybe he knew its weaknesses.

Kaj Nevis had already pinpointed one of those weaknesses himself—his air supply was running low. A modern pressure suit, like the one Tuf was wearing, included an airpac. The bacteria infused in its filters turned carbon dioxide into oxygen as fast as a human being could turn oxygen into carbon dioxide, so there was never any danger of running out of air, unless the damn bugs went and died on you. But this battlesuit was primitive; it carried a large but finite supply of air in those four huge tanks on its back. And the gauge in his helmet, if he was reading it correctly, indicated that one of those tanks was nearly empty. That still left three, which ought to give him more than enough time to get rid of the rest of them, if only he could find them. Still, it made Nevis uneasy. He was surrounded by perfectly breathable air, to be sure, but he was damned if he was going to crack his helmet after what had happened to the cybertech. The organic part of Anittas's body had decayed faster than Nevis would have believed, and the black goop that had eaten up the cybertech inside was as loathsome a sight as Kaj had ever seen, in a life that had featured lots of loathsome sights. He'd sooner suffocate, Kaj Nevis had decided.

But there was no danger of that. If the damned Ark could be contaminated, it could be cleansed, too. He'd find the control room and figure out how to do it. Even one clean sector would be enough. Of course, Anittas had said that Rica Dawnstar was already at the control room, but that did not faze him. In fact, he was kind of looking forward to that reunion.

He chose a direction at random and set off, his armored steps pounding against the deck. So let them hear him—what did he care. He liked this suit.

Rica Dawnstar sprawled in the captain's chair and surveyed the readouts she had projected on the main telescreen. Well-padded, large, covered with comfortable old plastic, the chair felt like a throne. It made a good place to rest. The trouble was, you really couldn't do anything but rest from there. The bridge had obviously been designed so that the captain sat in his throne and gave orders, and the other officers—there were nine other work stations on the upper bridge, twelve more in the lower-level control pit—did all the actual programming and punching of buttons. Lacking the foresight to have come aboard with nine flunkies, Rica was forced to move back and forth across the bridge, from one station to another, to try and get the *Ark* up and running again.

It took her a while—it was tedious work—and when she entered commands from the wrong substation, nothing happened. But slowly, step by step, she was figuring it all out. At least she felt as though she was making progress.

And she was secure. That had been her first objective, locking that elevator so that nobody else could come up and surprise her. As long as she was here and they were down there, Rica Dawnstar held the trump card. Every sector of the ship had its own substation, and every specialized function, from defense to cloning to propulsion to data storage, had its own sub-nexus and command post, but from up here she could oversee all of them, and countermand any command that anybody else might try and enter. If she noticed. And if she could figure out how. That was the problem. She could only man one station at a time, and she could only get things done when she figured out the proper sequence of commands. She was doing it, yes, by trial and error, but that was a lengthy and cumbersome progress.

She slumped back in her padded throne and watched the readouts, feeling proud of herself on several counts. She had managed to elicit a shipwide status check, it seemed. The *Ark* had already given her a full damage report on those sectors and systems that had been inoperative for a thousand years, waiting for repairs beyond the ship's capacities. Now it was telling her what programming was presently engaged.

The bio-defense listing was especially impressive, in a frightening sort of way. It went on and on. Rica had never heard of three-quarters of the diseases that had been unleashed to greet them, but they sounded unpleasant in the extreme. Anittas was no doubt one with the great program beyond the universe by now. Obviously, her next objective should be to try and seal off the bridge from the rest of the ship, irradiate and disinfect and try to see if she could get some uncontaminated air in here. Otherwise her suit was going to start getting pretty gamey in a day or two.

Up on the telescreen, it read:

BIO-DEFENSE PHASE ONE (MICRO) REPORT COMPLETE  
BIO-DEFENSE PHASE TWO (MACRO) REPORT COMMENCING

Rica frowned. Macro? What the hell did that mean? Big plagues?

STAND-BY BIO-WEAPONS AT READY: 47

The screen told her, and it followed that cryptic bit of information with a lengthy list of species numbers. It was a boring list. Rica slumped back in the captain's throne again. When the list ended, more messages rolled across the screen.

ALL CLONING PROCEDURES COMPLETE MALFUNCTIONS IN VATS: 671, 3312, 3379  
MALFUNCTIONS ABORTED  
STASIS FIELDS TERMINATED RELEASE CYCLE COMMENCING

Rica Dawnstar wasn't sure she liked the sound of that. Release cycle, she thought. What was it releasing? On the one hand, Kaj Nevis was still out there; if this second-phase defense could discomfort, distract, or dispose of him, that was all to her benefit. On the other hand, she already faced the task of getting rid of all these plagues. She didn't need any more problems. The reports began to flash by more quickly.

SPECIES # 22-743-88639-04090 HOMEWORLD: VILKAKIS  
COMMON NAME: HOODED DRACULA

It said. Rica sat up straight. She'd heard of Vilkakiss and its hooded draculas. Nasty things. Some kind of flying nocturnal bloodsucker, she seemed to recall. Dim-witted, but incredibly sensitive to sound, and insanely aggressive. The message flicked out. In its place appeared a single line.

INITIATING RELEASE

The screen told her. It held a moment and was replaced by a shorter line, a single word that flashed once, twice, three times, and then was gone:

RELEASED

Now, could a hooded dracula possibly have Kaj Nevis for lunch? Unlikely, Rica thought—not so long as he wore that stupid armored suit. “Great,” she said aloud. She didn’t have a battlesuit, which meant that the *Ark* was creating problems for her, not for Nevis .

SPECIES # 13-612-71425-88812 HOMEWORLD: ABBATOIR COMMON NAME: HELLKITTENS

Rica had no idea what a hellkitten was, but she didn’t especially want to find out. She had heard of Abbatoir, of course—a quaint little world that had eaten three different colonizing parties; its lifeforms were supposed to be uniformly unpleasant. Unpleasant enough to chew through Nevis’ battlesuit, though? That seemed doubtful.

INITIATING RELEASE

How many things was the ship going to belch forth? Forty-some-odd, she recalled. “Terrific,” she said dourly. Fill up the ship with forty-plus hungry monsters, any one of them sufficient to lunch on her mother’s favorite daughter. No, this wouldn’t do, not at all. Rica stood up and surveyed the bridge. So where did she have to go to put an end to this nonsense?

RELEASED

Rica vaulted over the captain’s chair, strode briskly back to the area she’d pegged as the defense command station, and told it to cancel its current programming.

SPECIES # 76-102-95994-12965 HOMEWORLD: JAYDEN TWO COMMON NAME: WALKING-WEB

Lights flashed in front of her, and the small telescreen on the console told her that the *Ark*’s external defense sphere was down. But up on the main screen, the parade went on.

INITIATING RELEASE

Rica uncorked a string of curses. Her fingers moved swiftly over the console, trying to tell the system that it wasn’t the external defenses she wanted dropped, it was bio-defense phase two. The machine didn’t seem to understand her.

RELEASED

Finally she got a response from the board. It told her she was at the wrong console. She scowled and glanced around. Of course. This was external defense, weapons systems. There had to be some kind of bio-control station, too.

SPECIES # 54-749-37377-84921 HOMEWORLD: PSC92, TSC749, UNNAMED COMMON NAME: ROLLERAM

Rica moved to the next station.

INITIATING RELEASE

The system responded to her cancel demand with a baffled query. No active program on this subsystem.

RELEASED

Four, Rica thought sourly. “That’s enough,” she said loudly. She stepped over to the next station, punched in a cancel, moved on without waiting to see if there was an effect, paused at another console to enter another cancel, moved on.

SPECIES # 67-001-00342-10078 HOMEWORLD: EARTH (EXTINCT) COMMON NAME:  
TYRANNOSAURUS REX

She ran now. Run, cancel, run, cancel, run, cancel.

INITIATING RELEASE

She made a circuit of the entire bridge, as quickly as she could. By the time she was done, she wasn’t even certain which command, at which station, had done the trick. But up on the screen, the message read:

RELEASE CYCLE TERMINATED BIO-WEAPONS ABORTED: 3  
BIO-WEAPONS RELEASED: 5

STAND-BY BIO-WEAPONS AT READY: 39

BIO-DEFENSE PHASE TWO (MACRO) REPORT COMPLETE

Rica Dawnstar stood with her hands on her hips, frowning. Five loose. That wasn’t too bad. She thought she’d managed to catch it after four, but she must have been a split-second too late. Oh, well. What the hell was a tyrannosaurus rex, anyway?

At least there was no one out there but Nevis .

Without the trace to guide him, Jefri Lion had wasted no time getting lost in the maze of interconnected corridors. Finally, he had adopted a simple policy; choose the wider corridors over the narrower, turn right where the passages were of the same size, go down whenever possible. It seemed to work. In no time at all, he heard a noise.

He flattened himself against a wall, although the attempt at concealment was somewhat compromised by the ungainly bulk of the plasma cannon on his back. He listened. Yes, definitely, a noise. Up ahead of him. Footsteps. Loud footsteps, though at some distance, but coming his way—Kaj Nevis in his battlesuit.

Smiling to himself with satisfaction, Jefri Lion unslung the plasma cannon and began to erect its tripod.

The tyrannosaur roared.

It was, thought Haviland Tuf, a thoroughly frightening sound. He pressed his lips firmly together in annoyance and squirmed back another half-meter into his niche. He was decidedly uncomfortable. Tuf was a big man, and there was very little room down here. He sat with his legs jammed under each other awkwardly, his back bent over in a painful manner, and his head bumping against the work station above. Yet he was not ungrateful. It was a small niche, true, but it had given him a place to seek shelter.

Fortunately, he had been deft enough to attain that shelter. He was fortunate, also, in that the work station, with its waldos and microscanner and computer terminal, rested upon a heavy, thick, metal table that extruded itself from floor and wall, and not simply a flimsy item of furniture to be easily brushed aside.



Nonetheless, Haviland Tuf was not entirely pleased with himself. He felt foolish; his dignity had been decisively compromised. No doubt his ability to concentrate on the task at hand was, in its own way, commendable. Still, that degree of concentration might be considered a liability when it allowed a seven-meter-tall carnivorous reptile to sneak up on one.

The tyrannosaur roared again. Tuf could feel the work station vibrate overhead. The dinosaur's massive head appeared about two meters in front of his face, as the beast leaned over, counterbalanced by its great tail, and tried to get in at him. Fortunately, its head was too large and the niche too small. The reptile pulled out and screamed its frustration; echoes rebounded all up and down the central cloning chamber. Its tail lashed around and smashed into the work station; the sheltering table shook to the impact, something shattered up above, and Tuf winced.

"Go away," he said as firmly as he could. He rested his hands atop his paunch and attempted to look stern.

The tyrannosaur paid him no heed... "These vigorous efforts will avail you naught," Tuf pointed out. "You are too large and the table too sturdily built, as would be readily apparent to you had you a brain larger than a mushroom. Moreover, you are undoubtedly a clone produced from the genetic record contained within a fossil. Therefore, it might be argued that I have a superior claim to life, on the grounds that you are extinct and ought properly to remain so. Begone!"

The tyrannosaur's reply was a furious squirming lunge and a wet bellow that sprayed Tuf with fine droplets of dinosaur saliva. The tail came down once more.

When she first caught a flicker of movement out of the corner of her eye, Celise Waan squeaked in panic.

She backpedaled and whirled to face—to face what? There was nothing there. But she had been certain that she'd seen something, up near that open door. What, though? Nervously, she unholstered her dart-pistol. She'd abandoned the laser rifle quite a distance back. It was cumbersome and heavy, and the effort of lugging it around had tired her out. Besides, she doubted that she'd be able to hit anything with it. The pistol was much preferable, in her view. As Jefri Lion had explained it, it threw explosive plastic darts, so she would not actually have to score a hit, just come close.

Warily, she moved toward the open door. She paused to one side of it, raised her pistol high, thumbed off the safety, and then peered quickly into the room.

Nothing.

It was some kind of storage room, she saw, full of plastisealed equipment piled high on floater skids. She glanced around uneasily. Had she imagined it, then? No. As she was about to turn away, she saw it once more, a tiny darting shape that appeared on the periphery of her vision and vanished before she could quite get a clear look at it.

But this time she had seen where it had gone. She hurried after it, feeling bolder now; it had, after all, been quite small.

She had it cornered, she saw when she rounded the looming equipment skid. But what was it? Celise Waan moved closer, gun at the ready.

It was a cat.

It stared at her steadily, its tail flicking back and forth. It was kind of a funny cat. Very small—a kitten, really. It was pale white, with vivid scarlet stripes, an oversized head, and astonishing lambent crimson eyes.

Another cat, thought Celise Waan. That was all she needed: another cat. It hissed at her.

She drew back, a little startled. Tuf's cats hissed at her from time to time, especially the nasty black-and-white one, but not like that. That hiss was almost, well, reptilian. Chilling, somehow. And its tongue... it seemed to have a very long, very peculiar tongue.

It hissed again.

"Here, kitty," she called. "Here, kitty."

It stared at her, unblinking, cold, haughty. Then it drew itself back and spat at her. The spittle struck her square in the center of her faceplate. It was thick greenish stuff, and it obscured her vision for a moment until she wiped it away with the back of her arm.

Celise Waan decided that she'd had enough of cats. "Nice kitty," she said, "come here, kitty. I've got a present for you."

It hissed again, drew back to spit. Celise Waan grunted and blew it to hell.

The plasma cannon would dispose of Kaj Nevis handsomely; on that score Jefri Lion had no doubt. The strength of the armor on that alien battlesuit was an unknown factor. If it was at all comparable to the armored suits worn by the Federal Empire's own assault squads during the Thousand Years War, it might be able to deflect laser fire, to withstand small explosions, to ignore sonic attacks, but a plasma cannon could melt through five meters of solid duralloy plate. One good plasma ball would instantly turn any kind of personal armor into slag, and Nevis would be incinerated before he even understood what had hit him.

The difficulty was the size of the plasma cannon. It was unfortunately cumbersome, and the so-called portable version, with its small energy-pac, took almost a full standard minute after each shot to generate another plasma ball in its force chamber. Jefri Lion was acutely and uncomfortably aware that, were he to miss Kaj Nevis, he would be unlikely to get a second shot. Moreover, even on its tripod, the plasma cannon was unwieldy, and it had been many years since he had been in the field, and even then, his strong suits had been his mind and his tactical sense, not his reflexes. After so many decades at the Shan Dellor Center, he had no great confidence in his eye-hand coordination.

So Jefri Lion concocted a plan.

Fortunately, plasma cannons had often been employed for automated perimeter defense, and this one had the standard minimind and autofire sequence. Jefri Lion erected the tripod in the middle of a broad corridor, approximately twenty meters down from a major intersection. He programmed in an extremely narrow field of fire, and calibrated the targeting cube with the utmost precision. Then he initiated the autofire sequence and stepped back with satisfaction. Inside the energy-pac he saw the plasma ball forming, burning brighter and brighter, and after a minute the ready light flashed on. Now the cannon was set, and its minimind was vastly quicker and more deadly accurate than Lion could ever hope to be firing manually. It was targeted on the center of the corridor intersection ahead, but it would fire only at objects whose dimensions exceeded certain preprogrammed limits.

So Jefri Lion could dash right through the cannon's target cube without fear, but Kaj Nevis, following in his absurdly huge battlesuit, would meet with a hot surprise. Now it only remained to lure Nevis into the appropriate position.

It was a stroke of tactical genius worthy of Napoleon or Chin Wu or Stephan Cobalt Northstar. Jefri Lion was infinitely pleased with himself.

The heavy footsteps had grown louder as Lion had worked with the plasma cannon, but in the last minute or so they had begun to fade; Nevis had obviously taken a wrong turn and would not be coming to the right position of his own accord. Very well then, Jefri Lion thought; he would bring him there.

He walked to the precise center of the fire zone with complete confidence in his own abilities, paused there briefly, smiled, and set off down the cross-corridor to attract the attention of his unwary prey.

Up on the great-curved telescreen, the *Ark* revolved in three-dimensional cross-section.

Rica Dawnstar, having abandoned the captain's throne for a less comfortable but more efficient post at one of the bridge work stations, studied the display, and the data flashing by underneath it, with some annoyance. It seemed she had a lot more company than she had thought.

The system displayed intruding lifeforms as vivid red pinpoints of light. There were six pinpoints. One of them was on the bridge. Since Rica was quite alone, obviously that was her. But five others? Even if Anittas was still alive, there should have been only two additional dots. It didn't add up.

Maybe the *Ark* hadn't been derelict after all—maybe there was still someone aboard. Except the system claimed to depict authorized *Ark* personnel as green dots, and there was no green to be seen.

Other scavengers? Highly unlikely.

It had to mean that Tuf, Lion, and Waan had somehow docked after all. That made the most sense. And, indeed, the system claimed there was an intruding lifeform in a ship up on the landing deck.

All right. That added up. Six red dots equaled her and Nevis and Anittas (how had he lived through the damned plagues? the system insisted it was showing only living organisms) plus Tuf and Waan and Lion. One of the others was still up in the *Cornucopia*, and the rest...

It was simple to pick out Kaj Nevis. The system showed power sources as well, as tiny yellow starbursts, and only one of the red pinpoints was surrounded by a tiny yellow starburst. That had to be Nevis in his battlesuit.

But what was that second yellow dot flashing so brightly by itself in an empty corridor on deck six? A hellacious power source, but what? Rica didn't understand. There had been a second red dot quite near to it, but it had moved away, and now seemed to be trailing Nevis, edging steadily closer.

Meanwhile, there were the black dots: the *Ark*'s bio-weapons. The huge central axis that cored the asymmetric, tapered cylinder of the ship was positively livid with black pinpricks, but at least those were stationary. Other black dots, which had to be the beasties that had been released, were moving through the corridors. Only there were more than five. There was one clump of them—thirty or more discrete organisms, moving en masse like a shapeless black blotch upon the screen, throwing off strays from time to time. One of the strays had come up near a red light and had suddenly been extinguished.

There was a red dot in that central core area, too.

Rica asked for a display of that sector, and the screen gave her a much tighter cross-section. The red light was very close to a moving black dot down there—some sort of confrontation. She studied the readouts below the graphic.

That particular black dot was species #67-001-00342-10078, the tyrannosaurus rex. It was massive, no doubt of that.

She noticed, with some interest, that a red light and one of the wandering blacks were both closing in on Kaj Nevis. That ought to be interesting. It looked like she was missing the party; all hell was breaking loose down there.

And she was up here, safe and secure and in control. Rica Dawnstar smiled.

Kaj Nevis was lumbering down a corridor, growing angrier and angrier, when a sudden explosive blow took him squarely in the back of his head. Inside his helmet, the sound was horrible. The force of the explosion knocked him forward and toppled him. He went smashing to the floor face first, too slow to break his fall with his arms.

But the suit absorbed most of the impact, and Nevis was unharmed. Lying there he made a quick check of his gauges, and smiled wolfishly; the battlesuit was undamaged, unbreached. He rolled over and rose ponderously to his feet.

Twenty meters away, at a corridor intersection, stood a man in a green-and-gold pressure suit, armed as if he had just looted a military museum, and holding a pistol in one gloved hand. "We meet again, blackguard!" the figure called out over external speakers.

"SO WE DO, LION," Nevis replied. "HOW GOOD TO SEE YOU. COME HERE AND SHAKE HANDS." He snapped his pincers. The right one was still stained with the cybertech's blood; he hoped Jefri Lion had noticed. A pity his cutting laser was so short-range, but no matter. He would simply catch Lion, take away his toys, and then play with him a while—pull off his legs, perhaps, and breach his suit, and let the damned air do the rest.

Kaj Nevis lumbered forward.

Jefri Lion stood his ground, raised his dart pistol, aimed it carefully with both hands, fired.

The dart struck Nevis in the chest. There was a loud explosion, but this time he had braced for it. His ears hurt, but he hardly even staggered. Some of the intricate filigree on the armor was blackened, but that was the extent of the damage. "YOU LOSE, OLD MAN," Nevis said. "I LIKE THIS SUIT."

Jefri Lion was silent and methodical. He holstered his dart pistol, unslung a laser rifle and raised it to his shoulder, took aim, fired.

The beam glanced off Nevis's shoulder, struck a wall, and burned a small black hole. "Reflective microcoating," Jefri Lion said. He put away the laser rifle.

Nevis had eaten up more than three-quarters of the distance between them with his long, powered strides.

Finally Jefri Lion seemed to realize his danger. He threw down the laser rifle, turned, and darted around a corner, out of sight.

Kaj Nevis lengthened his strides and followed.

Haviland Tuf was nothing if not patient.

He sat calmly, with his hands folded atop his bulging stomach and his head aching from the repeated blows the tyrannosaur had inflicted on the sheltering table. He did his best to ignore the hammering that dented the metal above and made him even more uncomfortable, the blood-curdling bestial roars, the excessive and melodramatic displays of carnivore appetite that occasionally prompted the tyrannosaur to bend over and snap its numerous large teeth futilely at Tuf in his shelter. Instead Tuf thought about sweet Rodelyian pop-berries in honey-butter, tried to recall which particular planet had the strongest and most pungent variety of ale, and devised an excellent new strategy with which to overwhelm Jefri Lion should they ever game again.

Ultimately, his plan bore fruit.

The raging reptile, bored and frustrated, went away.

Haviland Tuf waited until it grew quite still and silent outside. He twisted himself around awkwardly, and lay for a moment on his stomach while the pins and needles in his legs flared and faded and vanished. Then he squirmed forward and cautiously stuck his head out.

Dim green light. Low humming, and distant gurgling sounds. No motion anywhere. He emerged carefully. The dinosaur had struck what remained of Mushroom's poor body numerous times with its massive tail. The sight filled Haviland Tuf with a vast and bitter sorrow. The equipment at this particular work station was in a shambles.

Yet there were other work stations, and he needed but a single cell.

Haviland Tuf gathered up a tissue sample and walked ponderously down to the next work station. This time he made it a point to listen for the sound of dinosaur footsteps behind him.

Celise Waan was pleased. She had handled herself quite adroitly, no doubt of it. That nasty little cat-thing wouldn't be bothering her again. Her faceplate was a bit smeared where the cat-spit had struck, but otherwise she had come off splendidly from the encounter. She bolstered her pistol deftly, and stalked back out into the corridor.

The smear on her faceplate bothered her a little. It was up near her eyes, and it obscured her vision. She wiped at it with the back of her hand, but that only seemed to spread the smeariness around. Water, that was what she needed. Very well then. She had been looking for food anyway, and where you found food you always found water.

She walked briskly down the corridor, turned a corner, and stopped dead.

Not a meter away, another of those damned cat-things stood staring at her insolently.

This time Celise Waan acted decisively. She went for her pistol. She had some trouble getting it out, however, and her first shot missed the disgusting creature entirely and blew the door off a nearby room. The explosion was loud and startling. The cat hissed, drew back, spit just like the first one had, and then ran.

Celise Waan caught the spittle up near her left shoulder this time. She tried to get off a second shot, but the smeary condition of her helmet's faceplate made it difficult to see where she was aiming.

"Stuff and nonsense," she said loudly in exasperation. It was getting harder and harder to see. The plastic in front of her eyes seemed to be getting cloudy. The edges of the faceplate were still clear, but when she looked straight ahead everything was vague and distorted. She really had to get the helmet cleaned off.

She moved in the direction she thought the cat-thing had taken, going slowly so as not to trip. She tried to listen. She heard a soft scrabbling sound, as if the creature was nearby, but she couldn't be sure.

The faceplate was getting worse and worse. It was like looking through milk-glass. Everything was white and cloudy. This wouldn't do, Celise Waan thought. This wouldn't do at all. How could she hunt down that hideous cat-creature if she was half-blind? For that matter, how could she find where she was going? There was no help for it; she would have to take off this stupid helmet.

But the thought gave her pause; she remembered Tuf and his dire warnings about sickness in the ship's air. Well, yes, but Tuf was such a ridiculous man! Had she seen any proof of what he said? No, none at all. She'd put out that big gray cat of his, and it certainly hadn't seemed to suffer any for the experience. Tuf had been carrying it around the last time she'd seen him. Of course, he had done that big song and dance about incubation periods, but he was probably just trying to frighten her. He seemed to enjoy outraging her sensibilities, the way he had with his revolting catfood trick. No doubt he would find it perversely amusing if he frightened her into remaining in this tight, uncomfortable, smelly suit for weeks.

It occurred to her suddenly that Tuf was probably responsible for these cat-things that were harassing her. The very idea made Celise Waan furious. The man was a barbarous wretch!

She could hardly see a thing now. The milky center of her faceplate had grown almost opaque.

Resolute and angry, Celise Waan unsealed her helmet, took it off, and threw it down the corridor as far as she could.

She took a deep breath. The ship's air was slightly cold, with a faint astringency to it, but it was less musty than the recycled air from the suit's airpac. Why, it tasted good! She smiled. Nothing wrong with this air. She looked forward to finding Tuf and giving him a tongue-lashing.

Then she happened to glance down. She gasped.

Her glove... the back of her left hand, the hand she'd used to wipe away the cat-spit, why, a big hole had appeared in the center of the gold fabric, and even the metal weave beneath looked, well, corroded.

That cat! That damned cat! Why, if that spit had actually struck her bare skin, it would have... it could have... she remembered all of a sudden that she was no longer wearing a helmet.

Down the corridor, the cat-thing suddenly popped out of an open room.

Celise Waan shrieked at it, whipped up her pistol, and fired three times in rapid succession. But it was too fast. It ran away and vanished down around a corner.

She wouldn't feel safe until the pestilential thing was disposed of for good, she decided. If she let it get away, it might pounce on her at any unguarded moment, the way Tuf's obnoxious black-and-white pet was so wont to do. Celise Waan opened her pistol, fed in a fresh clip of explosive darts, and moved off warily in pursuit.

Jefri Lion's heart was pounding as it had not pounded in years; his legs ached and his breath was coming in hard, short little gasps. Adrenalin surged through his system. He pushed himself harder and harder. Just a little farther now, down this corridor and around the corner, and then maybe twenty meters on to the next intersection.

The deck underfoot shook every time Kaj Nevis landed on one of his heavy, armored saucer-feet, and once or twice Jefri Lion almost lost his footing, but the danger only seemed to add spice. He was running like he'd run as a youth, and even Nevis's huge augmented strides were not enough to catch him, though he could feel the other closing on him.

He had pulled out a light-grenade as he ran. When he heard one of Nevis 's damnable pincers snap within a meter of the back of his head, Jefri Lion armed it and flipped it over his shoulder and pushed himself even harder, darting around the last corner.

He whirled as he made the turn, just in time to see a sudden soundless flash of blue-white brilliance blossom in the corridor he had evacuated. Even the reflected light that blazed off the walls left Jefri Lion momentarily dazzled. He backpedaled, watching the intersection. Seen directly, the light-grenade ought to have burned out Nevis 's retinas, and the radiation ought to be enough to kill him within seconds...

The only sign of Nevis was a huge, utterly black shadow that loomed across the intersection. Jefri Lion retreated, running backwards now, panting. Kaj Nevis stepped out slowly into the intersection. His faceplate was so dark it looked almost black, but as Lion watched, the red glow returned, burning brighter and brighter. "DAMN YOU AND ALL YOUR STUPID TOYS," Nevis boomed.

Well, it didn't matter, thought Jefri Lion. The plasma cannon would do the job, there was no doubt of that, and he was only ten meters or so from the fire zone. "Are you giving up, Nevis?" he taunted, trotting backwards easily. "Is the old soldier too fast for you?"

But Kaj Nevis didn't move.

For a moment, Jefri Lion was baffled. Had the radiation gotten to him after all, even through the suit? No, that couldn't be it. Surely Nevis wouldn't give up the chase now, not after Lion had lured him so heartbreakingly close to the fire zone and his plasma-ball surprise.

Nevis laughed.

He was looking up over Lion's head.

Jefri Lion looked up, too, just in time to see something detach itself from the ceiling and come flapping down at him. It was all a sooty black, and it rode on wide dark batwings, and he had a brief vision of slitted yellow eyes with thin red pupils. Then the darkness folded over him like a cape, and leathery, wet flesh closed about him to muffle his sudden, startled scream.

It was all very interesting, Rica Dawnstar thought.

Once you mastered the system, once you got the commands down, you could find out all sorts of things. Like, for example, the approximate mass and body configuration of each of those little lights moving up on the screen. The computer would even work up a three-dimensional simulation for you, if you asked it nicely. Rica asked it nicely.

Now everything was falling into place.

Anittas was gone after all. The sixth intruder, back on the *Cornucopia*, was only one of Tuf's cats.

Kaj Nevis and his supersuit were chasing Jefri Lion around the ship. Except one of the black dots, the hooded dracula, had just gotten hold of Lion.

The red dot that was Celise Waan had stopped moving, although it hadn't winked out. The creeping black mass wag coming toward her.

Haviland Tuf was alone in the central axis, putting something in a cloning vat and trying to ask the system to activate the chronowarp. Rica let the command go through.

All of the other bio-weapons were out in the corridors.

Rica decided to let things sort themselves out a little more down there before she took a hand.

Meanwhile, she'd rummaged up the program to cleanse the interior of the ship of plague. First she'd have to close all the emergency locks, seal off each sector individually. Then the process could begin. Atmosphere evacuation, filtration, irradiation, with massive redundancy built in for safety, and when the replacement atmosphere flowed back, it was infused with all the proper antigens. Complex and time-consuming—but effective. And Rica was in no special hurry.

Her legs had collapsed first.

Celise Waan lay in the center of the corridor where she had fallen, her throat constricted with terror. It had all happened so suddenly. One moment she was rushing headlong down the hall in pursuit of the cat-thing. And then a wave of dizziness had swept over her, and suddenly she felt too weak to go on. She had decided to rest for a moment, had squatted down to catch her breath. But it didn't help. She only felt worse and worse, and when she tried to get up, her legs had buckled under her and she'd pitched forward onto her face.

After that her legs refused to move. Now she couldn't even feel them. She couldn't feel anything below her waist, in fact, and the paralysis was creeping up her body slowly. She could still move her arms, but it hurt when she did, and her motions were leaden and clumsy.

Her cheek was pressed against the hardness of the deck. She tried to raise her head, and failed. Her whole upper body shook with a sudden stabbing pain.

Two meters away, a cat-thing peered out from around a corner. It stood staring at her, its eyes huge and scary. Its mouth opened in a hiss.

Celise Waan tried to stifle a scream.

Her pistol was still in her hand. Slowly, jerkily, she dragged it forward to her face. Every motion was agony. She lined it up as best she could, squinting along the top of it, and fired.

The dart actually hit.

She was showered with pieces of cat-thing. One piece, raw and wet and disgusting, landed on her bare cheek.

It made her feel a little better. At least she'd killed the creature that had tormented her. At least she was safe from that. She was still sick and helpless, though. Maybe she should rest. A little nap, yes, she'd feel better after a little nap.

Another cat-thing bounded out into the corridor.

Celise Waan groaned, tried to move, gave up the effort. Her arms were growing heavier and heavier.

A second cat followed the first. Celise pushed her dart-gun to her cheek again, tried to aim. She was distracted when a third cat appeared. The dart went wide, exploded harmlessly way off down the corridor.



One of the cats spit at her. It struck her between the eyes.

The agony was unbelievable. If she could have moved, she would have torn her eyes from their sockets, rolled on the ground, pulled at her skin. But she couldn't move. She screamed.

Her vision distorted into a hideous blur of color and then was gone. She heard... feet. Small, light, padding footsteps. Cat steps.

How many were there?

Celise felt a weight on her back. And then another, and another. Something nudged against her useless right leg; she could dimly sense it shifting.

There was a spitting sound, and agony flared on her cheek.

They were all around her, on top of her, crawling over her. She could feel the stiffness of their fur brushing against her hand. Something bit into the flesh of her neck. She screamed. The biting continued. It took hold, pulling, worrying at her with small sharp teeth.

Another one nipped at a finger. Somehow the pain gave her strength. She flailed at it, pulled back her hand. When she moved, there was a cacophony of hissing all around her as the cat-things protested. She felt them biting her face, her throat, her eyes. Something was trying to squirm down into her suit.

Her hand moved slowly, awkwardly. She brushed aside cat-things, was bitten, persisted. She fumbled at her belt, and at last she felt it, round and hard within her grip. She pulled it loose, brought it up toward her face, held it oh so tight.

Where was the stud that armed it? Her thumb searched. There. She twisted it a half-turn, pressed it in as Lion had told her to.

Five, she recited silently, four three two one. In her last moment, Celise Waan saw the light.

Kaj Nevis had himself a good loud laugh as he watched the show.

He didn't know what the hell the damned thing was, but it was more than enough for Jefri Lion. Its wings folded over him when it hit, and for a few minutes he screamed and struggled, rolling around on the floor with the thing enveloping his head and shoulders. He looked like a man fighting an umbrella. It was downright comic.

After a while, Lion lay still, his legs kicking feebly. The screaming stopped. A sucking sound filled the corridor.

Nevis was amused and pleased, but he figured it was best not to leave any loose ends. The thing was intent on its feeding. Nevis walked up as quietly as he could manage, which wasn't very quietly, and grabbed it. It made a liquid popping sound when he pulled it off of what was left of Jefri Lion.

Damn, Nevis thought, it did one hell of a job. The whole front of Lion's helmet was staved in. The thing had a kind of bony sucker-beak, and it had punched right through Lion's faceplate and sucked off most of his face. Ugly. The flesh looked almost liquefied, and there was bone showing through.

The monster was flapping madly in his grip, and making a high, hideous noise, half shriek and half whine. Kaj Nevis held it at arm's length and let it flap while he studied it. It struck at his arm, again and again, to no effect. He liked those eyes; real mean, scary eyes. This thing could be handy, he thought. He pictured what it would be

like to dump a couple hundred of these down into Shandicity some night. Oh, they'd meet his price. They'd give him any damn thing he asked for—money, women, power, the whole damn world if that was what he wanted. It was going to be fun owning this ship.

In the meantime, though, this particular creature might be a nuisance.

Kaj Nevis took hold of a wing with each hand, and ripped it in half. Then, smiling, he went back the way he had come.

Haviland Tuf checked the instrumentation again, adjusted the fluid flow slightly. Satisfied, he folded his hands atop his stomach and took up his position by the vat. Within, opaque red-black liquid swirled and churned. Tuf felt a certain sense of vertigo watching it; that was a side-effect of the chronowarp, he knew. In that tiny tank, so small he could almost encompass it with his two large hands, vast primal energies were at play, and time itself was hurrying at his command. It filled him with a singular sense of awe and reverence.

The nutrient bath was thinning gradually, becoming almost translucent. Within, Tuf fancied that he could almost see a dark shape taking form, growing, growing visibly, ontogeny taking place before his eyes. Four paws, yes, he could see them. And a tail. That was most definitely a tail, Tuf decided.

He moved back to the instrumentation. It would not do for his creation to be vulnerable to the contagions that had killed Mushroom. He recalled the inoculation the tyrannosaur had received shortly before its unexpected and inconvenient release. No doubt there was a way to administer the appropriate antigens and prophylactics before completing the birth process. Haviland Tuf commenced to do just that.

The *Ark* was almost clean. Rica had sealed the barriers throughout three-quarters of the ship, and the sterilization program was proceeding with its own inexorable, automated logic. The landing deck, engineering, drive room, control tower, bridge, and nine other sectors showed a clean pale blue now on the telescreen status display. Only the great central axis and the main corridors and laboratory areas in close proximity to it were still shaded with that corrosive reddish hue that signified an atmosphere laced through with disease and death in all those myriad forms.

That was the way Rica Dawnstar wanted it. In those interconnected central sectors, another kind of process was working itself out with similar remorseless logic. And the final equation, she had no doubt, would leave her in sole and complete control of the seedship and all its knowledge, power, and wealth.

Now that her environment was clean and safe, Rica had gratefully removed her helmet. She had ordered up some food as well—a thick white slab of protein from some creature called a meatbeast that *Ark* had held in a succulent stasis for a millennium, which she washed down with a tall chilled glass of sweetwater that tasted slightly of Milidian honey. She enjoyed the snack as she watched the reports flow by.

Things had simplified themselves considerably down there. Jefri Lion was gone. A pity, in a way; he'd been harmless enough, although unbelievably naive. Celise Waan was out of it too, and, surprisingly, she'd managed to take the hellkittens out with her. Kaj Nevis had disposed of the hooded dracula.

Nobody left but Nevis and Tuf... and her. Rica grinned.

Tuf was no problem. He was busy making a cat. He could be taken care of easily, one way or the other. No, the only real obstacle now standing between Rica and the prize was Kaj Nevis and the Unquin battlesuit. Kaj was probably feeling real confident by this point. Good. Let him, she thought.

Rica Dawnstar finished her meal and licked the ends of her fingers. It was time for her zoology lesson, she figured. She called up reports on the three bio-weapons still out roaming the ship. If none of them would do, what the hey, she still had thirty-nine more in stasis just waiting for release. She could pick and choose her executioner.

A battlesuit? What she had was better than a hundred battlesuits.

When she had finished reading the zoological profiles, Rica Dawnstar was smiling broadly.

Forget the reserves. The only problem was making the right introductions. She checked out the geography up on the telescreen, and tried to consider just how devious a mind old Kaj Nevis had.

Not nearly devious enough, Rica suspected.

The damned corridors went on and on and never seemed to lead anywhere but to other corridors. His gauges showed that he had already begun drawing air from his third tank. Kaj Nevis knew he had to find the others quickly and get them out of the way so he could settle down to the problem of figuring out how this damned ship worked.

He was striding down one especially long, wide corridor when suddenly a kind of plastic stripe inset into the deck lit up under his feet.

Nevis paused, frowning.

The trace gleamed suggestively. It led straight ahead, and turned to the right at the next intersection. Nevis took a single step. The section of the trace behind him winked out. He was being pointed somewhere. Anittas had muttered something about leading people around the ship just before he'd had his little haircut. This was how he did it, then. Could the cybertech still be alive somehow, haunting the *Ark's* computer? Nevis doubted it.

Anittas had seemed pretty damned dead to him, and he had a lot of experience with making people dead. Who was this then? Dawnstar, of course. Had to be. The cybertech said he'd led her to the control room.

So where was she trying to lead him?

Kaj Nevis thought about it for an instant. In his suit, he felt nigh-on invulnerable. But why take chances? Besides, Dawnstar was a treacherous little bitch. She might very well just lead him around and around forever, until his air ran out.

He turned resolutely and stalked off, moving in the opposite direction from the seductive silver guideline. At the next turn, a green trace blazed to life, pointing to his left.

Kaj Nevis turned right.

The passage dead-ended in twin spiral escalators. When Nevis paused, one of them began to corkscrew up. He grimaced and walked down the unmoving one.

He descended three decks. At the bottom, the passageway was narrow and dark, and led off in two directions. Before Nevis could make a choice, there was a metallic scraping sound, and a sliding panel came out of a wall and closed off the right-hand corridor.

The bitch was still at it, he thought furiously. He looked down to the left. The corridor seemed to widen somewhat as it went, but it also got darker, and here and there it was broken by the hulks of old machinery. Nevis didn't like the looks of it.

If Dawnstar thought she could herd him along into a trap by closing a few doors, she had another thought coming. Nevis turned back to the sealed right-hand passage, drew back his foot, and kicked. The noise was deafening. He kicked again, and again, and then began to use his armored fists. He brought all the augmented exoskeletal strength of the battlesuit to bear.

Grinning, he stepped over what remained of the sliding panel into the dim, narrow passage that Dawnstar had tried to forbid to him. Underneath his feet was bare metal; the walls almost brushed his shoulders. It was an accessway of some sort, Nevis figured, but maybe it led to someplace important. Hell, it had to lead to someplace important. Why else had Dawnstar tried to keep him out of it?

His saucer-feet rang on the floorplates. He walked. It grew darker, but Kaj Nevis was determined. At one point, the passage made a sharp right-hand bend, almost too narrow for him to get through in the battlesuit. He had to squeeze past that point with his arms retracted and his legs half-bent.

Around the turn, a small square of light appeared up ahead. Nevis moved toward it. Then, abruptly, he stopped. What was that?

There was a black blob of some sort, floating in the air ahead of him. Kaj Nevis advanced cautiously.

The dark blob was small and round, barely the size of a man's fist. Nevis kept about a meter's distance from it, and studied it. Another creature—as damned ugly as the one that had dined on Jefri Lion, too, but weirder. It was brown and lumpy, and its hide looked like it was made of rocks. It looked almost like it was a rock, in fact; Nevis only knew it was alive because it had a mouth—a wet black hole in the rocky skin. Inside, the mouth was all moist and green and moving, and he could make out teeth, or what looked like teeth, except they looked metallic. He thought he saw a triple set of them, half-concealed by rubbery green flesh that pulsed slowly, steadily.

The weirdest thing was how incredibly still it was. At first, Nevis thought it was hovering in the air somehow. But then he came a little closer and saw that he'd been wrong. It was suspended in the center of an incredibly fine web, the strands so very thin they were all but invisible. In fact, the ends of them were invisible. Nevis could make out the thickest parts near the nexus where the creature sat pulsing, but the webbing seemed to get thinner and thinner as it spread, and you couldn't see where it attached to wall or floor or ceiling at all, no matter how hard you looked.

A spider, then. A weird one. The rocky appearance made him think it was some kind of silicon-based life. He'd heard of that, here and there. It was real god-damned rare. So he had some kind of silicon-spider here. Big deal.

Kaj Nevis moved closer. Damn, he thought. The web, or what he thought was the web... hell, the damned thing wasn't sitting on the web, it was part of the web. Those fine, thin, shiny web strands grew out of its body, he saw. He could barely make out the joinings. And there were more than he thought—hundreds of them, maybe thousands, most of them too thin to be seen from any kind of distance at all, but when you looked at them from the right angle, you could see the light gleaming off them, all silvery-faint.

Nevis edged back a step, uneasy despite the security of his armored suit, for no good reason that he could name. Behind the silicon-spider, light shone from the end of the accessway. There had to be something important there; that had to be why Rica Dawnstar had tried so hard to keep him away.

That was it, he thought to himself with grim satisfaction. That was probably the damned control room back there, and Rica was inside cowering, and this stupid spider was her last line of defense. It gave him the creeps, but what the hell else could it do to him?

Kaj Nevis shifted to his pincer arms and brought up the right pincer to snip the web.

The gleaming, bloodstained, serrated metal blades closed on the nearest visible strand, smoothly and easily. Gleaming, bloodstained, serrated shards of Unquish metal clattered down onto the floor plates.

The whole web began to vibrate.

Kaj Nevis stared at his lower right arm. Half of the pincer had been sheared off. Bile rose in his throat. He took a step backwards, another, a third, putting distance between him and the thing back there.

A thousand web strands, thinner than threads, became a thousand legs. They left a thousand holes in the metal walls when they moved, and they scored the floor with their lightest touch.

Nevis ran. He stayed ahead until he came to the narrow place where the passage turned.

He was still lowering the suit's massive arms and attempting to wedge himself through when the walking-web caught him. It bobbed as it moved toward him, suspended on countless invisible legs, its mouth pulsing. Nevis made terrified choking sounds. A thousand monomolecular silicon arms enveloped him.

Nevis brought up a huge powered hand to grab the head of the thing, to crush it to a pulp, but the arms were everywhere, waving, closing about him languidly. He pushed against them, and they cut through metal, flesh, bone. Blood came spurting from the stump of his wrist. He screamed, briefly.

Then the walking-web tightened its embrace.

A hairline crack appeared in the plastic of the empty vat. The kitten batted at it. The crack widened. Haviland Tuf reached in and caught up the kitten in one large hand, brought it close to his face. It was tiny, and a bit feeble yet: perhaps he had initiated birth too soon. He would be more careful on his next attempt, but this time the insecurity of his position and the need for constant vigilance lest wandering tyrannosaurs interrupt his work had resulted in a certain unseemly haste.

Nonetheless, he judged the trial a success. The kitten mewed. Haviland Tuf determined that it would be necessary to hand-feed it milk from a dropper, yet he had no doubt that he was equal to the task. The kitten's eyes were barely open, and its long gray fur was still wet from the fluids in which it had been so recently immersed. Had Mushroom ever truly been this small?

"I cannot name you Mushroom," he told his new companion solemnly. "Genetically you are one, it is true, yet Mushroom was Mushroom and you are you and I would not have you confused. I shall name you Chaos, a fitting companion to Havoc." The kitten moved in his palm and opened and closed one eye, as if it understood; but then, as Tuf knew, all cats have a touch of psi.

He looked about him. Nothing more remained to be done here. Perhaps it was time to search out his erstwhile and unworthy companions, and attempt to arrive at some sort of mutually beneficial accommodation. Cradling Chaos in his arm, he set off in search of them.

It was all over but the shouting, Rica Dawnstar decided when Nevis's red light vanished from the screen. Now it was down to her and Tuf, which meant that for all practical purposes, she was mistress of the *Ark*.

What the hell would she do with it, she wondered? Hard to say. Sell it to some arms consortium or the highest-bidding world? Doubtful. She didn't trust anyone with quite that much power. Power corrupts, after all. Maybe she should keep it, run it. She was corrupt enough already, she ought to be immune. But it would get awfully lonely living in this morgue alone. She could hire a crew, of course—bring aboard friends, lovers, flunkies. Only how could she trust them? Rica frowned. Well, it was a knotty problem, but she had a long, long time to get a handle on it. She'd think about it later.

Right now, she had a more immediate problem to consider. Tuf had just left the central cloning chamber and was wandering out into the corridors. What was she going to do about him?

She studied the display. The walking-web was still in its lair, snug and warm, probably still feeding. The rolleram, all four metric tons of it, was down in the main corridor of deck six, rolling back and forth like some kind of berserk living cannonball of enormous size, caroming off walls and searching in vain for something organic to roll over, crush, and digest.

The tyrannosaur was on the right level. What was it up to? Rica punched for more detail, and smiled. If her readouts could be believed, it was eating. Eating what? For a moment she drew a blank. Then it dawned on her. It had to be gulping down what remained of old Jefri Lion and the hooded dracula. The location seemed about right.

All things considered, it was pretty close to Tuf. Unfortunately, when it began to move again, it headed off in the wrong direction. Maybe she should arrange a meeting.

She couldn't underestimate Tuf, though. He had already escaped the reptile once; he might be able to do it again. And even if she maneuvered him onto the same level as the rolleram, the same problem presented itself. Tuf had a certain native cunning. She'd never be able to lead old Tufty by the nose the way she had with Nevis. He was too subtle. She recalled the games they'd played aboard the *Cornucopia*. Tuf had won all of them.

Release a few more bio-weapons? Easily done.

Rica Dawnstar hesitated. Ah, hell, she thought, there was an easier way. It was time she took a hand directly.

Hooked over one arm of the captain's throne was a thin coronet of iridescent metal that Rica had earlier removed from a storage cabinet. She picked it up, ran it under a scanner briefly to check the circuitry, and slid it over her head at a rakish angle. Then she donned her helmet, sealed up her suit, and took out her needler. Once more into the breach.

Wandering about in the corridors of the *Ark*, Haviland Tuf found a vehicle of sorts—a small, open, three-wheeled cart. He had been standing for some time, and before that had been hiding underneath a table. He was only too glad to be seated. He drove along at a smooth, steady, comfortable speed, sitting back against the cushion and looking straight ahead. Chaos rode in his lap.

Tuf drove through several kilometers of corridor. He was a cautious and methodical driver. At every intersection he stopped, looked right, looked left, and weighed his choices before proceeding. He turned twice, as dictated partly by stern logic and partly by sheerest whim, but stayed for the most part to the widest corridors. Once he stopped and dismounted to explore a set of doors that seemed interesting. He saw nothing, encountered no one. Now and again, Chaos moved about in his lap.

Then Rica Dawnstar appeared up ahead of him.

Haviland Tuf stopped his cart in the center of a great intersection. He looked right, and blinked several times. He looked left. Then he stared straight ahead, hands folded on top of his stomach, and watched as she came toward him slowly.

She stopped about five meters away, down the corridor. “Out for a drive?” she asked. In her right hand she carried her familiar needler. In her left hand was a tangle of straps that trailed down onto the deck.

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “I have been occupied for some time. Where are the others?”

“Dead,” Rica Dawnstar said. “Deceased. Gone. Eliminated from the game. We’re the end of it, Tuf.”

“A familiar situation,” Tuf said flatly.

“This is the last game, Tuf,” Rica Dawnstar said. “No rematch. And this time I win.”

Tuf stroked Chaos and said nothing.

“Tuf,” she said amiably, “you’re the innocent in all this. I’ve got nothing against you. Take your ship and go.”

“If you refer to the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*,” said Haviland Tuf, “might I remind you that it suffered grave damage which has not yet been repaired?”

“Take some other ship, then.”

“I think not,” Tuf said. “My claim to the *Ark* is perhaps inferior to that of Celise Waan, Jefri Lion, Kaj Nevis, and Anittas, yet you tell me that all of them are deceased, and my claim is surely as good as your own.”

“Not quite,” said Rica Dawnstar. She raised her needler. “This gives my claim the edge.”

Haviland Tuf looked down at the kitten in his lap. “Let this be your first lesson in the hard ways of the universe,” he said loudly. “What matters fairness, when one party has a gun and one does not? Brute violence rules everywhere, and intelligence and good intent are trampled upon.” He stared back at Rica Dawnstar. “Madam,” he said, “I acknowledge your advantage. Yet I must protest. The deceased members of our group admitted me to a full share in this venture before we came aboard the *Ark*. To my knowledge, you were never similarly included. Therefore I enjoy a legal advantage over you.” He raised a single finger. “Furthermore, I would advance the proposition that ownership is conferred by use, and the ability to use. The *Ark* should, optimally, be under the command of the person who has demonstrated the talent, intellect, and will to make the most effective use of its myriad capabilities. I submit that I am that person.”

Rica Dawnstar laughed. “Oh, really?”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. He cupped Chaos in his hand, and lifted the kitten for Rica Dawnstar to see. “Behold my proof. I have explored this ship, and mastered the cloning secrets of the vanished Earth Imperials. It was an awesome and intoxicating experience, and one I am anxious to replicate. In fact, I have decided to give up the crass calling of the merchant, for the nobler profession of ecological engineer. I would hope you would not attempt to stand in my way. Rest assured, I will furnish you with transport back to ShanDellor and see to it personally that you receive every fraction of the fee promised to you by Jefri Lion and the others.”

Rica Dawnstar shook her head in disbelief. “You’re priceless, Tuffy,” she said. She stepped forward, spinning her needler around her finger. “So you think you ought to get the ship because you can use it, and I can’t?”

“You have outlined the very heart of it,” Tuf said approvingly.

Rica laughed again. “Here, I don’t need this,” she said lightly. She tossed her needler at him.

Tuf reached up and snatched it out of the air. "It would seem that my claim has been unexpectedly and decisively strengthened. Now I may threaten to shoot you."

"But you won't," Rica said. "Rules, Tuf. You play the game by the rules. I'm the kid who likes to kick over the board." She slung the tangled straps she had been dragging over her shoulder. "You know what I've been up to while you've been cloning yourself a kitten?"

"Obviously I do not," said Haviland Tuf.

"Obviously," Rica echoed sardonically. "I've been up on the bridge, Tuf, playing the computer and learning just about everything I need to know about the EEC and its *Ark*."

Tuf blinked. "Indeed."

"There's a swell telescreen up there," she said. "Think of it like a big gaming board, Tuf. I've been watching every move. The red pieces, that was you and the rest of them. Me, too. And the black pieces. The bio-weapons, as the system likes to call them. I like the sound of monsters better myself. Shorter. Less formal."

"Fraught with strong connotations, however," Tuf put in.

"Oh, certainly. But to the point. We got through the defense sphere, we even handled the plague defense, but Anittas got himself killed and decided to get a little revenge, so he kicked loose the monster defense. And I sat up on top and watched the red and the black chase each other. But something was missing, Tuf. Know what?"

"I suspect this to be a rhetorical question," Tuf said.

"Indeed," mocked Rica Dawnstar, with laughter. "The greens were missing, Tuf! The system was programmed to show intruders in red, its own bio-weapons in black, and authorized *Ark* personnel in green. There were no greens, of course. Only that got me thinking, Tuf. The monster defense was obviously a last resort fallback position, sure. But was it intended for use only when the ship was derelict, abandoned?"

Tuf folded his hands. "I think not. The existence of the telescreen display capacity implies the existence of someone to watch said display. Moreover, if the system was coded to display ship's personnel, intruders, and monstrous defenders simultaneously and in variant colors, then the possibility of all three groupings being aboard and active at the same time must have been considered."

"Yes," said Rica Dawnstar. "Now, the key question."

In the corridor behind her, Haviland Tuf glimpsed motion. "Excuse me," he began.

Rica waved him quiet. "If they were prepared to turn loose these caged horrors of theirs to repel boarders in an emergency, how did they prevent their own people from getting killed?"

"An interesting quandary," Tuf admitted. "I eagerly anticipate learning the answer to this puzzle. I fear I will have to defer that pleasure, however." He cleared his throat. "Far be it from me to interrupt such a fascinating discourse. I feel obliged to point out, however..." The deck shook.

"Yes," Rica said, grinning.

"I feel obliged to point out," Tuf repeated, "that a rather large carnivorous dinosaur has appeared in the corridor behind you, and is presently attempting to sneak up on us. He is not doing a very good job of it."

The tyrannosaur roared.



Rica Dawnstar was undisturbed. “Really?” she said laughing. “Surely you don’t expect me to fall for the old there’s-a-dinosaur-behind-you gambit. I expected better of you, Tuf.”

“I protest! I am completely sincere.” Tuf turned on the motor of his cart. “Witness the speed with which I have activated my vehicle, in order to flee the creature’s approach. How can you doubt me, Rica Dawnstar? Surely you hear the beast’s thunderous approach, the sound of its roaring?”

“What roaring is that?” Rica asked. “No, seriously, Tuf, I was telling you something. The answer. We forgot one little piece of the puzzle.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. The tyrannosaur was moving toward them at an alarming velocity. It was in a foul temper, and its roaring made it difficult to hear Rica Dawnstar.

“The Ecological Engineering Corps were more than cloners, Tuf. They were military scientists. They were genetic engineers of the first order. They could recreate the lifeforms of hundreds of worlds and bring them alive in their vats, but that was not all they could do. They could also tinker with the DNA itself, change those lifeforms, redesign them to suit their own purposes!”

“Of course,” Tuf said. “Pardon me, but now I fear I must run away from the dinosaur.” The tyrannosaur was ten meters behind Rica. It paused. Its lashing tail struck the wall, and Tuf’s cart shook to the impact. Saliva was dripping from its fangs, and its stunted forelegs clawed the air with unseemly eagerness.

“That would be very rude,” Rica said. “You see, Tuf, that’s the answer. These bio-weapons, these monsters—they were held in stasis for a thousand years, likely for longer than that. But they weren’t ordinary monsters. They were cloned for a special purpose, to defend the ship against intruders, and they had been genetically manipulated to just that end.” The tyrannosaur took one step, two, three, and now it was directly behind her, its shadow casting her in darkness.

“How manipulated?” asked Haviland Tuf.

“I thought you’d never ask,” said Rica Dawnstar. The tyrannosaur leaned forward, roared, opened its massive jaws, engulfed her head. “Psionics,” she said from between its teeth.

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“A simple psionic capacity,” Rica announced from inside the tyrannosaur’s jaws. She reached up and picked something from between its teeth, with a tsking sound. “Some of the monsters were close to mindless, all instinct. They got a basic instinctual aversion. The more complex monsters were made psionically submissive. The instruments of control were psi-boosters. Pretty little things, like crowns. I’m wearing one now. It doesn’t confer psi powers or anything dramatic like that. It just makes some of the monsters avoid me, and other ones obey me.” She ducked out of the dinosaur’s mouth, and slapped the side of his jaw soundly. “Down, boy,” she said.

The tyrannosaur roared, and lowered its head. Rica Dawnstar untangled her harness and saddle and began to strap it into place. “I’ve been controlling him all the time we’ve been talking,” she said conversationally. “I called him here. He’s hungry. He ate Lion, but Lion was small, and dead, too, and he hasn’t had anything else for a thousand years.”

Haviland Tuf looked at the needler in his hand. It seemed worse than useless. He was a poor shot in any case. “I would be most glad to clone him a stegosaurus.”

“No thanks,” Rica said as she tightened the harness, “you can’t get out of the game now. You wanted to play, Tuffy, and I’m afraid you lose all around. You should have gone away when I offered you the chance. Let’s review your claim, shall we? Lion and Nevis and the others offered you a full share, yes, but of what? I’m afraid

now you get a full share, whether you want one or not—a share of everything they got. So much for your legal argument. As for your moral claim on the basis of superior utility,” she slapped the dinosaur again, and grinned, “I think I’ve demonstrated that I can put the *Ark* to more effective use than you can. Down a little more.” The beast leaned over still further, and Rica Dawnstar vaulted into the saddle on its neck. “Up!” she barked. It stood.

“Therefore we put legality and morality aside, and again return to violence,” Tuf said.

“I’m afraid so,” Rica said from on top of her tyrant lizard. It came forward slowly, as if she were feeling her way. “Don’t say I didn’t play fair, Tuf. I’ve got the dinosaur, but you’ve got my needler. Maybe you’ll get a lucky hit. So we’re both armed.” She laughed. “Only I’m armed to the teeth.”

Haviland Tuf stood and tossed back her needler, overhand. It was a good throw. Rica leaned out to one side, caught it.

“What’s this?” she said. “Giving up?”

“Your scruples about fairness have impressed me,” said Tuf. “I would take no advantage. You have a claim, I have a claim. You have an animal.” He stroked his kitten. “I have an animal, too. Now you have a gun.” He activated his cart and backed away from the intersection, rolling quickly down the corridor behind him, or at least as quickly as he could go in reverse.

“Have it your way,” Rica Dawnstar said. She was done playing. She felt a little sad. Tuf was turning his cart about to flee headlong instead of backwards. The tyrannosaur opened its mouth wide, and saliva ran from half-meter-long teeth. It screamed a scream that was pure red primal hunger a million years old, and came roaring down on him.

It roared down the corridor and into the intersection.

Twenty meters away along the cross-corridor, the minimind of the plasma cannon took cognizance of the fact that something exceeding the programmed target dimensions had entered the fire zone. There was the faintest of clicks.

Haviland Tuf was turned away from the glare; he put his body between Chaos and the heat and awful noise. It lasted only an instant, fortunately, although the smell of burnt reptile would linger in that spot for years, and sections of the deck and walls would need to be replaced.

“I had a gun, too,” said Haviland Tuf to his kitten.

Later, much later, when the *Ark* was clean and he and Havoc and Chaos were settled comfortably into the captain’s suite, and he had moved all his personal effects and taken care of all the bodies and done what repairs he could and figured out how to placate the incredibly noisy creature that lived down on deck six, Haviland Tuf began to search the ship methodically. On the second day, he found a store of clothing, but the men and women of the EEC had been shorter than he, and more slender, so none of the uniforms fit.

He did, however, find a hat he took rather a liking to. It was a green duckbilled cap, and it fit snugly atop his bald, milk-white head. On the front of it, in gold, was the theta that had been the sigil of the corps.

“Haviland Tuf,” he said to himself in the mirror, “ecological engineer.” It had a certain ring to it, he thought.

# Tuf Voyaging: Loaves and Fishes

Her name was Tolly Mune, but they called her all sorts of things.

Those entering her domain for the first time used her title with a certain amount of deference. She had been Portmaster for more than forty standard years, and Deputy Portmaster before that, a colorful fixture in the great orbital community that was officially known as the Port of S'uthlam. Downstairs, planetside, the office was only another box on the bureaucratic flowcharts, but up in orbit the Portmaster was foreman, chief executive, judge, mayor, arbiter, legislator, mastermech, and head cop all in one. So they called her the P.M.

The Port had started small and grown over the centuries, as S'uthlam's swelling population made the world an increasingly important market and a key link in the network of interstellar trade for the sector.

At port center was the station itself, a hollow asteroid some sixteen kilometers in diameter, with its parks and shops and dormitories and warehouses and labs. Six predecessor stations, each larger than the last and each now outdated, the oldest built three centuries back and no bigger than a good-sized starship, clung to the Spiderhome like fat metal buds on a stone potato.

Spiderhome was what they called it now, because it sat at the center of the web, an intricate silver-metal net cast across the dark of space. Radiating from the station in all directions were sixteen great spurs. The newest was four kilometers long, and building; seven of the originals (the eighth had been destroyed in an explosion) stabbed twelve kays out into space. Inside the great tubes were the port's industrial zones—warehouses, factories, shipyards, customs gates, and embarkation centers, plus docking facilities and repair bays for every class of starship known in the sector. Long pneumatic tubetrains ran through the center of the spurs, moving cargo and passengers from gate to gate and to the crowded, noisy, bustling nexus in Spiderhome, and the elevator downstairs.

Other, lesser tubes branched from the spurs, and still lesser passages from them, crossing and recrossing the void, binding everything together in a pattern that grew in intricacy each year, as more and more additions were made.

And between the web strands were the flies—shuttles going up and down from the surface of S'uthlam with consignments too big or too volatile for the elevator, mining ships coming in with ore and ice from the Frags, food freighters from the terraformed farming asteroids inward they called the Larder, and all manner of interstellar traffic: luxurious Transcorp liners, traders from worlds as close as Vandeen or as distant as Caissa and Newholme, merchant fleets from Kimdiss, warships from Bastion and Citadel, even alien starcraft, Free Hruun and Raheemai and gethsoids and other, stranger species. They all came to the Port of S'uthlam and were welcome.

The ones who lived in Spiderhome, who worked in the bars and mess halls, moved the cargos, bought and sold, repaired and fueled the ships, they called themselves spinnerets as a badge of honor. To them, and to the flies who came calling often enough to be regulars, Tolly Mune was Ma Spider—irascible, foul-mouthed, rough-humored, frighteningly competent, omnipresent, indestructible, as big as a force of nature and twice as mean. Some of them, those who had crossed her or earned her displeasure, had no love for the Portmaster; to them she was the Steel Widow.

She was a big-boned, well-muscled, homely woman, as gaunt as any honest S'uthlamese but so tall (almost two meters) and so broad (those shoulders) that she had been considered something of a freak downstairs. Her face was as creased and comfortable as old leather. Her age was forty-three local, nearing ninety standard, but she didn't look an hour over sixty; she attributed that to a life in orbit. "Gravity's the thing that ages you," she would say. Except for a few starclass spas and hospitals and tourist hotels in the Spiderhome, and the big liners with their gravity grids, the Port turned in endless weightlessness, and free fall was Tolly Mune's natural element.

Her hair was silver and iron, bound up tightly when she worked, but off-duty it flowed behind her like a comet's tail, following her every motion. And she did move. That big, gaunt, raw-boned body of hers was firm and graceful; she swam through the spokes of the web and the corridors, halls, and parks of Spiderhome as fluidly as a fish through water, her long arms and thin, muscular legs pushing, touching, propelling her along. She never wore shoes; her feet were almost as clever as her hands.

Even out in naked space, where veteran spinnerets wore cumbersome suits and moved awkwardly along tether lines, Tolly Mune chose mobility and form-fitting skinthins. Skinthins gave only minimal protection against the hard radiation of S'ulstar, but Tolly took a perverse pride in the deep blue-black cast of her skin, and swallowed anti-carcinoma pills by the handful each morning rather than opt for slow, clumsy safety. Out in the bright hard black between the web strands, she was the master. She wore airjets at wrist and ankle, and no one was more expert in their use. She zipped freely from fly to fly, checking here, visiting there, attending all the meetings, supervising the work, welcoming important flies, hiring, firing, solving any problem that might arise.

Up in her web, Portmaster Tolly Mune, Ma Spider, the Steel Widow, was everything she had ever wanted to be, equal to every task, and more than satisfied with the cards she'd drawn.

Then came a night-cycle when she was buzzed from a sound sleep by her Deputy Portmaster. "It better be goddamned important," she said when she stared at him over her vidscreen.

"You better access Control," he said.

"Why?"

"Fly coming in," he said. "Big fly."

Tolly Mune scowled. "You wouldn't dare wake me up for nothing. Let's have it."

"A *real* big fly," he stressed. "You have to see this. It's the biggest damn fly I've ever laid eyes on. Ma, no fooling, this thing is thirty kays long."

"Puling hell," she said, in the last uncomplicated moment of her life, before she made the acquaintance of Haviland Tuf.

She swallowed a handful of bright blue anti-carcinogens, washed them down with a healthy squeeze from a bulb of beer, and studied the holo apparition that stood before her. "Large ship you've got there," she said casually. "What the hell is it?"

"The *Ark* is a biowar seedship of the Ecological Engineering Corps," replied Haviland Tuf.

"The EEC?" she said. "You don't say."

"Must I repeat myself, Portmaster Mune?"

"This is the Ecological Engineering Corps of the old Federal Empire, now?" she asked. "Based on Prometheus? Specialists in cloning, biowar—the ones who custom-tailored all kinds of ecological catastrophe?" She watched Tuf's face as she spoke. He dominated the center of her small, cramped, disorderly, and too-seldom-visited office in Spiderhome, his holographic projection standing among the drifting, weightless clutter like some huge white ghost. From time to time a balled up sheet of paper floated through him.

Tuf was big. Tolly Mune had met flies who liked to magnify themselves in holo, so they came across as bigger than they were. Maybe that was what this Haviland Tuf was doing. Somehow she thought not, though; he didn't

seem the sort. Which meant he really did stand some two-and-a-half meters tall, a good half-meter above the tallest spinneret she'd ever met. And that one had been as much a freak as Tolly herself; S'uthlamese were a small people—a matter of nutrition and genetics.

Tuf's face gave absolutely nothing away. He interlocked his long fingers calmly on top of the swollen bulge of his stomach. "The very same," he replied. "Your historical erudition is to be commended."

"Why, thank you," she said amiably. "Correct me if I'm wrong, though, but being historically erudite and all, I seem to recall that the Federal Empire collapsed, oh, a thousand years ago. And the EEC vanished too—disbanded, recalled to Prometheus or Old Earth, destroyed in combat, gone from human space, whatever. Of course, the Prometheans still have a lot of the old biotech, it's said. We don't get many Prometheans way out here, so I couldn't say for sure. But they're a bit jealous about sharing any of their knowledge, I've heard. So, let me see if I've got this straight. You've got a thousand-year-old EEC seedship there, still functional, which you just happened to find one day, and you're the only person on board and the ship is yours?"

"Correct," said Haviland Tuf.

She grinned. "And I'm the Empress of the Crab Nebula."

Tuf's face remained expressionless. "I fear I have been connected to the wrong person then. I wished to speak to the Portmaster of S'uthlam."

She took another squeeze of beer. "I'm the puling Portmaster," she snapped. "Enough of this goddamned nonsense, Tuf. You're sitting out there in a thing that looks suspiciously like a warship and happens to be about thirty times the size of the largest so-called dreadnaught in our so-called Planetary Defense Flotilla, and you're making one hell of a lot of people extremely nervous. Half of the groundworms in the big hotels think you're an alien come to steal our air and eat our children, and the other half are certain that you're a special effect we've thoughtfully provided for their amusement. Hundreds of them are renting suits and vacuum sleds right now, and in a couple of hours they'll be crawling all over your hull. And my people don't know what the hell to make of you either. So come to the goddamned point, Tuf. What do you want?"

"I am disappointed," said Tuf. "I have led myself here at great difficulty to consult the spinnerets and cybertechs of Port S'uthlam, whose expertise is far famed and whose reputation for honest, ethical dealing is second to none. I did not think to encounter unexpected truculence and unfounded suspicions. I require certain alterations and repairs, nothing more."

Tolly Mune was only half listening. She stared at the feet of the holographic projection, where a small, hairy, black-and-white thing had suddenly appeared. "Tuf," she said, her throat a little dry, "excuse me, but some kind of goddamned vermin is rubbing up against your leg." She sucked at her beer.

Haviland Tuf bent and scooped up the animal. "Cats may not properly be referred to as vermin, Portmaster Mune," he said. "Indeed, the feline is an implacable foe of most pests and parasites, and this is but one of the many fascinating and beneficial attributes of this admirable species. Are you aware that humanity once worshipped cats as gods? This is Havoc."

The cat began to make a deep rumbling noise as Tuf cradled it in the crook of one massive arm and began to apply long, regular strokes to its black-and-white hair.

"Oh," she said. "A... pet, is that the term? The only animals on S'uthlam are food stock, but we do get visitors who keep pets. Don't let your... cat, was it?"

"Indeed," said Tuf.

“Well, don’t let it out of your ship. I remember once when I was Deputy P.M., we had the damndest... some brain-damaged fly lost his puling pet at the same time this alien envoy was visiting, and our security crews mistook one for the other. You wouldn’t believe how upset everyone got.”

“People are often overexcitable,” said Haviland Tuf.

“What kind of alterations and repairs were you talking about?”

Tuf responded with a ponderous shrug. “Some small things, no doubt most easily accomplished by experts as proficient as your own. As you have pointed out, the *Ark* is indeed a most ancient vessel, and the vicissitudes of war and centuries of neglect have left their marks. Entire decks and sectors are dark and dysfunctional, damaged beyond the ship’s admittedly admirable capacities for self-repair. I wish to have these portions of the craft repaired and restored to full function.

“Additionally, the *Ark*, as you might know from your study of history, once carried a crew of two hundred. It is sufficiently automated so that I have been able to operate it by myself, but not without certain inconveniences, it must be admitted. The central command center, located on the tower bridge, is a wearisome daily commute from my living quarters, and I have found the bridge itself to be inefficiently designed for my purposes, requiring me to walk constantly from one work station to the next in order to perform the multitude of complex duties required to run the ship. Certain other functions require me to leave the bridge entirely and journey hither and yon about the immensity of the vessel. Still other tasks I have found impossible to accomplish, since they would seem to require my simultaneous presence in two or more locations kilometers apart on different decks. Near to my living quarters is a small, yet comfortable auxiliary communications room that appears to be fully functional. I would like your cybertechs to reprogram and redesign the command systems so that in future I will be able to accomplish anything that might need accomplishing from there, without the need of making the exhausting daily trek to the bridge—indeed, without the need of leaving my seat.

“Beyond these major tasks, I have in mind only a few further alterations. Some minor modernizations, perhaps. The addition of a kitchen with a full array of spices and flavorings, and a large recipe library, in order that I might dine on food somewhat more varied and interesting to the palate than the grimly nutritious military fare the *Ark* is now programmed to provide. A large stock of beers and wines and the mechanisms necessary to ferment my own in future, during lengthy deep-space voyagings. The augmentation of my existing entertainment facilities through the acquisition of some books, holoplays, and music chips dating from this last millennium. A few new security programs. Other trifling minor changes. I will provide you with a list.”

Tolly Mune listened to him with astonishment. “Goddamn,” she said when he had finished. “You really do have a derelict EEC seedship, don’t you?”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. A little stiffly, she thought.

She grinned. “My apologies. I’ll scramble a crew of spinnerets and cybertechs, scream ‘em right over to have a look, and we’ll get you an estimate. Don’t hold your goddamned breath, though. That big a ship, it’ll take quite a while before they begin to sort things out. I’d better post some security, too, or you’ll have all kinds of curiosity seekers tramping through your halls and stealing souvenirs.” She looked his hologram up and down thoughtfully. “I’ll need you to give my crew a briefing and point them in the right direction. After that, it’d be better if you got out from underfoot and let them run amuck. You can’t bring that damned monstrosity into the web, it’s too puling big. You got any way of getting out of there?”

“The *Ark* is equipped with a full complement of shuttlecraft, all operational,” said Haviland Tuf, “but I have scant desire to leave the comforts of my quarters. Certainly my ship is large enough so that my presence will not seriously inconvenience your crews.”

“Hell, you know that and I know that, but they work better if they don’t think someone’s looking over their shoulders,” said Tolly Mune. “Besides, I’d think you’d want to get out of that can a bit. You’ve been shut up alone for how long?”

“Several standard months,” Tuf admitted, “although I am not strictly alone. I have enjoyed the company of my cats, and have pleasantly occupied myself learning the capabilities of the *Ark* and expanding my knowledge of ecological engineering. Still, I will concede your point that perhaps a bit of recreation is in order. The opportunity to sample a new cuisine is always to be relished.”

“Wait’ll you try S’uthlamese beer! And the port has other diversions as well—exercise facilities, hotels, sports, drug dens, sensoria, sex parlors, live theater, gaming halls.”

“I have some small skill at certain games,” Tuf said.

“And then there’s tourism,” Tolly Mune said. “You can just take the tubetrain down the elevator to the surface, and all the districts of S’uthlam are yours to explore.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “You have intrigued me, Portmaster Mune. I fear I am of a curious temperament. It is my great weakness. Unfortunately, my funds preclude a lengthy stay.”

“Don’t worry about that,” she replied, smiling. “We’ll just put it on your repair bill, settle up afterwards. Now, just hop in your goddamned shuttle and bring yourself to, let’s see... dock nine-eleven is vacant. See the Spiderhome first, then take the train downstairs. You ought to be a goddamned sensation. You’re on the newsfeeds already, you know. The groundworms and flies will be crawling all over you.”

“A decaying piece of meat might find this prospect appealing,” said Haviland Tuf. “I do not.”

“Well then,” the Portmaster said, “go incognito!”

The steward on the tubetrain wheeled out a tray of beverages shortly after Haviland Tuf had strapped himself in for the trip downstairs. Tuf had sampled S’uthlamese beer in the restaurants of Spiderhome, and found it thin, watery, and notably devoid of taste. “Perhaps your offerings include some malt products brewed offworld,” he said. “If so, I would gladly purchase one.”

“Certainly,” the steward said. He reached into the cart and produced a squeeze bulb full of dark brown liquid, bearing a cursive logo Tuf recognized as Shan-Dellor script. A card plate was offered, and Tuf punched in his code number. The S’uthlamese currency was the calorie; the charge for the bulb amounted to almost four-and-a-half times the actual caloric content of the beer, however. “Import costs,” the steward explained.

Tuf sucked his bulb with ponderous dignity as the tubetrain fell down the elevator toward the surface of the planet below. It was not a comfortable ride. Haviland Tuf had found the cost of starclass accommodations prohibitively high, and had therefore settled for premiere class, the next best available, only to discover himself crammed into a seat seemingly designed for a S’uthlamese child, and a small S’uthlamese child at that, in a row of eight similar seats divided by a narrow central aisle.

Sheer chance had given him the aisle seat, fortunately; without such placement, Tuf entertained grave doubts about whether he could have made the voyage at all. But even here, it was impossible to move without brushing against the bare thin arm of the woman to his left, a contact that Tuf found distasteful in the extreme. When he sat in his accustomed manner, the crown of his head bumped against the ceiling, so he was forced to hunker down, and tolerate a most annoying tightness in his neck as a result. Farther back on the tubetrain, Tuf understood, were the first-, second-, and third-class accommodations. He resolved to avoid experiencing their dubious comforts at all costs.

When the descent commenced, the majority of the passengers pulled privacy hoods down over their heads, and punched up the personal diversion of their choice. The offerings, Haviland Tuf noted, included three different musical programs, a historical drama, two erotic fantasy loops, a business interface, something listed as a “geometric pavane,” and direct stimulation to the pleasure center of the brain. Tuf considered investigating the geometric pavane, until discovering that the privacy hood was too small for his head, his skull being unduly large and long by S’uthlamese standards.

“You the big fly?” asked a voice from across the aisle.

Tuf looked over. The S’uthlamese were sitting in silent isolation, their heads enveloped by their dark eyeless helmets. Aside from the cluster of stewards far at the rear of the car, the only passenger still in the world of reality was the man in the aisle seat across from him one row back. Long, braided hair, copper-colored skin, and plump, fleshy cheeks branded the man as much an offworlder as Tuf himself. “The big fly, right?”

“I am Haviland Tuf, an ecological engineer.”

“I knew you were a fly,” the man said. “Me, too. I’m Ratch Norren, from Vandeen.” He held out a hand.

Haviland Tuf looked at it. “I am familiar with the ancient ritual of shaking hands, sir. I have noted that you are carrying no weapons. It is my understanding that the custom was originally intended to establish this fact. I am unarmed as well. You may now withdraw your hand, if you please.”

Ratch Norren grinned and pulled back his arm. “You’re a funny duck,” he said.

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I am neither a funny duck nor a large fly. I would think this much obvious to any person of normal human intelligence. Perhaps standards are different on Vandeen.”

Ratch Norren reached up and pinched his own cheek. It was a round, full, fleshy cheek, covered with red powder, and he gave it a good strong pinch. Tuf decided this was either a particularly perverse tic or a Vandeeni gesture the significance of which escaped him. “The fly stuff,” the man said, “that’s just spinneret talk. An idiom. They call all us offworlders flies.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf.

“You are the one who arrived in that giant warship, right? The one who was on all the newsfeeds?” Norren did not wait for an answer. “Why are you wearing the wig?”

“I am traveling incognito,” said Haviland Tuf, “though it appears that you have penetrated my disguise, sir.”

Norren pinched his cheek again. “Call me Ratch,” he said. He looked Tuf up and down. “Pretty feeb disguise, though. Wig or no wig, you’re still a big fat giant with a complexion like a mushroom.”

“In future, I shall employ makeup,” said Tuf. “Fortunately, none of the native S’uthlamese have displayed your perspicacity.”

“They’re just too polite to mention it. That’s how it is on S’uthlam. There’s so many of them, you know? Most of them can’t afford any kind of real privacy, so they go in for a lot of pretend privacy. They won’t take any notice of you in public unless you want to be noticed.”

Haviland Tuf said, “The inhabitants of Port S’uthlam that I encountered did not seem unduly reticent, nor overburdened with elaborate etiquette.”



“The spinnerets are different,” Ratch Norren replied offhandedly. “Things are looser up there. Say, let me give you a little advice. Don’t sell that ship of yours here, Tuf. Take it to Vandeen. We’ll give you a lot better price for it.”

“It is not my intention to sell the *Ark*,” Tuf replied.

“No need to dickerdaddle with me,” Norren said. “I don’t have the authority to buy it anyhow. Or the standards. Wish I did.” He laughed. “You just go to Vandeen and get in touch with our Board of Coordinators. You won’t regret it.” He glanced about, as if he were checking to see that the stewards were far away and the other passengers still dreaming behind their privacy helmets, and then dropped his voice to a conspiratorial whisper. “Besides, even if the price wasn’t a factor, I hear that warship of yours has got nightmare-class power, right? You don’t want to give the S’uthlamese power like that. No lying, I love ‘em, I really do, come here regularly on business, and they’re good people, when you get one or two of them alone, but there are so *many* of them, Tuffer, and they just breed and breed and breed, like goddamned rodents. You’ll see. A couple centuries back, there was a big local war just on account of that. The suthies were planting colonies all over the damned place, grabbing every piece of real estate they could, and if anybody else happened to be living there, the suthies would just outbreed ‘em. We finally put an end to it.”

“We?” said Haviland Tuf.

“Vandeen, Skrymir, Henry’s World, and Jazbo, officially, but we had help from a lot of neutrals, right? The peace treaty restricted the S’uthlamese to their own solar system. But you give them that hellship of yours, Tuf, and maybe they break free again.”

“I had understood the S’uthlamese to be a singularly honorable and ethical people.”

Ratch Norren pinched his cheek again. “Honorable, ethical, sure, sure. Great folks to cut deals with, and the swirls—know some blistery erotic tricks. I tell you, I got a hundred suthie friends, and I love every one of ‘em. But between them, my hundred friends must have maybe a thousand children. These people breed, that’s the problem, Tuf, you listen to Ratch. They’re all liferoos, right?”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “And what, might I inquire, is a liferoo?”

“Liferoos,” Norren repeated impatiently. “Anti-entropists, kiddie-culters, helix-humpers, genepool puddlers. Religious fanatics, Tuffer, religious crazies.” He might have said more, but the steward was wheeling the beverage cart back down the aisle just then. Norren sat back in his seat.

Haviland Tuf raised a long pale finger to check the steward’s progress. “I will have another bulb, if you please,” he said. He hunched over in silence for the remainder of the trip, sucking thoughtfully on his beer.

Tolly Mune floated in her cluttered apartment, drinking and thinking. One wall of the room was a huge vidscreen, six meters long and three meters high. Customarily, Tolly keyed it to display scenic panoramas; she liked the effect of having a window overlooking the high, cool mountains of Skrymir, or the dry canyons of Vandeen with their swift Whitewater rivers, or the endless city lights of S’uthlam itself spreading across the night, with the shining silver tower that was the base of the elevator ascending up and up and up into the dark, moonless sky, soaring high above even starclass tower-homes four kays tall.

But tonight she had a starscape spread across her wall, and against it was outlined the grim metallic majesty of the immense starship called *Ark*. Even a screen as large as hers—one of the perks of her status as Portmaster—could not really convey the ship’s sheer size.

And the things it represented—the hope, the threat—were immeasurably bigger than the *Ark* itself, Tolly Mune knew.

Off to her side, she heard the buzzing of her comm unit. The computer would not have disturbed her unless it was the call she had been waiting for. “I’ll take it,” she said. The stars blurred, the *Ark* dissolved, and the vidscreen ran with liquid colors for an instant before resolving itself into the face of First Councillor Josen Rael, majority leader of the Planetary High Council.

“Portmaster Mune,” he said. At this merciless magnification, she could see all the tension in his long neck, the tightness around the thin lips, the hard glitter in his dark brown eyes. The top of his head, domed and balding, had been powdered, but was beginning to sweat nonetheless.

“Councillor Rael,” she replied. “Good of you to call. You’ve gone over the reports?”

“Yes. Is this call shielded?”

“Certainly,” she said. “Speak freely.”

He sighed. Josen Rael had been a fixture in planetary politics for a decade now. He had first made the newsfeeds as councillor for war, later had climbed to councillor for agriculture, and for four standard years he had been the leader of the council’s majority faction, the technocrats, and therefore the single most powerful man on S’uthlam. The power had made him look old and hard and tired, and this was the worst Tolly Mune had ever seen him.

“You’re certain of the data, then?” he said. “If our crews have made no mistake? This is too crucial for error, I don’t have to tell you that. This is truly an EEC seedship?”

“Damn right,” said Tolly Mune. “Damaged and in disrepair, yes, but the puling thing is still functional, more or less, and the cell library is intact. We’ve verified it.”

Rael ran long, blunt fingers through his thinning white hair. “I should be jubilant, I suppose. When this is over, I will have to pretend to be jubilant for the newsfeeds. But right now, all I can think of are the dangers. We’ve had a council meeting. Closed. We can’t risk too much getting out until the affair is settled. The council was largely in accord—technocrats, expansionists, zeros, the church party, the fringe factions.” He laughed. “I’ve never seen such unanimity in all the years I’ve served. Portmaster Mune, we must have that ship.”

Tolly Mune had known it was coming. She had not been Portmaster this long without understanding the politics of the society downstairs. S’uthlam had been locked into endless crisis all her life. “I’ll try to buy it for you,” she said. “This Haviland Tuf was a freelance trader originally, before he stumbled on the *Ark*. My crews found his old ship on the landing deck, in terrible shape. Traders are greedy abortions, every one of them. That should work for us.”

“Offer him whatever it takes,” said Josen Rael. “Do you understand, Portmaster? You have unlimited budgetary authority.”

“Understood,” said Tolly Mune. But there was another question to be asked. “And if he won’t sell?”

Josen Rael hesitated. “Difficult,” he muttered. “He must sell. A refusal would be tragic. Not for the man himself, but for us, perhaps.”

“If he won’t sell?” Tolly Mune repeated. “I need to know the alternatives.”

“We must have the ship,” Rael told her. “If this Tuf proves unreasonable, he gives us no choice. The High Council will exercise its right of eminent domain and confiscate. The man will be compensated, of course.”

“Damn. You’re talking about seizing the ship by force.”

“No,” said Josen Rael. “Everything would be proper—I’ve checked. In an emergency, for the good of the greatest number, the rights of private property must be set aside.”

“Oh, hell and damn, that’s puling rationalization, Josen,” said Mune. “You had more common sense when you were up here. What have they done to you downstairs?”

He grimaced, and for an instant, he looked a little like the young man who had worked at her side for a year, when she had been Deputy Portmaster and he third assistant administrator for interstellar trade. Then he shook his head, and the old, tired politician was back. “I don’t feel good about this, Ma,” he said, “but what choice do we have? I’ve seen projections. Mass famine within twenty-seven years unless we have a breakthrough, and there’s no breakthrough in sight. Before it comes to that, the expansionists will regain power and we’ll have another war, perhaps. Either way, millions will die—billions, perhaps. Against that, what are the rights of this one man?”

“I won’t argue that point, Josen, though there are those who would, you know that. But never mind. You want to be practical, I’ll give you some goddamned practical things to think over. Even if we *buy* this ship from Tuf legally, there’s going to be hell to pay with Vandeen and Skrymir and the rest of the allies, but I doubt that they’d try anything. If we grab it by force, though, that’s a set of coordinates to a whole different place—a hard place, too. They can say piracy, maybe. They can define the *Ark* as a military craft—which it was, by the way, and a puling world-buster, too—and say we’re in violation of the treaty and come after us again.”

“I’ll speak to their envoys personally,” said Josen Rael wearily. “Assure them that as long as the technocrats are in power, the colonization program will not be resumed.”

“And they’ll take your puling word? Like goddamned horny hell they will. And will you assure them that the technocrats are *never* going to lose power, that they’ll never have the expansionists to deal with again? How will you do that? Are you planning to use the *Ark* to establish a benevolent dictatorship?”

The councillor pressed his lips together tightly, and a flush crept up the back of his long, dark neck.

“You know me better than that. Agreed, there are dangers. The ship is a formidable military resource, however. Let us not forget that. If the allies mobilize against us, we will hold the trump card.”

“Nonsense,” said Tolly Mune. “It has to be repaired and we have to master it. The technology involved has been lost for a thousand years. We’ll be studying it for months, maybe years, before we can really use the goddamned thing. Only we won’t get the chance. The Vandeeni armada will arrive within weeks to take it away from us, and the others won’t be far behind them.”

“None of this is your concern, Portmaster,” said Josen Rael coldly. “The High Council has discussed the issue thoroughly.”

“Don’t try and pull rank on *me*, Josen. Remember the time you got drunk on narco-blasters and decided you’d go outside and see how fast urine crystallized in space? I was the one who talked you out of freezing off your hose, esteemed First Councillor. Clean out your puling ears and listen to me. Maybe war isn’t my concern, but trade *is*. The port is our lifeline. We import thirty percent of our raw calories now—”

“Thirty-four percent,” Rael corrected.

“Thirty-four percent,” Tolly Mune agreed. “And that is going to go nowhere but up, we both know it. We pay for that food with our technological expertise—both manufactured goods and port profits. We service, repair, and build more starships than any other four worlds in the sector, and you know why? Because I’ve busted my puling buns to make sure we’re the *best*. Tuf himself said it. He came here for repairs because we had a reputation—a

reputation for being ethical, honest, and fair, as well as technically competent. What's going to happen to that reputation if we confiscate his puling ship? How many other traders are going to bring in *their* ships for repairs if we feel free to help ourselves to any we like? *What's going to happen to my goddamned port?*"

"It would certainly have an adverse effect," Josen Rael admitted.

Tolly Mune made a loud crude noise at him. "Our economy will be destroyed," she said bluntly.

Rael was sweating heavily now, trickles of moisture running down the broad, domed forehead. He mopped at the moisture with a pocket cloth. "Then you must see that it doesn't happen, Portmaster Mune. You must see that it doesn't come to that."

"How?"

"Buy the *Ark*," he said. "I delegate full authority to you, since you seem to understand the situation so well. Make this Tuf person see reason. The responsibility is yours." He nodded, and the screen went black.

On S'uthlam, Haviland Tuf played the tourist.

It could not be denied that the world was impressive, in its way. During his years as a trader, hopping from star to star in the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, Haviland Tuf had visited more worlds than he could easily remember, but he would be unlikely to forget S'uthlam any time soon.

He had seen a goodly number of breathtaking sights: the crystal towers of Avalon, the skywebs of Arachne, the churning seas of Old Poseidon and the black basalt mountains of Clegg. The city that was S'uthlam—the old names were only districts and neighborhoods now, the ancient cities having grown into one swollen megalopolis centuries ago—rivalled any of them.

Tuf had a certain fondness for tall buildings, and he gazed out upon the cityscape by both day and night—on observation platforms at one kilometer, two, five, nine. No matter how high he ascended, the lights went on and on, sprawling across the land endlessly in all directions, with nowhere a break to be seen. Square and featureless forty- and fifty-story buildings stood cheek-to-jowl in endless rows, crowding each other, living in the perpetual shadow of mirrored towers that rose around them to drink the sun. Levels were built upon other levels that had been built upon still others. The moving sidewalks crossed and crisscrossed in patterns of labyrinthine intricacy. Beneath the surface ran a network of vast subterranean roads where tubetrains and delivery capsules hurtled through the darkness at hundreds of kays per hour, and beneath the roads were basements and sub-basements and tunnels and underways and malls and sub-housing, a whole second city that burrowed as far below the ground as its mirrored sibling ascended above it.

Tuf had seen the lights of the metropolis from the *Ark*; from orbit, the city swallowed half a continent. From the surface, it seemed large enough to swallow galaxies. There were other continents; they, too, blazed by night with the lights of civilization. The sea of light had no islands of darkness within it; the S'uthlamese had no room to spare for luxuries like parks. Tuf did not disapprove; he had always thought parks to be a perverse institution, designed principally to remind civilized humanity how raw and crude and uncomfortable life had been when they had been forced to live it in nature.

Haviland Tuf had sampled a great variety of cultures in his wanderings, and he judged the culture of the S'uthlamese to be inferior to none. It was a world of variety, of dizzying possibilities, of a richness that partook both of vitality and decadence. It was a cosmopolitan world, plugged into the network that linked the stars, freely plundering the music, drama, and sensoria imported from other worlds, and using those unceasing stimuli to endlessly transform and mutate its own cultural matrix. The city offered more modes of recreation and more

entertainment of more varied sorts than Tuf had ever seen in any one place before—sufficient choices to occupy a tourist for several standard years, if one desired to taste it all.

During his years of travel, Haviland Tuf had seen the advanced science and technological wizardry of Avalon and Newholme, Tober-in-the-Veil, Old Poseidon, Baldur, Arachne, and a dozen other worlds out on the sharpened leading edge of human progress. The technology demonstrated on S'uthlam was equal to the most advanced of them. The orbital elevator itself was an impressive feat—Old Earth was supposed to have built such constructs in the ancient days before the Collapse, and Newholme had raised one once, only to have it fall during the war, but nowhere else had Tuf ever observed such a colossal artifact, not even on Avalon itself, where such elevators had been studied and rejected on the grounds of economy. And the slidewalks, the tubetrains, the manufactories, all were advanced, and efficient. Even the government seemed to work.

S'uthlam was a wonder world.

Haviland Tuf observed it, traveled through it, and sampled its marvels for three days before he returned to his small, cramped, premiere-class sleeping quarters on the seventy-ninth floor of a tower hotel, and summoned the host. “I wish to make arrangements for an immediate return to my ship,” he said, seated on the edge of the narrow bed he had summoned from a wall, the chairs being uncomfortably small. He folded large white hands neatly atop his stomach.

The host, a tiny man barely half Tuf's height, seemed nonplussed. “It was my understanding that you were to stay for another ten days,” he said.

“That is correct,” said Tuf. “Nonetheless, it is the nature of plans to be changed. I wish to return to orbit as soon as is conveniently possible. I would be most grateful if you would see to the arrangements, sir.”

“There's so much you haven't seen yet!”

“Indeed. Yet I find that what I have seen, however small a sample of the whole it may be, has been more than sufficient.”

“You don't like S'uthlam?”

“It suffers from an excess of S'uthlamese,” Haviland Tuf replied. “Several other flaws might also be mentioned.” He held up a single long finger. “The food is abysmal, for the most part chemically reformulated, largely without taste, of a distinctly unpleasant texture, full of unusual and disquieting colors. Moreover, the portions are inadequate. I might also be so bold as to mention the constant intrusive presence of a large number of newsfeed reporters. I have learned to recognize them by the multifocus cameras they wear in the center of their foreheads as a third eye. Perhaps you have observed them lurking about your lobby, sensorium, and restaurant. By my rough estimate, there seem to be about twenty of them.”

“You're a celebrity,” the host said, “a public figure. All of S'uthlam is interested in learning about you. Surely, if you don't wish to grant interviews, the peeps haven't dared intrude on your privacy? The ethics of the profession...”

“Have no doubt been observed to the letter,” Haviland Tuf finished, “as I must concede that they have kept their distance. Nonetheless, each night when I have returned to this insufficiently large room and accessed the newsfeeds, I have been welcomed by scenes of myself looking over the city, eating tasteless rubbery food, visiting various scenic tourist attractions, and entering sanitary facilities. Vanity is one of my great faults, I must confess, but nonetheless, the charm of this notoriety has quickly pallid. Moreover, most of their camera angles have been unflattering in the extreme, and the humor of the newsfeed commentators has bordered on being offensive.”

“Easily solved,” the host said. “You might have come to me earlier. We can rent you a privacy shield. It clips on the belt, and if any peep approaches within twenty meters, it will jam his third eye and give him a splitting headache.”

“Less easily solved,” said Tuf impassively, “is the total lack of animal life I have observed.”

“Vermin?” the host said, with a horrified look. “You’re upset because we have no *vermin*?”

“Not all animals are vermin,” said Haviland Tuf. “On many worlds, birds, canines, and other species are kept and cherished. I myself am fond of cats. A truly civilized world preserves a place for felines, but on S’uthlam it appears the populace would find them indistinguishable from lice and bloodworms. When I made the arrangements for my visit here, Portmaster Tolly Mune assured me that her crew would take care of my cats, and I accepted said assurances, but if indeed no S’uthlamese has ever before encountered an animal of a species other than human, I believe I have just cause to wonder as to the quality of the care they are presently receiving.”

“We have animals,” the host protested. “Out in the agrifactory zones. Plenty of animals—I’ve seen tapes.”

“No doubt you have,” said Tuf. “A tape of a cat and a cat, however, are somewhat different things, and require different treatment. Tapes can be stored on a shelf. Cats cannot.” He pointed at the host. “These are in the nature of quibbles, however. The crux of the matter, as I have previously mentioned, lies more in the number of S’uthlamese than in their manner. There are too many people, sir. I have been jostled repeatedly on every occasion. In eating establishments, the tables are too close to other tables, the chairs are insufficient to my size, and strangers sometimes seat themselves beside me and pummel me with rude elbows. The seats in theaters and sensoriums are cramped and narrow. The sidewalks are crowded, the lobbies are crowded, the tubes are crowded—there are people everywhere who touch me without my leave or consent.”

The host slipped into a polished professional smile. “Ah, humanity!” he said, waxing eloquent. “The glory of S’uthlam! The teeming masses, the sea of faces, the endless pageant, the drama of life! Is there anything quite as invigorating as rubbing shoulders with our fellow man?”

“Perhaps not,” said Haviland Tuf flatly. “Yet I find I am now sufficiently invigorated. Furthermore, permit me to point out that the average S’uthlamese is too short to rub against my shoulders, and has therefore been forced to content him- or herself with rubbing up against my arms, legs, and stomach.”

The host’s smile faded. “You are taking the wrong attitude, sir. To fully appreciate our world, you must learn to see it through S’uthlamese eyes.”

“I am unwilling to go about on my knees,” said Haviland Tuf.

“You’re not anti-life, are you?”

“Indeed not,” said Haviland Tuf. “Life is infinitely preferable to its alternative. However, in my experience, all good things can be carried to extremes. This would seem to be the case on S’uthlam.” He raised a hand for silence before the host could respond. “More particularly,” Tuf continued, “I have developed something of an antipathy, no doubt overhasty and unjustified, to some of the individual specimens of life I have come upon during chance encounters in my travels. A few have even expressed open hostility to me, directing at me epithets clearly derogatory of my size and mass.”

“Well,” said the host, flushing, “I’m sorry, but you are, uh, ample, and on S’uthlam it is, uh, socially unacceptable to be, uh, overweight.”

“Weight, sir, is entirely a function of gravity, and is therefore most malleable. Moreover, I am unwilling to concede you the authority to judge my weight over, under, or just right, these being subjective criteria. Aesthetics

vary from world to world, as do genotypes and hereditary predisposition. I am quite satisfied with my present mass, sir. To return to the matter at hand, I wish to terminate my stay immediately.”

“Very well,” said the host. “I will book passage for you on the first tubetrain tomorrow morning.”

“This is unsatisfactory. I would prefer to leave at once. I have examined the schedules and discovered a listing for a train in three standard hours.”

“Full,” snapped the host. “Nothing left on that one but second- and third-class seating.”

“I shall endure as best I can,” said Haviland Tuf. “No doubt the close press of so much humanity will leave me much invigorated and improved when I depart my train.”

Tolly Mune floated in the middle of her office in a lotus position, looking down on Haviland Tuf.

She kept a special chair for flies and groundworms who were unaccustomed to weightlessness. It was a rather uncomfortable chair, all things considered, but it was bolted securely to the deck and equipped with a web-harness to keep its occupant in place. Tuf had pushed over to it with awkward dignity and strapped himself down tightly, and she had settled in comfortably in front of him, at about the level of his head. A man the size of Tuf could not possibly be accustomed to having to look up at anyone during conversation; Tolly Mune figured it gave her a certain psychological edge.

“Portmaster Mune,” Tuf said, appearing remarkably unfazed by his inferior position, “I must protest. I comprehend that these repeated references to my own person as a fly are merely an instance of colorful local slang with no opprobrium attached. Still, I cannot but take a certain umbrage at this obvious attempt to, shall we say, pull my wings off.”

Tolly Mune grinned down at him. “Sorry, Tuf,” she said. “Our price is firm.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “Firm. An interesting word. Were I not awed to be in the mere presence of such an esteemed personage as yourself, and uneasy about giving offense, I might go so far as to suggest that this firmness approaches rigidity. Politeness forebears me from mouthing any statements about greed, avarice, and deep-space piracy in order to further my end of these thorny negotiations. I will point out however, that the sum of fifty million standards is several times greater than the gross planetary product of a good number of worlds.”

“Small worlds,” said Tolly Mune, “and this is a large job. You’ve got one hell of a big ship there.”

Tuf remained impassive. “I concede that the *Ark* is indeed a large ship, but fear this has little bearing on matters, unless it is customary for you to charge by the square meter rather than by the hour.”

Tolly Mune laughed. “This isn’t like fitting some old freighter with a few new pulse-rings or reprogramming your drive navigator. You’re talking thousands of hours even with three full crews of spinnerets on triple-shift, you’re talking massive systems work by the best cyber-techs we’ve got, you’re talking manufacture of custom parts that haven’t been used in hundreds of years, and that’s just for starts. We’ll have to research this damn museum piece of yours before we start ripping it apart, or we’ll never be able to get it back together. We’ll have to lure some planetside specialists up the elevator, maybe even go out of system. Think of the time, the energy, the calories. The docking fees alone—That thing is *thirty kilometers long*, Tuf. You can’t get her into the web. We’ll have to build a special dock around her, and even then she’ll take up the berths we could have used for three hundred ordinary ships. You don’t want to know what it would cost, Tuf.” She did some quick figuring on her wrist computer, and shook her head. “If you’re here one local month, a real optimistic projection, that’s nearly a million cal in docking fees alone. More than three hundred thousand standards in your money.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

Tolly Mune spread her hands helplessly. “If you don’t like our price, you could, of course, take your business elsewhere.”

“This suggestion is impractical,” said Haviland Tuf. “Unfortunately, as simple as my requests are, it appears that only a handful of worlds possess the expertise to fulfill my requirements—a sad commentary on the present state of human technological prowess.”

“Only a handful?” Tolly Mune raised a corner of her mouth. “Perhaps we have priced our services too low.”

“Madam,” said Haviland Tuf. “Surely you would not be so crass as to take advantage of my naive frankness.”

“No,” she said. “As I said, our price is firm.”

“It appears we have reached an embarrassing and knotty impasse. You have your price. I, unfortunately, do not.”

“I never would have guessed. A ship like yours, I would have figured you to have calories to burn.”

“No doubt I shall soon pursue a lucrative career in the field of ecological engineering,” said Haviland Tuf. “Unfortunately, I have not yet commenced my practice, and in my previous trade I had recently suffered some unaccountable financial reverses. Perhaps you would be interested in some excellent plastic reproductions of Cooglish orgy-masks? They make unusual and stimulating wall decorations, and are also said to have certain mystic aphrodisiac properties.”

“I’m afraid not,” Tolly Mune replied, “but you know what, Tuf? Today is your lucky day.”

“I fear you are making light with me,” said Haviland Tuf. “Even if you are about to inform me of a half-price sale or two-for-one service special, I am not optimally positioned to take advantage of it. I will be bitterly and brutally candid with you, Portmaster Mune, and admit that I am presently suffering from a temporary inadequacy of funds.”

“I have a solution,” said Tolly Mune.

“Indeed,” said Tuf.

“You’re a trader, Tuf. You don’t really need a ship as large as the *Ark*, do you? And you know nothing about ecological engineering. This derelict is of no possible good to you. But it does have considerable salvage value.” She smiled warmly. “I’ve talked to the folks downstairs on S’uthlam. The High Council felt it might be in your best interest to sell us your find instead.”

“Their concern is touching,” said Haviland Tuf.

“We’ll pay you a generous salvage fee,” she said. “Thirty percent of the ship’s estimated value.”

“The estimate to be made by you,” said Tuf flatly.

“Yes, but that’s not all. We’ll toss in a million standards cash, over and above the salvage fee, and we’ll give you a new ship. A brand-new Longhaul Nine, the biggest freighter we make, with fully automated kitchen, passenger quarters for six, gravity grid, two shuttles, cargo bays big enough to hold the largest Avalonian and Kimdissi traders side-by-side, triple redundancy, the latest Smartalec-series computer, voice-activated, and even a weapons capability if you want one. You’ll be the best-equipped independent trader in this whole sector.”

“Far be it from me to deprecate such generosity,” said Tuf. “The very thought of your offer makes me want to swoon. And yet, though I would no doubt be far more comfortable aboard the handsome new ship you offer me, I



have come to have a certain foolish sentimental attachment to the *Ark*, ruined and useless as it is, it is nonetheless the last remaining seedship of the vanished Ecological Engineering Corps, a living piece of history as it were, a monument to their valor and genius, and yet still not without its small uses. Some time ago, as I made my lonely way across space as best I could, the whim struck me to give up the uncertain life of a trader and take up, instead, the profession of ecological engineer. As illogical and no doubt ignorant as this decision was, it still has a certain appeal to me, and I fear that my stubborn nature is a great vice. Therefore, Portmaster Mune, it is with the deepest regret that I must decline your offer. I shall keep the *Ark*.”

Tolly Mune gave herself a little twist, spun upside down, and pushed off lightly from the ceiling, so as to come right up into Tuf’s face. She pointed a finger at him. “Damn it to hell,” she said, “I have no patience with this haggling over every puling calorie, Tuf. I’m a busy woman and I don’t have the time or the energy for your trader’s games. You’re going to sell—I know it and you know it—so let’s get this over with. Name your price.” She poked his nose lightly with the point of her finger. “Name,” poke, “your,” poke, “price,” poke.

Haviland Tuf unstrapped his harness and kicked off from the floor. He was so huge he made her feel petite—*her*, who’d been called a giant half her life. “Kindly cease your assault upon my person,” he said. “It can have no positive benefit upon my decision. I fear you grossly misapprehend me, Portmaster Mune. I have been a trader, true, but a poor one—perhaps because I have never mastered the skill as a haggler which you wrongly impute to me. I have stated my position concisely. The *Ark* is not for sale.”

“I have a certain amount of affection for you, from my years upstairs,” Josen Rael said crisply over a shielded comm-link, “and there’s no denying that your record as Portmaster has been exemplary. Otherwise, I’d remove you right now. You let him get back to his ship? How *could* you? I thought you had better sense than that.”

“I thought you were a politician,” Tolly Mune said with a certain amount of scorn in her voice. “Josen, think of the goddamned ramifications if I had security grab him in the middle of Spiderhome! Tuf isn’t exactly inconspicuous, even when he slips into his silly wig and tries to go incognito. This place is lousy with Vandeeni, Jazbots, Henrys, you name it, all of them watching Tuf and watching the *Ark*, waiting to see what we do. He’s already been approached by a goddamned Vandeeni agent. They were observed deep in conversation on the tubetrain.”

“I know,” the Councillor said unhappily. “Still, something should have... you could have had him taken surreptitiously.”

“And then what do I do with him?” Tolly Mune said. “Kill him and shove him out an airlock? I won’t do that, Josen, and don’t even think of having it done for me. If you try it, I’ll expose you to the newsfeeds and bring down the whole puling house.”

Josen Rael mopped at his sweat. “You’re not the only one with principles,” he said defensively. “I would not suggest any such thing. Still, we must have that ship, and now that Tuf is back inside it, our task has been made more difficult. The *Ark* still has formidable defenses. I’ve had scenarios done, and the odds are good that it might be able to withstand a full-scale assault by our entire Planetary Defense Flotilla.”

“Oh, puling hell, he’s parked a bare five kays beyond the terminus of tube nine, Josen. A goddamned full-scale assault by *anybody* would probably destroy the port and bring down the elevator on top of your puling head! Just hold your bladder, and let me work on this. I’ll get him to sell, and I’ll do it legally.”

“Very well,” the Councillor replied. “I’ll give you a little more time. But I warn you, the High Council is following the affair closely, and they’re impatient. You have three days. If Tuf hasn’t thumbed a transfer slip by then, I’m sending up some assault squads.”

“Don’t worry,” said Tolly Mune, “I have a plan.”

The communications room of the *Ark* was long and narrow, its walls covered with arrays of blank, dark telescreens. Haviland Tuf had settled in comfortably with his cats. Havoc, the boisterous black-and-white female, was curled up on his legs asleep, while longhaired gray Chaos, scarcely out of his kittenhood, rambled back and forth across Tuf's ample shoulders, rubbing against his neck and purring loudly. Tuf had folded his hands atop his paunch patiently as various computers took his request and reviewed it, relayed it, checked it, transferred it, and cross-indexed it. He had been waiting for some time. When the geometric pavane on the screen finally cleared, he was looking at the typically sharp features of an elderly S'uthlamese woman. "Curator," she announced. "Council databanks."

"I am Haviland Tuf, of the starship *Ark*," he announced.

She smiled. "I recognized you from the newsfeeds. How may I be of help?" She blinked, "Ack, there's something on your neck."

"A kitten, madam," he said. "Quite friendly." He reached up and scratched Chaos under the chin. "I require your assistance in a small matter. As I am but a hopeless slave to my own curiosity, and always eager to improve my meager store of knowledge, I have recently been occupying myself in the study of your world—its history, customs, folklore, politics, social patterns, and the like. I have of course availed myself of all the standard texts and popular data services, but there is one particular bit of information that I have been hitherto unable to secure. A small thing, truly, no doubt laughably easy to find had I only the wisdom to know where to look, but nonetheless unaccountably absent from all the sources I have checked. In pursuit of this crumb of data, I have contacted the S'uthlam Educational Processing Center and your major planetary library, both of which referred me to you. Thus, here I am."

The Curator's face had grown guarded. "I see. The council databanks are not generally open to the public, but perhaps I can make an exception. What are you looking for?"

Tuf raised his finger. "A single small nubbin of information, as I have said, but I would be in your debt if you would be so kind as to answer my query and salve my burning curiosity. Precisely what is the current population of S'uthlam?"

The woman's face grew cold and clouded. "That information is restricted," she said flatly. The screen went black.

Haviland Tuf paused for a moment before plugging back into the data service he had been employing. "I am interested in a general survey of S'uthlamese religion," he told the search program, "and in particular in a description of the beliefs and ethical systems of the Church of Life Evolving."

Some hours later, Tuf was deeply immersed in his text and playing absently with Havoc, who had woken up feisty and hungry, when Tolly Mune's call came through. He stored the information he had been reviewing and summoned her face on another of the room's screens. "Portmaster," he said.

"I hear you're trying to pry into planetary secrets, Tuf," she said, grinning at him.

"I assure you that I had no such intent," Tuf replied, "but in any case, I am a most ineffectual spy, as my attempt was a dismal failure."

"Let's have dinner together," Tolly Mune said, "and maybe I can answer your little question for you."

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “In that case, Portmaster, permit me to invite you to dine aboard the *Ark*. My cuisine, while unexceptional, is nonetheless more flavorful and considerably more bountiful than the fare available in your port.”

“Afraid not,” said Tolly Mune. “Too goddamned many duties, Tuf, I can’t leave my station. Don’t get your guts in an uproar, though. A big freighter just arrived from the Larder—our farming asteroids, a little in from here, terraformed and fertile as hell. The P.M. gets first grab at the calories. Fresh neograss salads, tunnel-hog ham steaks in brown sugar sauce, spicepods, mushroom bread, jellyfruit in real squirter cream, and beer.” She smiled. “*Imported* beer.”

“Mushroom bread?” said Haviland Tuf. “I do not eat of animal flesh, but the remainder of your menu sounds most attractive. I shall gladly accept your kind invitation. If you will prepare a dock for my arrival, I will shuttle over in the *Manticore*.”

“Use dock four,” she said. “Very close to Spiderhome. Is that one Havoc or Chaos?”

“Havoc,” Tuf replied. “Chaos has departed on mysterious errands of his own, as cats are wont to do.” “I’ve never actually seen a live animal,” said Tolly Mune cheerfully.

“I shall bring Havoc with me for your elucidation.” “See you soon,” Tolly Mune closed.

They dined at one-quarter gee. The Crystal Room clung to the underside of Spiderhome, its exterior a dome of transparent crystalline plasteel. Beyond the all-but-invisible walls of the dome, they were surrounded by the black clarity of space, fields of cool clean stars, and the intricate tracteries of the web. Below was the rocky exterior of the station, transport tubes tangled thickly across its surface, the swollen silvery blisters of habitats clinging to nexus points, the sculpted minarets and shining arrow-towers of starclass hotels rising into the cold darkness. Directly overhead hung the immense globe of S’uthlam itself, pale blue and brown, aswirl with cloud patterns, the elevator hurtling up toward it, higher and higher, until the huge shaft became a thin bright thread and then was lost to the eye entirely. The perspectives were dizzying, and more than a little unsettling.

The room was customarily used only on major state occasions; it had last been opened three years ago, when Josen Rael had come upstairs to entertain a visiting dignitary. But Tolly Mune was pulling out all the stops. The food was prepared by a chef she borrowed for the night from a Transcorp liner, the beer was commandeered from a trader in transit to Henry’s World; the service was a rare antique from the Museum of Planetary History; the great ebonfire table, made of gleaming black wood shot through with long scarlet veins, had room enough for twelve; and everything was served by a silent, discreet phalanx of waiters in gold and black livery.

Tuf entered cradling his cat, considered the splendor of the table, and gazed up at the stars and the web.

“You can see the *Ark*,” Tolly Mune told him. “There, that bright dot, beyond the web to the upper left.”

Tuf glanced at it. “Is this effect achieved through three-dimensional projection?” he asked, stroking the cat.

“Hell no. This is the real thing, Tuf.” She grinned. “Don’t worry, you’re safe. That’s triple-thick plasteel. Neither the world nor the elevator is likely to fall on us, and the chances of the dome being struck by a meteor are astronomically low.”

“I perceive a substantial amount of traffic,” said Haviland Tuf. “What are the chances of the dome being struck by a tourist piloting a rented vacuum sled, a lost circuit-tracer, or a burned-out pulse-ring?”

“Higher,” admitted Tolly Mune. “But the instant it happens, the airlocks will seal, claxons will sound, and an emergency cache will spring open. They’re required in any structure that fronts on vacuum. Port regs. So in the unlikely event that anything happens, we’ll have skinthins, breather pacs, even a laser torch if we want to try and repair the damage before the spinnerets get here. But it’s only happened two, three times in all the years there’s been a port, so just enjoy the view and don’t get too nervous.”

“Madam,” said Haviland Tuf with ponderous dignity, “I was not nervous, merely curious.”

“Right,” she agreed. She gestured him to his seat. He folded himself stiffly into it and sat quietly stroking Havoc’s black-and-white fur while the waiters brought out appetizer plates and baskets of hot mushroom bread. The savories were of two sorts—tiny pastries stuffed with deviled cheese and mushroom pate, and what appeared to be small snakes, or perhaps large worms, cooked in an aromatic orange sauce.

Tuf fed two of the latter to his cat, who devoured them eagerly, before lifting one of the pastries, sniffing at it, and biting into it delicately. He swallowed and nodded. “Excellent,” he pronounced.

“So that’s a cat,” said Tolly Mune.

“Indeed,” replied Tuf, tearing off some mushroom bread—a wisp of steam rose from the interior of the loaf when he broke it open—and methodically slathering it with a thick coating of butter.

Tolly Mune reached for her own bread, burning her fingers on the hot crust. But she persisted; it would not do to show any weakness in front of Tuf. “Good,” she said, around the first mouthful. She swallowed. “You know Tuf, this meal we’re about to have—most S’uthlamese don’t eat this well.”

“This fact had not escaped my notice,” said Tuf, lifting another snake between thumb and forefinger and holding it out for Havoc, who climbed halfway up his arm to get at it.

“In fact,” said Tolly Mune, “the actual caloric content of this meal approximates what the average citizen consumes in a week.”

“On the strength of the savories and bread alone, I would venture to suggest that we have already enjoyed more gustatory pleasure than the average S’uthlamese does in a lifetime,” Tuf said impassively.

The salad was set before them; Tuf tasted it and pronounced it good. Tolly Mune pushed her own food around on her plate and waited until the waiters had retreated to their stations by the walls. “Tuf,” she said, “you had a question, I believe.”

Haviland Tuf raised his eyes from his plate and stared at her, his long white face blank and still and expressionless. “Correct,” he said. Havoc was looking at her, too, from slitted eyes as green as the neograss in their salads.

“Thirty-nine billion,” said Tolly Mune in a crisp, quiet voice.

Tuf blinked. “Indeed,” he said.

She smiled. “Is that your only comment?”

Tuf glanced up at the swollen globe of S’uthlam overhead. “Since you solicit my opinion, Portmaster I shall venture to say that while the world above us seems formidably large, I cannot but wonder if it is indeed large enough. Without intending any censure of your mores, culture, and civilization, the thought does occur to me that a population of thirty-nine billion persons might be considered, on the whole, a trifle excessive.”

Tolly Mune grinned. “You don’t say?” She sat back, summoned a waiter, called for drinks. The beer was thick and brown, with a heavy fragrant head; they served it in huge double-handled mugs of etched glass. She lifted hers a bit awkwardly, watching the liquid slosh about. “The one thing I’ll never get used to about gravity,” she said. “Liquids ought to be in squeeze bulbs, goddamnit. These seem so damned... messy—like an accident waiting to happen.” She sipped, and came away with a foam mustache. “Good, though,” she said, wiping her mouth with the back of her hand. “Time to quit this damned fencing, Tuf,” she continued as she lowered the mug back to the table with the excessive care of one unaccustomed to even this trace gravity. “You obviously had some suspicion of our population problem, or you would never have inquired after it. And you’ve been soaking up all kinds of other information. To what end?”

“Curiosity is my sad affliction, madam,” Tuf said, “and I sought merely to solve the puzzle that was S’uthlam, with perhaps the vaguest hope that in study I might come across some means of resolving our present impasse.”

“And?” Tolly Mune said.

“You have confirmed the assumption I was forced to make about your excessive population. With that datum in place, all becomes clear. Your sprawling cities climb ever higher because you must accommodate this swelling population even as you struggle futilely to preserve your agricultural areas from encroachment. Your proud port is impressively busy, and your great elevator moves constantly, because you lack the capacity to feed your own population and must import food from other worlds. You are feared and perhaps even hated by your neighbors because centuries ago you attempted to export your population problem through emigration and annexation, until stopped violently by war. Your people keep no pets because S’uthlam has no room for any nonhuman species that is not a direct, efficient, and necessary link in the food chain. You are on the average distinctly smaller than the human norm due to the rigors of centuries of nutritional deprivation and rationing in all but name, economically enforced. Therefore generation succeeds generation, each smaller and thinner than the last, struggling to subsist on ever-diminishing provender. All these woes are directly attributable to your surfeit of population.”

“You don’t sound very approving, Tuf,” Tolly Mune said.

“I intend no criticism. You are not without your virtues. In the main, you are an industrious, cooperative, ethical, civilized, and ingenious folk, and your society, your technology and especially your rate of intellectual advance, is much to be admired.”

“Our technology,” said Tolly Mune drily, “is the only thing that has saved our goddamned asses. We import thirty-four percent of our raw calories. We grow perhaps another twenty percent on what agricultural land remains to us. The rest of our food comes out of the food factories, processed from petrochemicals. That percentage goes up every year. Has to. Only the food factories can gear up fast enough to keep pace with the population curve. One goddamned problem, though.”

“You are running out of petroleum,” ventured Haviland Tuf.

“Damned right we are,” said Tolly Mune.

“A nonrenewable resource and all that, Tuf.” “Undoubtedly your governing bodies know approximately when the famine will come upon you.”

“Twenty-seven standard years,” she said. “More or less. The date changes constantly, as various factors are altered. We may get a war before we get famine. That’s what some of our experts believe. Or maybe we’ll get war *and* famine. Either way we get a lot of dead people. We’re a civilized people, Tuf, you said it yourself. So goddamned civilized you wouldn’t believe it. Cooperative, ethical, life-affirming, all that bladder-bloat. Even that’s breaking down, though. Conditions in the undercities are growing worse, have been for generations, and some of our leaders go so far as to say they’re devolving down there, turning into some kind of puling *vermin*. Murder, rape, all the violent crimes, the rates go up each year. Within the past eighteen months, two reports of

cannibalism. All that will get a lot worse in years to come. Rising with the puling population curve. You receiving my transmission, Tuf?"

"Indeed," he said impassively.

The waiters returned, bearing the entrees. Slices of meat were piled high on the platter, still steaming from the oven, and four different types of vegetables were available. Haviland Tuf allowed his plate to be filled to overflowing with spicepods, mashed smackles, sweetroot, and butterknots, and bid the waiter cut several thin slivers of ham for Havoc. Tolly Mune took a thick ham slice herself, and drowned it in brown sauce, but after the first taste she found herself without appetite; she watched Tuf eat. "Well?" she prompted.

"Perhaps I can be of some small service to you in this quandary," Tuf said, deftly spearing a forkful of spicepods.

"You can be a big service to us," Tolly Mune said. "Sell us the *Ark*. It's the only way out, Tuf. You know it. I know it. Name your own price. I appeal to your goddamned sense of morality. Sell, and you'll save millions of lives—maybe billions. Not only will you be wealthy, you'll be a hero. Say the word and we'll name the goddamned planet after you."

"An interesting notion," said Tuf. "Yet, my vanity notwithstanding, I fear you greatly overestimate the prowess of even the lost Ecological Engineering Corps. In any case the *Ark* is not for sale, as I have already informed you. Perhaps I might venture to suggest an obvious solution to your difficulties? If it proves efficacious, I would be pleased to allow you to name a city or a small asteroid after me."

Tolly Mune laughed and took a healthy swallow of beer. She needed it. "Go on, Tuf. Say it. Tell me this easy, obvious solution."

"A plethora of terms come to mind," said Tuf. "Population control is the heart of the concept, to be achieved through biochemical or mechanical birth control, sexual abstinence, cultural conditioning, legal prohibitions. The mechanisms may vary, but the end result must be the same. The S'uthlamese must breed at a somewhat diminished rate."

"Impossible," said Tolly Mune.

"That is scarcely so," said Tuf. "Other worlds, vastly older than S'uthlam, have accomplished the same."

"Makes no damned difference," Tolly Mune said. She made a sharp gesture with her mug, and beer sloshed on the table. She ignored it. "You don't win any prizes for original thinking, Tuf. This is anything but a new idea. In fact, we've got a political faction that has been advocating this for, hell, hundreds of years. The zeros, we call 'em. They want to zero out the population curve. I'd say maybe seven, eight percent of the citizenry supports them."

"Mass famine will undoubtedly increase the number of adherents to their cause," Tuf observed, lifting a heavily laden forkful of mashed smackles. Havoc yowled in approval.

"By then it will be too puling late, and you damn well know it. Problem is, the teeming masses down there really don't believe any such thing is coming, no matter what the politicians say, no matter how many dire predictions they hear over the newsfeeds. We've heard *that* before, they say, and damned if they haven't. Grandmother and great-grandfather heard similar predictions about famine just around the corner. But S'uthlam has always been able to avoid the catastrophe before. The technocrats have stayed on top for centuries by perpetually managing to keep the day of collapse a generation away. They always find a solution. Most citizens are confident they always *will* find a solution."

"Such solutions as you imply are by their very nature only stopgaps," commented Haviland Tuf. "Surely this must be obvious. The only true solution is population control."

“You don’t understand us, Tuf. Restrictions against birth are anathema to the vast majority of S’uthlamese. You’ll never get any meaningful number of people to accept them—certainly not just to avoid some damned unreal catastrophe that none of them believe in anyway. A few exceptionally stupid and exceptionally idealistic politicians have tried, and they’ve been dragged down overnight, denounced as immoral, as anti-life.”

“I see,” said Haviland Tuf. “Are you a woman of strong religious conviction, Portmaster Mune?”

She made a face and drank some more beer. “Hell no. I suppose I’m an agnostic. I don’t know, I don’t think about it much. But I’m also a zero, though I’d never admit it downstairs. A lot of spinnerets are zeros. In a small closed system like the port, the effects of unrestrained breeding soon become damned apparent, and damned scary. Downstairs, it’s not so puling clear. And the church... are you familiar with the Church of Life Evolving?”

“I have a certain cursory familiarity with its precepts,” Tuf said, “of admittedly recent acquisition.”

“S’uthlam was *settled* by the elders of the Church of Life Evolving,” Tolly Mune said. “They were escaping from religious persecution on Tara, and they were persecuted because they bred so damned fast they were threatening to take over the planet, which the rest of the Tarans didn’t much like.”

“An understandable sentiment,” said Tuf.

“Same damned thing killed the colonization program the expansionists launched a few centuries back. The church—well, its fundamental belief is that the destiny of sentient life is to fill up the universe, that life is the ultimate good. Anti-life—entropy—is the ultimate evil. The church believes that life and anti-life are in a kind of race. We must evolve, the church says, evolve through higher and higher states of sentience and genius into eventual godhood, and we must achieve that godhood in time to avert the heat-death of the universe. Since evolution operates through the biological mechanism of breeding, we must therefore breed, must ever expand and enrich the gene-pool, must spread our seed to the stars. To restrict birth... we might be interfering with the next step in human evolution, might be aborting a genius, a proto-god, the carrier of the one mutant chromosome that would pull the race up to the next, transcendent rung on the ladder.”

“I believe I grasp the essentials of the credo,” Tuf said.

“We’re a free people, Tuf,” Tolly Mune said. “Religious diversity, freedom of choice, all that. We’ve got Erikaners, Old Christers, Children of the Dreamer. We’ve got Steel Angel bastions and we’ve got Melder communes, anything you want. But more than eighty percent of the population still belongs to the Church of Life Evolving, and if anything, their beliefs are stronger now than they’ve ever been. They look around, and they see all the obvious fruits of the church’s teachings. When you’ve got billions of people, you’ve got millions at genius level, and you’ve got the stimulus of virulent cross-fertilization, of savage competition for advancement, of incredible need. So, puling hell, it’s only logical, S’uthlam has achieved miraculous technological breakthroughs. They see our cities, our elevator, they see the visitors coming from a hundred worlds to study here, they see us eclipsing all the neighboring worlds. They *don’t* see a catastrophe, and the church leaders say everything will be fine, so why the bloody hell should anybody stop breeding!” She slapped the table hard, turned to a waiter. “You!” she snapped. “More beer. And quick.” She turned back to face Tuf. “So don’t give me these naive suggestions. Birth restrictions are utterly infeasible given our situation. Impossible. You understand that, Tuf?”

“There is no need to impugn my intelligence,” said Haviland Tuf. He stroked Havoc, who had settled into his lap, surfeit with ham. “The plight of S’uthlam has touched my heart. I shall endeavor to do what I can to relieve your world’s distress.”

“You’ll sell us the *Ark*, then?” she said sharply.

“This is an unwarranted assumption,” Tuf replied. “Yet I shall certainly do what I can in my capacity as an ecological engineer, before moving on to other worlds.”

The waiters were bringing out the dessert—fat blue-green jellyfruit swimming in bowls of thickened, clotted cream. Havoc sniffed the cream and leapt up on to the table for a closer investigation as Haviland Tuf lifted the long silver spoon they had provided him.

Tolly Mune shook her head. “Take it away,” she snapped, “too damn rich. Just beer for me.”

Tuf looked up and raised a finger. “A moment! No use in letting your portion of this delightful confection go to waste. Havoc will surely enjoy it.”

The Portmaster sipped a fresh mug of brown beer, and scowled. “I’ve run out of things to say, Tuf. We have a crisis here. We must have that ship. This is your last chance. Will you sell?”

Tuf looked at her. Havoc moved in quickly on the dessert. “My position is unchanged.”

“I’m sorry, then,” Tolly Mune said. “I didn’t want to do this.” She snapped her fingers. In the quiet of that moment, when the only sound was Havoc lapping at the clotted cream, the noise was like a gunshot. All around the clear crystalline walls, the tall, attentive waiters reached beneath their snug gold-and-black jackets and produced nerveguns.

Tuf blinked, and moved his head first right, then left, studying each man in turn while Havoc plundered his jellyfruit. “Treachery,” he said flatly. “I am gravely disappointed. My trust and good nature have been ill used.”

“You forced my hand. Tuf, you damned fool—”

“Such rank abuse exacerbates this betrayal rather than justifying it,” said Tuf, with spoon in hand. “Am I now to be secretly and villainously slain?”

“We’re civilized people,” Tolly Mune said angrily, furious at Tuf, at Josen Rael, at the goddamned Church of Life Evolving, and mostly at herself for letting it come to this. “No, you won’t be killed. We won’t even steal that goddamned derelict of a ship you care so damned much about. This is all legal, Tuf. You’re under arrest.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “Please accept my surrender. I am always anxious to comply with all pertinent local laws. On what charge am I to be tried?”

Tolly Mune smiled thinly, without joy, knowing full well they’d be calling her the Steel Widow in Spiderhome tonight. She pointed down to the far end of the table, where Havoc sat licking cream off her whiskers. “Bringing illegal vermin into the Port of S’uthlam,” she said.

Tuf laid down his spoon carefully and folded his hands atop his paunch. “It is my recollection that I brought Havoc here with me on your specific invitation.”

Tolly Mune shook her head. “Won’t wash, Tuf. I’ve got our talk recorded. True, I observed that I’d never seen a live animal before, but that’s a simple factual declaration, and no court could possibly construe it as an incitement for you to commit a criminal violation of our health statutes. No court of ours, anyway.” Her smile was almost apologetic.

“I see,” said Tuf. “In that case, let us dispense with time-consuming legal machinations. I will plead guilty and pay the prescribed fine for this minor infraction.”

“Good,” said Tolly Mune. “The fine is fifty standards.” She gestured, and one of her men strode forward and gathered up Havoc from the table. “Of course,” she finished, “the vermin in question must be destroyed.”



“I hate gravity,” Tolly Mune said to Josen Rael’s smiling, magnified face after she’d finished her report on the dinner. “It exhausts me, and I hate to think what all that goddamned *drag* does to my muscles, my internal organs. How can you worms live that way? And all that puling food! It was obscene the way he put it away, and the *smells* ...”

“Portmaster, we have more important things to discuss,” Rael said. “It’s done, then? We have him?”

“We have his cat,” she said glumly. “More precisely, *I* have his goddamned cat.” As if on cue, Havoc yowled and pressed her face against the meshwork plasteel cage that the security men had rigged up in a corner of her apartment. The cat yowled a lot; it was distinctly uncomfortable in weightlessness, and kept spinning out of control when it tried to move. Every time it caromed off the side of the cage, Tolly Mune winced with guilt. “I was sure he’d thumb the transfer to save the puling cat.”

Josen Rael looked upset. “I can’t say I think much of your plan, Portmaster. Why in the name of life would anyone surrender a treasure the magnitude of this *Ark* to preserve an animal specimen? Especially since you tell me he has other samples of the same type of vermin back aboard his craft?”

“Because he’s got an emotional attachment to this particular vermin,” Tolly Mune said, with a sigh. “Except that Tuf is even cagier than I thought. He called my bluff.”

“Destroy the vermin, then. Show him we mean what we say.”

“Oh, be sane, Josen!” she replied impatiently. “Where does that leave us? If I go ahead and kill the damned cat, then I’ve got nothing. Tuf knows that, and he knows that I know that, and he knows that I know that he knows. At least this way, we’ve got something he wants. We’re stalemated.”

“We’ll change the law,” Josen Rael suggested. “Let me... yes, the penalty for smuggling vermin into port should include confiscation of the ship used for the smuggling!”

“A goddamned masterstroke,” said Tolly Mune. “Too bad the charter prohibits retroactive laws.”

“I have yet to hear a better plan from you.”

“That’s because I don’t have one yet, Josen. But I will. I’ll argue him out of it. I’ll swindle him out of it. We know he’s got weaknesses. Food, his cats. Maybe there’s something else, something we can use. A conscience, a libido, a weakness for drink, for gambling.” She paused, thoughtful. “Gambling,” she repeated. “Right. He likes to play games.” She pointed a finger at the screen. “Stay out of it. You gave me three days, and my time’s not up yet. So hold your bladder.” She wiped his features off the huge vidscreen, and replaced them with the darkness of space, with the *Ark* floating against a field of unwinking stars.

The cat somehow seemed to recognize the image up on the screen, and made a thin, plaintive mewing sound. Tolly Mune looked over, frowned, and asked to be put through to her security monitor. “Tuf,” she barked, “where is he now?”

“In the Worldview Hotel starclass gaming salon, Ma,” the woman on duty responded.

“The Worldview?” she groaned. “He would pick a goddamned worm palace, wouldn’t he? What’s that under, full gee? Oh, puling hell, never mind. Just see that he stays there. I’m coming down.”

She found him playing five-sided quandary against a couple of elderly groundworms, a cybertech she had had suspended for systems-looting a few weeks back, and a moon-faced, fleshy trade negotiator from Jazbo. Judging from the mountain of counters stacked in front of him, Tuf was winning handily. She snapped her fingers, and the salon hostess came gliding over with a chair. Tolly Mune sat herself next to Tuf and touched him lightly on the arm. "Tuf," she said.

He turned his head and pulled away from her. "Kindly refrain from laying hands upon my person. Portmaster Mune."

She pulled her hand back. "What are you doing, Tuf?"

"At the moment, I am assaying an interesting new stratagem of my own devising against Negotiator Dez. I fear it will be proved unsound, but we shall see. In a larger sense, I strive to earn a few meager standards through the application of statistical analysis and applied psychology. S'uthlam is by no means inexpensive, Portmaster Mune."

The Jazbot, his long hair gleaming with iridescent oils, his fat face covered with rank-scars, laughed roughly and displayed a mouth of polished black teeth inset with tiny crimson jewels. "I challenge, Tuf," he said, touching a button underneath his station to flash his array upon the lighted surface of the table.

Tuf leaned forward briefly. "Indeed," he said. A long pale finger moved appropriately, and his own formation lit up within the gaming circle. "I fear you are lost, sir. My experiment has been proven successful, though no doubt by mere fluke."

"Blast you and your damnable luck!" the Jazbot said, lurching unsteadily to his feet. More counters changed hands.

"So you game well," Tolly Mune said to him. "It won't do you a damned bit of good, Tuf. The odds in these places favor the house. You'll never gamble your way to the money you need."

"I am not unaware of this," Tuf replied.

"Let's talk."

"We are engaged in talking at this very moment."

"Let's talk *privately*," she stressed.

"During our last private discussion, I was set upon by men with nerveguns, verbally pummeled, cruelly deceived, deprived of a beloved companion, and denied the opportunity to enjoy dessert. I am not favorably predisposed to accept further invitations."

"I'll buy you a drink," said Tolly Mune.

"Very well," said Tuf. He rose ponderously, scooped up his counters, and bid farewell to the other players.

The two of them walked to a privacy booth on the far side of the gaming room, Tolly Mune puffing a bit from the strain of fighting gravity. Once inside, she slumped into the cushions, ordered iced narcoblats for two and opaqued the curtain.

"The ingestion of narcotic beverages will have scant effect on my decision-making capacities, Portmaster Mune," said Haviland Tuf, "and while I am willing to accept your largesse as a token of redress for your earlier perversion of civilized hospitality, my position is nonetheless unchanged."

“What do you want, Tuf?” she said wearily, after the drinks had come. The tall glasses were rimmed with frost, the liquor cobalt blue and icy.

“Like all of humanity, I have many desires. At the moment I most urgently wish the safe return of Havoc to my custody.”

“I told you, I’ll swap the cat for the ship.”

“We have discussed this proposal, and I have rejected it as inequitable. Must we go over the same ground again?”

“I have a new argument,” she said.

“Indeed.” Tuf sipped at his drink.

“Consider the question of ownership, Tuf. By what right do you own the *Ark*? Did you build it? Did you have any role in its creation? Hell no.”

“I found it,” said Tuf. “True, this discovery was made in the company of five others, and it cannot be denied that their claims to ownership were, in some cases, superior to my own. They, however, are dead, and I am alive. This strengthens my claim considerably. Moreover, I presently possess the artifact in question. In many ethical systems, possession is the key, indeed oftentimes the overriding determinant of ownership.”

“There are worlds where the state owns everything of value, where your goddamned ship would have been seized out of hand.”

“I am mindful of this and purposely avoided such worlds when choosing my destination,” said Haviland Tuf.

“We could take your damned ship by force if we wanted, Tuf. Maybe it’s power that conveys ownership, eh?”

“It is true that you command the fierce loyalty of numerous lackey armed with nerveguns and lasers, while I am alone, a humble trader and neophyte ecological engineer, companioned only by his harmless cats. Nonetheless, I am not without certain small resources of my own. It is theoretically possible for me to have programmed defenses into the *Ark* that would make such a seizure perhaps less easily accomplished than you imagine. Of course this supposition is entirely hypothetical, but you might do well to give it due consideration. In any case, brutal military action would be illegal under the laws of S’uthlam.”

Tolly Mune sighed. “Some cultures hold that utility confers ownership. Others opt for need.”

“I am not unfamiliar with these doctrines.”

“Good. S’uthlam needs the *Ark* more than you do, Tuf.”

“Incorrect. I have need of the *Ark* to pursue my chosen profession and earn a livelihood. Your world has no need of the ship itself, but rather of ecological engineering. Therefore I have offered you my services, only to find my generous offer spurned and dubbed insufficient. ”

“Utility,” Tolly Mune interrupted. “We have a whole goddamned world of brilliant scientists. You’re nothing but a trader, by your own admission. We can make better use of the *Ark*. ”

“Your brilliant scientists are largely specialists in physics, chemistry, cybernetics, and other like fields. S’uthlam is not especially advanced in the areas of biology, genetics, or ecology. This is doubly obvious. If you possessed such expertise as you imply, firstly, your need for the *Ark* would not be urgent, and secondly, your ecological

problem would never have been allowed to reach its present ominous proportions. Therefore I question your assertion that your people would put the ship to more efficient use. Since coming upon the *Ark* and commencing my voyage here, I have dutifully immersed myself in study, and I would be so bold as to suggest that I am now the single most qualified ecological engineer in human space, possibly excluding Prometheus.”

Haviland Tuf’s long white face was without expression; he shaped each pronouncement carefully and fired them at her in cool salvos. Yet, unflappable as he was, Tolly Mune sensed that behind Tuf’s calm facade was a weakness—pride, ego, a vanity she could twist to her own ends. She jabbed a finger at his face. “Words, Tuf. Nothing but puling empty words. You can call yourself an ecological engineer, but that doesn’t mean a damned thing. You can call yourself a jellyfruit, but you’d still look damned silly squatting in a bowl of clotted cream!”

“Indeed,” Tuf said.

“I’ll make you a wager,” she said, going for the kill, “that you don’t know what the hell you’re doing with that damned ship.”

Haviland Tuf blinked, and made a steeple of his—hands on the table. “This is an interesting proposition,” he said. “Continue.”

Tolly Mune smiled. “Your cat against your ship,” she said. “I’ve described our problem. Solve it, and you get back Havoc, safe and sound. Fail, and we get the *Ark*. ”

Tuf raised a finger. “This scheme is flawed. Although you set me a formidable task, I am not loath to accept such a challenge, were the suggested stakes not so imbalanced. The *Ark* and Havoc are both mine, though you have unscrupulously, albeit legally, seized custody of the latter. Therefore it appears that by winning, I simply get back that which is rightfully mine to begin with, whereas you stand to gain a great prize. This is inequitable. I have a counteroffer. I came to S’uthlam for certain repairs and alterations. In the event of my success, let this work be performed without cost to me.”

Tolly Mune lifted her drink to her mouth to give herself a moment to consider. The ice had turned slushy, but the narcoblaster still had a nice sting to it. “Fifty million standards of free repairs? That’s too damn much.”

“Such was my opinion,” said Tuf.

She grinned. “The cat,” she said, “may have been yours to start with, but now she’s ours. But I’ll go this far on the repairs, Tuf—I’ll give you credit.”

“On what terms and at what interest rate?” Tuf asked.

“We’ll do the refitting,” she said, smiling. “We’ll start immediately. If you win—which you won’t—you get the cat back, and we’ll give you an interest-free loan for the cost of the repair bill. You can pay us off from the money you make out there”—she waved vaguely toward the rest of the universe—“doing your damned eco-engineering. But we get a lien on the *Ark*. If you haven’t paid half the money back in five standard years, or all of it in ten, the ship is ours.”

“The original estimate of fifty million standards was excessive,” Tuf said, “obviously an inflated figure intended solely to force me to sell you my ship. I suggest we settle on a sum of twenty million standards as the basis for this agreement.”

“Ridiculous,” she snapped. “My spinnerets couldn’t even *paint* your goddamned ship for twenty million standards. But I’ll go down to forty-five.”

“Twenty-five million,” Tuf suggested. “As I am alone aboard the *Ark*, it is not strictly necessary that all decks and systems be restored to full optimal function. A few distant, dysfunctional decks are of no ultimate importance. I will trim my work order to include only the repairs that must be made for my safety, comfort, and convenience.”

“Fair enough,” she said. “I’ll go to forty million.”

“Thirty,” Tuf insisted, “would seem more than enough.”

“Let’s not quibble over a few million standards,” said Tolly Mune. “You’re going to lose, so it doesn’t matter one hot damn.”

“I have a somewhat different viewpoint. Thirty million.”

“Thirty-seven,” she said.

“Thirty-two,” Tuf replied.

“Obviously, we’re going to settle on thirty-five, right? Done!” She stuck out her hand. Tuf looked at it.

“Thirty-four,” he said calmly.

Tolly Mune laughed, withdrew her hand, and said, “What does it matter? Thirty-four.” Haviland Tuf stood up. “Have another drink,” she said, gesturing. “To our little wager.”

“I fear I must decline,” Tuf said. “I will celebrate after I have won. For the nonce, there is work to do.”

“I cannot believe you’ve done this,” Josen Rael said, very loudly. Tolly Mune had turned the volume up high on her comm unit, to drown out the constant irritating protests of her captive cat.

“Give me a little sanity, Josen,” she said querulously. “This is goddamned brilliant.”

“You’ve *bet* the future of our world! Billions and billions of lives! Do you seriously expect me to honor this little pact of yours?”

Tolly Mune sucked on her beer bulb and sighed. Then, in the same voice she would have used to explain things to an especially slow child, she said, “We *can’t lose*, Josen. Think about it, if that wormy thing in your skull isn’t too atrophied by gravity to be capable of thought. Why the hell did we want the *Ark*? To feed ourselves, of course. To avoid the famine, to solve the problem, to work a puling biological miracle. To multiply the loaves and fishes.”

“Loaves and fishes?” the First Councillor said, baffled.

“Times infinity. It’s a classical allusion, Josen. Christian, I think. Tuf is going to take a try at making fish sandwiches for thirty billion. I think he’ll just get flour on his face and choke on a fish bone, but that doesn’t matter. If he fails, we get the goddamned seedship, all nice and legal. If he succeeds, we don’t *need* the *Ark* any more. We win either way. And the way I got things rigged, even if Tuf does win, he’ll still owe us thirty-four million standards. If by some miracle he pulls it off, odds are we’ll get the ship anyway, when he comes up short on his damned note.” She drank some more beer and grinned at him. “Josen, you’re damned lucky I don’t want your job. Has it ever dawned on you that I’m a lot smarter than you?”

“You’re a lot less politic too, Ma,” he said, “and I doubt you’d last a day in my job. I can’t deny that you do yours well, however. I suppose your plan is viable.”

“You *suppose*?” she said.

“There are political realities to consider. The expansionists want the ship itself, you must realize, against the day they regain power. Fortunately, they are a minority. We’ll outvote them in council once again.”

“See that you do, Josen,” Tolly Mune said. She broke the connection and sat floating in the dimness of her home. On her vidscreen, the *Ark* came into view again. Her work crews were all over it now, jury-rigging a temporary dock. Permanence would come later. She expected the *Ark* to be around for a good few centuries, so they needed a place to keep the damned thing, and even if Tuf did make off with it by some freakish chance, a major expansion of the web was long overdue and would provide new docking facilities for hundreds of ships. With Tuf paying the bill, she saw no sense in postponing the construction any longer. A long translucent plasteel tube was being assembled, section by section, to link the huge seedship to the end of the nearest major spur, so shipments of materials and teams of spinnerets could reach it more easily. Cybertechs were already inside, linked to the ship’s computer system, reprogramming to suit Tuf’s requirements and, incidentally, dismantling any internal defenses he might have coded in. Secret orders from the Steel Widow herself; Tuf didn’t know. It was just a little extra precaution, in case he was a poor loser. She didn’t want any monsters or plagues popping out of her prize box when she opened it.

As for Tuf, her sources said he had been in his own computer room almost continuously since leaving the Worldview’s gaming salon. On her authority as Portmaster, the council databanks had been authorized to give him whatever information he required, and he certainly required a great deal, from the reports she was getting. He had the *Ark*’s own computers data-storming extensive series of projections and simulations. Tolly Mune had to give him credit; he was giving it his best.

The cage in the corner thumped as Havoc crashed against its side and gave out a small, hurt mew. She felt sorry for the cat. She felt sorry for Tuf, too. Maybe, when he failed, she’d see if she couldn’t get him that Longhaul Nine anyway.

Forty-seven days passed.

Forty-seven days passed with the work crews working triple-shift, so the activity around the *Ark* was constant, unrelenting, and frenetic. The web crawled out to the seedship and covered it; cables snaked around it like vines; a network of pneumatic tubes plunged in and out of its airlocks as if it were a dying man in a downstairs medcenter; plasteel bubbles swelled out on its hull like fat silver pimples; tendrils of steel and duralloy crisscrossed it like veins; vacuum sleds buzzed about its immensity like stinging insects trailing fire; and everywhere, inside and out, walked platoons of spinnerets. Forty-seven days passed and the *Ark* was repaired, refinished, modernized, restocked.

Forty-seven days passed without Haviland Tuf leaving his ship for so much as a minute. At first he lived in his computer room, the spinnerets reported, with the simulations running day and night and the data crashing in all around him. These past few weeks he had most often been seen riding in a small three-wheeled cart down the thirty-kilometer length of the seedship’s huge central shaft, a green duck-billed cap perched atop his head, a small long-haired gray cat in his lap. He took only scant and perfunctory notice of the S’uthlamese workers, but at intervals he would pull over to recalibrate instrumentation at scattered random work stations or check the endless series of vats, large and small, that lined those towering walls. The cybertechs noticed that certain cloning programs were up and running, and that the chronowarp had been engaged, drawing off enormous amounts of energy.

Forty-seven days passed with Tuf in near seclusion, companioned only by Chaos, working.

Forty-seven days passed during which Tolly Mune talked neither to Tuf nor to First Councillor Josen Rael. Her duties as Portmaster, neglected during the onset of the *Ark* crisis, were more than sufficient to keep her occupied. She had disputes to hear and adjudicate, promotions to review, construction to supervise, beribboned fly diplomats to entertain before flushing them down the elevator, budgets to draw up, payrolls to thumb. And she had a cat to deal with, too.

At first, Tolly Mune feared the worst. Havoc refused to eat, seemed unable to reconcile herself to weightlessness, fouled the air in the Portmaster's apartment with her waste products, and insisted on making some of the most pitiful noises the Portmaster had ever had the misfortune to hear. She got worried enough to bring in her chief verminologist, who assured her that the cage was spacious enough and the portions of protein paste were more than adequate. The she-cat did not agree, and continued to sicken, mewling and hissing until Tolly Mune was certain that insanity, either feline or human, was just around the corner.

Finally she took steps. She discarded the nutritious protein paste and began to feed the creature with the meat-sticks Tuf had sent over from the *Ark*. The ferocity with which Havoc attacked them when she thrust the ends through the bars was reassuring. Once she licked at Tolly Mune's fingers after consuming a stick in record time; it was a strange sensation, but not entirely unpleasant. The cat took to rubbing up against the cage, too, as if she wanted contact; Tolly touched her tentatively, and was repaid with a far more pleasant sound than the cat had uttered previously. The touch of the creature's black-and-white fur was almost sensuous.

After eight days, she let it out of its cage. The larger confines of the office would be a sufficient prison, she thought. No sooner did Tolly Mune slide back the cage door than Havoc bounded through, but when the bound took her sailing clear across the room, she began hissing wildly in distress. Tolly kicked off after her and snatched her as she tumbled, but the cat struggled wildly, clawing long gashes down the backs of her hands. After the medtech had come and gone, Tolly Mune called through to security. "Requisition a room in the Worldview," she said, "a tower room with gravity control. Tell them to set the grid for one-quarter gee."

"Who's the guest?" they asked her.

"A port prisoner," she snapped, "armed and dangerous."

After the move, she visited the hotel daily at the end of her work-shift, at first strictly to feed her hostage and check on its welfare. By the fifteenth day, she was lingering long enough to soak up a few calories and give the cat the contact it craved. The beast's personality had changed dramatically. It made sounds of pleasure when she opened the door for her daily inspection (although it still tried constantly to escape), rubbed up against her leg without provocation, kept its claws sheathed, and even seemed to be growing fat. Whenever Tolly Mune permitted herself to sit, Havoc was in her lap instantly. On the twentieth day she slept over. On the twenty-sixth she moved in temporarily.

Forty-seven days passed, and by the end of them Havoc had grown accustomed to sleeping next to her, curled up on her pillow, her soft black-and-white fur brushing against the Portmaster's cheek.

On the forty-eighth day, Haviland Tuf called. If he was shocked to see his cat nestled in her lap, he gave no sign. "Portmaster Mune," he said.

"Give up yet?" she asked him.

Scarcely," Tuf replied. "In point of fact, I stand ready to claim my victory."

It was too important a meeting for a tele-link, even a shielded tele-link, Josen Rael had ruled. The Vandeenis might have ways of penetrating the shields. And yet, because Tolly Mune had dealt with Tuf firsthand and might understand him in a way the council could not, her presence was imperative, and her aversion to gravity was

considered unimportant. She took the elevator down to the surface, for the first time in more years than she cared to contemplate, and was whisked by aircab to the highest chamber atop the council tower.

The huge drafty room had a certain spartan dignity. It was dominated by a long, wide conference table with a mirror-bright monitor-top. Josen Rael sat in the position of authority, in a high-backed black chair with the globe of S'uthlam worked in three-dimensional relief above his head. "Portmaster Mune," he said, nodding to her as she struggled to an unoccupied seat near the foot of the table.

The room was crowded with the powerful—the inner council, the elite of the technocratic faction, key bureaucrats. Half her life had passed since the last time she had been summoned downstairs, but Tolly Mune watched the newsfeeds, and recognized many of the people—the young councillor for agriculture, surrounded by under-councillors, his assistants for botanical research, oceanic development, food processing. The councillor for war and his cyborg tactician. The transport administrator. The curator of the databanks and her chief analyst. The councillors for internal security, science and technology, interstellar relations, industry. The commander of the Planetary Defense Flotilla. The senior officer of the world police. They all nodded at her blankly.

To his credit, Josen Rael dispensed with all formality. "You've had a week with Tuf's projections and the seedstock and samples he provided us," he asked his council. "Well?"

"It's difficult to judge with any degree of accuracy," said the data analyst. "His projections may be right on target or they may be completely wrong, based on mistaken assumptions. I can't begin to check for accuracy until, well, I'd say it will take several plantings at least, several years. These things Tuf has cloned for us, these plants and animals and the like, all of them are new to S'uthlam. Until we have some hard experience with them, to determine how they will flourish under S'uthlamese conditions, we can't be certain how much of a difference they'll make."

"If any," said the councillor for internal security, a short square brick of a woman.

"If any," echoed the analyst.

"You're being much too conservative," the councillor for agriculture interrupted. He was the youngest man in the room, brash and outspoken, and at the moment his smile looked as though it might crack his thin face clean in two. "My reports are all positively *glowing*."

He had a tall pile of crystal data-chips on the conference table in front of him. He spread them out and shoved one into a port on his station; lines of readout began to scroll down the mirrored table-top, below the polished surface.

"This is our analysis of the thing he calls omni-grain," the councillor said. "Incredible, really incredible. A gene-tailored hybrid, completely edible. *Completely edible*, councillors, every part of the plant. The stalks grow waist high, like neograss, very high in carbohydrates, crunchy texture, not at all bad with a little dressing, but primarily useful as fodder for food animals. The heads yield an excellent cereal grain with a better food-to-chaff ratio than nanowheat or s'rice. The yield is easy to transport, stores forever without refrigeration, is impossible to bruise, and is high in protein. And the roots are edible tubers! Not only that, but it grows so damn fast that it will give us twice as many crops per season. Just guesswork, of course, but I estimate that if we plant omni-grain on the kays we've got allotted to nanowheat, neograss, and s'rice, we'll reap three, four times the calories from the same plots."

"It must have some disadvantages," Josen Rael objected. "It sounds too good to be true. If this omni-grain is so perfect, why haven't we heard of it before? Tuf certainly didn't gene-splice it together in these past few months."

"Of course not. It's been around for centuries. I found a reference to it in the databanks, believe it or not. It was developed by the EEC during the war, as military fodder. The stuff grows so quickly that it's ideal when you're not sure whether you'll be reaping the crops you're sowing or fertilizing them, ah, personally. But it was never adapted by civilians. The taste was considered inferior. Not awful or unpleasant, you understand, just inferior to existing grains. Also, it exhausts the soil in a very short time."



“Aha,” said the councillor for internal security. “So it’s a trap of sorts?”

“By itself, yes. You’d get maybe five years of bountiful crops and then disaster. But Tuf has also sent along some vermin—incredible things, super-worms and other aerators—and a symbiote, a kind of slime-mold that will grow together with the omni-grain without harming it, living off—get this now—living off *air pollution* and certain kinds of useless petrochemical waste, and using that to restore and enrich the soil.” He threw up his hands. “It’s an incredible breakthrough! If our own research teams had developed this, we’d have already declared a holiday.”

“What about the other things?” Josen Rael asked curtly. The First Councillor’s face did not reflect any of the enthusiasm of his subordinate.

“Almost as exciting,” was the reply. “The oceans—we’ve *never* been able to get a decent caloric yield from the oceans, relative to their size, and the last administration practically fished them to extinction with their sea-sweepers. Tuf is giving us a dozen new sorts of fast-breeding fish, and a variety of plankton...” He fished around in front of him, found another data-chip, plugged it in. “Here, this plankton, it will gum up the sea lanes, certainly, but ninety percent of our commerce is subsurface or airborne, so it doesn’t matter. The fish will thrive on it, and under the right conditions, the plankton itself will grow so thick it will cover the water to a depth of three meters, like some vast gray-green carpet.”

“An alarming prospect,” said the councillor for war. “Is it edible? By humans, I mean.”

“No.” The agri-councillor grinned. “But when it’s dead and decaying, it will serve admirably as a raw material for our food factories, once the petroleum runs out.”

All the way down at the far end of the table, Tolly Mune laughed loudly. Heads turned to face her. “I’ll be damned,” she said. “He gave us loaves and fishes after all.”

“The plankton’s not really a fish,” the councillor said.

“If it lives in the goddamned ocean, it’s a puling fish as far as I’m concerned.”

“Loaves and fishes?” asked the councillor for industry.

“Go on with your report,” Josen Rael said impatiently. “Was there anything else?”

There was. There was a nutritious lichen that would grow on the highest mountains, and another that could survive even in airless conditions under hard radiation. “More Larder asteroids,” announced the agricultural councillor, “without having to spend decades and billions of cal terraforming.” There were parasitic food-vines that would infest S’uthlam’s steamy equatorial swamps and gradually choke out and displace the fragrant and poisonous native forms that now grew there in profusion. There was a grain called snow-oats that would grow on frozen tundra, and tunnel-tubers that could honeycomb even the frozen earth beneath a glacier with huge airy passages walled by buttery brown nut-meat. There were genetically improved cattle, pigs, fowl, and fish; a new bird that Tuf claimed would eliminate the leading S’uthlamese agricultural pest; and seventy-nine new varieties of edible mushroom and fungus that could be raised in the darkness of the undercities and nourished with human waste products.

And when the councillor had finished his report, there was silence.

“He’s won,” Tolly Mune said, grinning. The rest were all deferring to Josen Rael, but she was damned if she was going to sit and play politics. “I’ll be damned, Tuf actually did it.”

“We do not know that,” said the databanks curator.

“It will be years before we have meaningful statistics,” said the analyst.

“There may be a trap,” warned the councillor for war. “We must be cautious.”

“Oh, to hell with that,” said Tolly Mune. “Tuf has proved that—”

“*Portmaster!*” interrupted Josen Rael, very sharply.

Tolly Mune closed her mouth; she had never heard him use that tone before. The others all looked at him as well.

Josen Rael took out a cloth and mopped the perspiration from his brow. “What Haviland Tuf has proven, beyond any doubt, is that the *Ark* is far too valuable for us to even consider letting it go. We will now discuss how best to seize it, while minimizing the loss of life and the diplomatic repercussions.” He called upon the councillor for internal security.

Portmaster Tolly Mune listened quietly to her report, and sat through an hour of the discussion that followed, while they argued about tactics, the proper diplomatic stance, the most efficient utilization of the seedship, which department ought to take charge of it, and what to say to the newsfeeds. The discussion promised to last half the night, but Josen Rael said firmly that they would not break until the whole affair had been settled to the last jot and tittle. Food was ordered, records were sent for, subordinates and specialists were summoned and dismissed. Josen Rael gave orders that they were not to be interrupted for any reason whatsoever. Tolly Mune listened. Finally, she got unsteadily to her feet. “Sorry,” she apologized, “it’s... it’s the puling gravity. Not used to it. Where’s the nearest sani... sanitary... ulp.”

“Of course, Portmaster,” said Josen Rael. “Outside, the left corridor, fourth door down.”

“Thank you,” she said. They resumed talking as Tolly Mune staggered outside. She could hear their droning through the door. There was one police guard. She nodded to him, walked off briskly, and turned right.

Once out of his sight, she began to run.

On the roofdeck she commandeered an aircab. “The elevator,” she snapped, “and scream it.” She showed him her priority band.

A train was just about to leave. It was full. She bumped a starclass passenger. “Emergency in the web,” she said. “I have to get back in a hurry.” They made a record ascent, since after all she was Ma Spider, and transportation was waiting in Spiderhome to whisk her to her quarters.

She sailed in, sealed the door, turned on her comm, coded it to transmit a recording of her deputy’s face, and tried to punch through to Josen Rael. “I’m sorry,” the computer said with cybernetic sympathy. “He’s in meeting, and cannot be interrupted at this time. Would you care to leave a message?”

“No,” she said. She sent her own image when she punched through to her foreman out on the *Ark*. “How are things floating, Frakker?”

He looked tired, but he managed a smile for her. “We’re going great, Ma,” he said. “I guesstimate ninety-one percent done. Work will be complete in another six, seven days, and then it will be just clean-up.”

“The work’s done now,” Tolly Mune said.

“What?” He looked baffled.

“Tuf has been lying to us,” she said glibly. “He’s a con man, a puling abortion, and I’m pulling the crews on him.”

“I don’t understand,” the cybertech said.

“Sorry. Details are classified, Frakker. You know how it goes. Just get off the *Ark*. All of you. Spinnerets, cybertechs, security, everybody. I’ll give you an hour, then I’m coming over, and if I find anybody on that derelict except Tuf and his goddamned vermin, I’ll ship their rectums out to the Larder faster than you can say *Steel Widow*, you got that?”

“Uh, yes.”

“I mean *now!*” snapped Tolly Mune. “*Move*, Frakker.”

She cleared the screen, keyed in a top-priority shield, and placed her final call. Haviland Tuf, infuriatingly, had instructed the *Ark* to screen his calls while he napped. It took her fifteen priceless minutes to find the right formula of words to convince the idiot machine that this was an emergency.

“Portmaster Mune,” Tuf responded when his image finally materialized before her, wearing an absurd fuzzy robe belted around his overample stomach. “To what do I owe the singular delight of your call?”

“The refitting is ninety percent done,” Tolly Mune said. “Everything important. You’ll have to live with anything we left undone. My spinnerets are scuttling off down the web, fast. They’ll all be gone in, uh, now it’s down to forty-odd minutes. When that time’s up, I want you out of port, Tuf.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“You’re spaceworthy,” she said. “I’ve seen your specs. You’ll rip apart the dock, but there’s no time to pull it down and it’s a small price to pay for what you’ve done. Shift to drive and get out of our system and don’t look back over your shoulder, unless you want to turn to goddamned salt.”

“I fail to understand,” said Haviland Tuf.

Tolly Mune sighed. “So do I, Tuf, so do I. Don’t argue with me. Prepare for departure.”

“Am I to make the assumption that your High Council found my humble offering to be a satisfactory solution to your crisis, so that I have been adjudged winner of our wager?”

She groaned. “Yes, if that’s what you want to hear, you give great vermin, they loved the omni-grain, the slime-mold was a real hit, you win, you’re brilliant, you’re wonderful. Now scream it, Tuf, before someone thinks to ask the sickly old Portmaster a question and they notice that I’m gone.”

“Your haste has left me nonplussed,” said Haviland Tuf, folding his hands calmly atop his paunch and staring at her.

“*Tuf,*” Tolly Mune said, from between clenched teeth. “You won your goddamned wager, but you’ll lose your ship if you don’t wake up and learn to dance. Get moving! Do I have to spell it out for you, damn it? Treachery, Tuf. Violence. Betrayal. Right at this very moment, the High Council of S’uthlam is discussing all the fine details of how to grab the *Ark* and dispose of you, and arguing about what kind of perfume will make it smell the best. Now do you understand? As soon as they finish talking, and it won’t be long, they’ll give the orders, and security will be converging on you with vacuum sleds and nerveguns. The Planetary Defense Flotilla has four protector-class

ships and two dreadnaughts in the web right now, and if they go on alert, you might not even be able to run. I don't want any goddamned space battle slugging my port and killing my people."

"An understandable aversion," Tuf said. "I shall initiate immediate implementation of departure programming. One small difficulty remains, however."

"What?" she said, all wire-edged impatience.

"Havoc remains in your custody. I cannot leave S'uthlam until she has been returned safely to me."

"Forget the puling cat!"

"A selective memory is not among my capabilities," Tuf said. "I have fulfilled my portion of our understanding. You must return Havoc or be in breach of contract."

"I *can't*," Tolly Mune said angrily. "Every fly, worm, and spinneret in the station knows that damned cat is our hostage. If I jump on a train with Havoc under my arm, it will be noticed, and someone is going to ask questions. Wait for that cat, and you're risking everything."

"Nonetheless," said Haviland Tuf, "I fear I must insist."

"Goddamn you," swore the Portmaster. She wiped out his image with a single furious snap of her fingers.

When she reached the Worldview's lofty atrium, the host greeted her with a brilliant smile. "Portmaster!" he said happily. "How good to see you. You're being paged, you know. If you'd care to take the call in my private office..."

"Sorry," she said, "pressing business. I'll check in from the room." She rushed past him to the elevators.

Outside the door were the guards she had posted. "Portmaster Mune," the left one said. "We were notified to watch for you. You're to call in to the security office at once."

"Certainly," she said. "You two, get down to the atrium, and fast."

"Is there a problem?"

"A big one. A brawl. I don't think the staff can handle it alone."

"We'll take care of it, Ma." They ran off together. Tolly Mune went inside. The room was a relief; only a quarter gee, compared to the full gravity of the corridors and atrium. It was a tower suite. Beyond a triple-thick window of transparent plasteel was the vast globe of S'uthlam, the rocky surface of Spiderhome, and the brilliance of the web. She could even see the bright line that was the *Ark*, shining in the yellow light of S'ulstar.

Havoc was curled up asleep on the floater cushion in front of the window, but the cat hopped down when she entered and came bounding across the carpet, purring loudly. "I'm glad to see you, too," Tolly Mune said, scooping up the creature. "But now I have to get you out of here." She looked around for something large enough to hide her hostage.

The comm unit began to scream at her. She ignored it and continued to search. "Goddamn it," she said furiously. She had to hide the puling cat, but how? She tried wrapping her up in a towel, but Havoc didn't like that idea at all.

The comm unit cleared—a security override. The head of port security was staring at her. “Portmaster Mune,” he said, deferential for the moment, though she wondered how long that would last once the situation became clear to him. “There you are. The First Councillor seems to believe you have some difficulty. Is there a problem?”

“None at all,” she said. “Is there any reason for intruding on my privacy, Danja?”

He looked abashed. “My apologies, Ma. Orders. We were instructed to locate you immediately and report on your whereabouts.”

“Do that,” she said.

He apologized again and the screen blanked. Obviously, no one had yet informed him that the *Ark* was being cleared. Good, that bought her a bit more cushion. She moved methodically through the suite one final time, taking a good ten minutes to search everywhere and anywhere for something to stash Havoc in, before she finally gave it up as a lost cause. She’d just have to brazen it out, stride to the docks and requisition vacuum sled, skinthins, and a carrier for the cat. She moved toward the door, opened it, stepped out... and saw the guards running toward her. She darted back inside. Havoc yowled in protest. Tolly Mune triple-locked the door and raised the privacy shield. That didn’t stop them from banging. “Portmaster Mune,” one of them called through the door, “there was no brawl. Open please, we need to talk.”

“Go away,” she snapped. “Orders.”

“Sorry, Ma,” he replied, “they want us to take that cat downstairs. That’s right from the council, they say.”

Behind her, the comm unit came on once more. This time it was the councillor for internal security herself. “Tolly Mune,” the woman said, “you are wanted for questioning. Surrender yourself immediately.”

“I’m right here,” Tolly Mune snapped back. “Ask your goddamned questions.” The guards kept pounding on the door.

“Explain your return to port,” the woman said.

“I work here,” Tolly Mune said sweetly.

“Your actions are not in accord with policy. They have not been approved by High Council.”

“High Council’s actions haven’t been approved by me,” the Portmaster said. Havoc hissed at the screen.

“Place yourself under arrest, if you please.”

“I’d rather not.” She lifted a small, thick table—it was easy under a quarter gee—and sent it sailing into the vidscreen. The councillor’s square features disintegrated in a shower of glass and sparks.

At the door, the guards had coded in a security override. She countermanded it, using Portmaster’s priority, and heard one of them swearing. “Ma,” the other one said, “that won’t do any good. Open up, now. You can’t get by us and it won’t take them more than ten, twenty minutes to cancel your priority.”

He was right, Tolly Mune realized. She was trapped, and once they unsealed the door it was all over. She looked around helplessly, searching for a weapon, a way out, anything. There was nothing.

Far away at the end of the web the *Ark* shone with reflected sunlight. It ought to be clear by now. She hoped Tuf had had the sense to seal up tight when the last spinneret had departed. But would he leave without Havoc? She

looked down, stroked the cat's fur. "All this trouble for you," she said. Havoc purred. She looked back at the *Ark*, then at the door.

"We could pump some gas in," one of the guards was saying. "The room's not airtight, after all." Tolly Mune smiled.

She placed Havoc back on the floater cushion, climbed up on a chair, and pulled the cover off the emergency sensor box. It had been a long time since she'd done any mech work. It took her a few moments to trace the circuits, and a few more moments to puzzle out how to make the sensors think the airseal had been broken. When she did, an alarm claxon began to shrill hideously in her ear. There was a sudden hissing and foaming around the edges of the door as the airseal was activated. The gravity went out, the air stopped circulating, and on the far side of the room, a panel slid open on the cache of emergency vacuum gear.

Tolly Mune moved to it quickly. Inside were breather-pacs, airjets, a half dozen sets of skinthins. She dressed and sealed herself up. "Come here," she said to Havoc. The cat didn't like all the noise. "Careful now, don't claw the fabric." She shoved Havoc inside a bubble helmet, attached it to a limp set of skinthins, clipped on a breather pac and turned it all the way up, way past the recommended pressure.

The skinthins inflated like a balloon. The cat tried her claws against the inside of the plasteel helmet and yowled piteously. "I'm sorry," said Tolly Mune. She let Havoc float in mid-room while she removed the laser torch from its brackets.

"Who said it was a puling false alarm?" she said as she kicked herself toward the window, torch in hand.

"Perhaps you would care for some mulled mushroom wine," said Haviland Tuf. Havoc was rubbing up against his leg. Chaos was up his shoulder, long gray tail twitching, peering down at the black-and-white cat as if he were trying to remember just who that was. "You appear to be tired."

"Tired?" Tolly Mune said. She laughed. "I just burned my way out of a starclass hotel and crossed kilometers of open space, flying on nothing but airjets and using my feet to tug along a cat in an over-inflated pair of skinthins. I had to outdistance the first security squad they scrambled from the dockside ready-room, and use a laser torch to cripple the sled the second bunch came cruising up on, dodging their snares the whole time, still pulling your damned cat. Then I got to spend a half-hour crawling around on the outside of the *Ark*, knocking on the hull like a brain-damage case, all the time watching my port go insane with activity. I lost the cat twice and had to chase her down again before she floated off to S'uthlam, and whenever I misjudged an airblast, off we went. Then a puling *dreadnought* came heaving up at me. I got to enjoy the suspense of wondering when the hell you'd raise your defense sphere, and got to relish the exciting pyrotechnics when the flotilla decided to test your screens. I had a nice long time to ponder whether they'd see me, crawling around like so much vermin on the skin of some damned animal, and Havoc and I had this great conversation about what we'd do when it occurred to them to send in a wave of security on sleds. We decided I'd speak sternly to them and she'd scratch their eyes out. And then you *finally* notice us and drag us inside just as the goddamned flotilla is opening up with plasma torpedoes. And you think I might be *tired*?"

"There is no call for sarcasm," said Haviland Tuf.

Tolly Mune snorted. "Do you have a vacuum sled?"

"Your crew abandoned four in their haste to depart."

"Good. I'll take one with me." A glance at the instruments told her that Tuf finally had the seedship under way. "What's happening out there?"

"The flotilla continues to hound me," said Tuf. "The dreadnaughts *Double Helix* and *Charles Darwin* pursue, with their protector escorts close astern, and a cacophony of commanders clamor at me, making rude threats, stern martial pronouncements, and insincere entreaties. Their efforts are to no avail. My defensive screens, now that

your spinnerets have so excellently restored them to full function, are more than equal to any weaponry in the S'uthlamese armory.”

“Don't test it,” Tolly Mune said sourly. “Just get into drive as soon as I'm gone, and get the hell out of here.”

“This is sound advice,” Haviland Tuf agreed.

Tolly Mune looked at the banks of vidscreens along both walls of the long, narrow communications room that they had refitted as Tuf's control center. Slumped in her chair and crumpled under the gravity, she suddenly looked and felt her age.

“What will become of you?” Tuf asked.

She looked at him. “Oh, that's a choice question. Disgrace. Arrest. Removal from office—maybe trial for high treason. Don't worry, they won't execute me. Execution is anti-life. A penal farm on the Larders, I suppose.” She sighed.

“I see,” said Haviland Tuf. “Perhaps you might wish to reconsider my offer to furnish you with transportation out of the S'uthlamese system. I would be only too glad to take you to Skrymir or Henry's World. If you wished to remove yourself further from the site of your infamy, I understand that Vagabond is quite pleasant during its Long Springs.”

“You'd sentence me to a life under gravity,” she said. “No thanks. This is my world, Tuf. Those are my own puling people. I'll go back and take what comes. Besides, you're not getting off the hook that easily.” She pointed. “You owe me, Tuf.”

“Thirty-four million standards, as I recall,” Tuf said. She grinned. “Madam,” said Tuf, “if I might so bold as to ask—”

“I didn't do it for you,” she said quickly.

Haviland Tuf blinked. “My pardon if I seem to be prying into your motives. Such is not my intent. I fear curiosity will be my downfall someday, but for the nonce I must inquire—why *did* you do it?”

Portmaster Tolly Mune shrugged. “Believe it or not, I did it for Josen Rael.”

“The First Councillor?” Tuf blinked again.

“Him, and the others. I knew Josen when he was just starting out. He's not a bad man, Tuf. He's not evil. None of them are evil. They're decent men and women, doing their best. All they want to do is to feed their children.”

“I do not understand your logic,” said Haviland Tuf.

“I sat at that meeting, Tuf. I sat there and listened to them talk, and I heard what the *Ark* had done to them. They were honest, honorable, ethical people, and the *Ark* had already turned them into cheats and liars. They believe in peace, and they were talking about the war they might have to fight to keep this puling ship of yours. Their entire creed is based on the holy sanctity of human life, and they were blithely discussing how much killing might be necessary—starting with yours. You ever study history, Tuf?”

“I make no special claims to expertise, but neither am I entirely ignorant of what has gone before.”

“There's an ancient saying, Tuf. Came out of Old Earth. Power corrupts, it went, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”

Haviland Tuf said nothing. Havoc bounded onto his knees and settled down. He began to stroke her with a huge pale hand.

“The dream of the *Ark* had already begun to corrupt my world,” Tolly Mune told him. “What the hell would the reality of possession have done to us? I didn’t want to find out.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “A further question suggests itself.”

“What’s that?”

“I now control the *Ark*,” Tuf said, “and therefore wield near absolute power.”

“Oh, yes,” Tolly Mune said.

Tuf waited, saying nothing.

She shook her head. “I don’t know,” she said. “Maybe I didn’t think things through. Maybe I was just making it up as I went along. Maybe I’m the biggest damned fool you’ll find for light-years.”

“You do not seriously believe this,” said Tuf.

“Maybe I just figured it was better you got corrupted than my own people. Maybe I think you’re naive and harmless. Or maybe it was instinct.” She sighed. “I don’t know if there is such a thing as an incorruptible man, but if there is, you’re the one, Tuf. The last goddamned innocent. You were willing to lose the whole thing for her.” She pointed at Havoc. “For a cat. Damned puling vermin.” But she smiled as she said it.

“I see,” said Haviland Tuf.

The Portmaster pulled herself wearily to her feet. “Now it’s time to go back and make that speech to a less appreciative audience,” she said. “Point me to the sleds and tell them that I’m coming out.”

“Very well,” said Tuf. He raised a finger. “One further point remains to be clarified. As your crews did not complete all of the agreed-upon work, I do not think it equitable to charge me the full price of thirty-four million standards. I suggest an adjustment. Would thirty-three million five-hundred thousand standards be acceptable to you?”

She stared at him. “What difference does it make?” she asked. “You’re never coming back.”

“I beg to differ,” said Haviland Tuf.

“We tried to steal your ship,” she said.

“True. Perhaps thirty-three million would be fair, the rest being considered a penalty of sorts.”

“You’re really planning to return?” Tolly Mune said.

“In five years,” said Tuf, “the first payment on the loan will be due. By that time, moreover, we will be able to judge what effect, if any, my small contributions have had upon your food crisis. Perhaps more ecological engineering will be necessary.”

“I don’t believe it,” she said, astonished.



Haviland Tuf reached up to his shoulder and scratched Chaos behind the ear. “Why,” he asked reproachfully, “are we always doubted?”

The cat did not reply.

# Tuf Voyaging: Guardians

Haviland Tuf thought the Six Worlds Bio-Agricultural Exhibition a great disappointment.

He had spent a long wearying day on Brazelourn, trooping through the cavernous exhibition halls, pausing now and then to give a cursory inspection to a new grain hybrid or a genetically improved insect. Although the *Ark*'s cell library held cloning material for literally millions of plant and animal species from an uncounted number of worlds, Haviland Tuf was nonetheless always alert for any opportunity to expand his stock-in-trade.

But few of the displays on Brazelourn seemed especially promising, and as the hours passed Tuf grew bored and uncomfortable in the jostling, indifferent crowds. People swarmed everywhere—Vagabonder tunnel-farmers in deep maroon furs, plumed and perfumed Areeni landlords, somber nightsiders and brightly garbed evermoons from New Janus, and a plethora of the native Brazeleen. All of them made excessive noise and favored Tuf with curious stares as he passed among them. Some even brushed up against him, bringing a frown to his long face.

Ultimately, seeking escape from the throngs, Tuf decided he was hungry. He pressed his way through the fairgoers with dignified distaste, and emerged from the vaulting five-story Ptolan Exhibit Hall. Outside, hundreds of vendors had set up booths between the great buildings. The man selling pop-onion pies seemed least busy of those nearby, and Tuf determined that a pop-onion pie was the very thing he craved.

“Sir,” he said to the vendor, “I would have a pie.”

The pieman was round and pink and wore a greasy apron. He opened his hotbox, reached in with a gloved hand, and extracted a hot pie. When he pushed it across the counter at Tuf, he stared. “Oh,” he said, “you’re a big one.”

“Indeed, sir,” said Haviland Tuf. He picked up the pie and bit into it impassively.

“You’re an offworlder,” the pieman observed. “Not from no place nearby, neither.”

Tuf finished his pie in three neat bites, and cleaned his greasy fingers on a napkin. “You belabor the obvious, sir,” he said. He held up a long, callused finger. “Another,” he said.

Rebuffed, the vendor fetched out another pie without further observations, letting Tuf eat in relative peace. As he savored the flaky crust and tartness within, Tuf studied the milling fairgoers, the rows of vendors’ booths, and the five great halls that loomed over the landscape. When he had done eating, he turned back to the pieman, his face as blank as ever. “Sir. If you will, a question.”

“What’s that?” the other said gruffly.

“I see five exhibition halls,” said Haviland Tuf. “I have visited each in turn.” He pointed. “Brazelourn, Vale Areen, New Janus, Vagabond, and here Ptola.” Tuf folded his hands together neatly atop his bulging stomach. “Five, sir. Five halls, five worlds. No doubt, being a stranger as I am, I am unfamiliar with some subtle point of local usage, yet I am perplexed. In those regions where I have heretofore traveled, a gathering calling itself the Six Worlds Bio-Agricultural Exhibition might be expected to include exhibits from six worlds. Plainly that is not the case here. Perhaps you might enlighten me as to why?”

“No one came from Namor.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“On account of the troubles,” the vendor added.

“All is made clear,” said Tuf. “Or, if not all, at least a portion. Perhaps you would care to serve me another pie, and explain to me the nature of these troubles. I am nothing if not curious, sir. It is my great vice, I fear.”

The pie-man slipped on his glove again and opened the hotbox. “You know what they say. Curiosity makes you hungry.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “I must admit I have never heard them say that before.”

The man frowned. “No, I got it wrong. Hunger makes you curious, that’s what it is. Don’t matter. My pies will fill you up.”

“Ah,” said Tuf. He took up the pie. “Please proceed.”

So the pie-seller told him, at great rambling length, about the troubles on the world Namor. “So you can see,” he finally concluded, “why they didn’t come, with all this going on. Not much to exhibit.”

“Of course,” said Haviland Tuf, dabbing his lips. “Sea monsters can be most vexing.”

Namor was a dark green world, moonless and solitary, banded by wispy golden clouds. The *Ark* shuddered out of drive and settled ponderously into orbit around it. In the long, narrow communications room, Haviland Tuf moved from seat to seat, studying the planet on a dozen of the room’s hundred viewscreens. Three small grey kittens kept him company, bounding across the consoles, pausing only to slap at each other. Tuf paid them no mind.

A water world, Namor had only one landmass decently large enough to be seen from orbit, and that none too large. But magnification revealed thousands of islands scattered in long, crescent-shaped archipelagoes across the deep green seas, earthen jewels strewn throughout the oceans. Other screens showed the lights of dozens of cities and towns on the nightside, and pulsing dots of energy outlay where settlements sat in sunlight.

Tuf looked at it all, and then seated himself, flicked on another console, and began to play a war game with the computer. A kitten bounded up into his lap and went to sleep. He was careful not to disturb it. Sometime later, a second kitten vaulted up and pounced on it, and they began to tussle. Tuf brushed them to the floor.

It took longer than even Tuf had anticipated, but finally the challenge came, as he had known it would. “*Ship in orbit*,” came the demand, “ship in orbit, this is Namor Control. State your name and business. State your name and business, please. Interceptors have been dispatched. State your name and business.”

The transmission was coming from the chief land-mass. The *Ark* tapped into it. At the same time, it found the ship that was moving toward them—there was only one—and flashed it on another screen.

“I am the *Ark*,” Haviland Tuf told Namor Control.

Namor Control was a round-faced woman with close-cropped brown hair, sitting at a console and wearing a deep green uniform with golden piping. She frowned, her eyes flicking to the side, no doubt to a superior or another console. “*Ark*,” she said, “state your homeworld. State your homeworld and your business, please.”

The other ship had opened communications with the planet, the computer indicated. Two more viewscreens lit up. One showed a slender young woman with a large, crooked nose on a ship’s bridge, the other an elderly man before a console. They both wore green uniforms, and they were conversing animatedly in code. It took the computer less

than a minute to break it, so Tuf could listen in. "...damned if I know what it is," the woman on the ship was saying. "There's never been a ship that big. My God, just look at it. Are you getting all this? Has it answered?"

"Ark," the round-faced woman was still saying, "state your homeworld and your business, please. This is Namor Control."

Haviland Tuf cut into the other conversation, to talk to all three of them simultaneously. "This is the *Ark*," he said. "I have no homeworld, sirs. My intentions are purely peaceful—trade and consultation. I learned of your tragic difficulties, and moved by your plight, I have come to offer you my services."

The woman on the ship looked startled. "What are *you* ..." she started. The man was equally nonplussed, but he said nothing, only gaped open-mouthed at Tuf's blank white visage.

"This is Namor Control, *Ark*," said the round-faced woman. "We are closed to trade. Repeat, we are closed to trade. We are under martial law here."

By then the slender woman on the ship had composed herself. "*Ark*, this is Guardian Kefira Qay, commanding NGS *Sunrazor*. We are armed, *Ark*. Explain yourself. You are a thousand times larger than any trader I have ever seen, *Ark*. Explain yourself or be fired upon."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. "Threats will avail you little, Guardian. I am most sorely vexed. I have come all this long way from Braelourn to offer you my aid and solace, and you meet me with threats and hostility." A kitten leapt up into his lap. Tuf scooped it up with a huge white hand, and deposited it on the console in front of him, where the viewer would pick it up. He gazed down at it sorrowfully. "There is no trust left in humanity," he said to the kitten.

"Hold your fire, *Sunrazor*," said the elderly man. "*Ark*, if your intentions are truly peaceful, explain yourself. What are you? We are hard-pressed here, *Ark*, and Namor is a small, undeveloped world. We have never seen your like before. Explain yourself."

Haviland Tuf stroked the kitten. "Always I must truckle to suspicion," he told it. "They are fortunate that I am so kind-hearted, or else I would simply depart and leave them to their fate." He looked up, straight into the viewer. "Sir," he said. "I am the *Ark*. I am Haviland Tuf, captain and master here, crew entire. You are troubled by great monsters from the depths of your seas, I have been told. Very well. I shall rid you of them."

"*Ark*, this is *Sunrazor*. How do you propose doing that?"

"The *Ark* is a seedship of the Ecological Engineering Corps," said Haviland Tuf with stiff formality. "I am an ecological engineer and a specialist in biological warfare."

"Impossible," said the old man. "The EEC was wiped out a thousand years ago, along with the Federal Empire. None of their seedships remain."

"How distressing," said Haviland Tuf. "Here I sit in an illusion. No doubt, now that you have told me my ship does not exist, I shall sink right through it and plunge into your atmosphere, where I shall burn up as I fall."

"Guardian," said Kefira Qay from the *Sunrazor*, "these seedships may indeed no longer exist, but I am fast closing on something that my scopes tell me is almost thirty kilometers long. It does not appear to be an illusion."

"I am not yet falling," admitted Haviland Tuf.

"Can you truly help us?" asked the round-faced woman at Namor Control.

“Why must I always be doubted?” Tuf asked the small grey kitten.

“Lord Guardian, we must give him the chance to prove what he says,” insisted Namor Control.

Tuf looked up. “Threatened, insulted, and doubted as I have been, nonetheless my empathy for your situation bids me to persist. Perhaps I might suggest that *Sunrazor* dock with me, so to speak. Guardian Qay may come aboard and join me for an evening meal, while we converse. Surely your suspicions cannot extend to mere conversation, that most civilized of human pastimes.”

The three Guardians conferred hurriedly with each other and with a person or persons offscreen, while Haviland Tuf sat back and toyed with the kitten. “I shall name you Suspicion,” he said to it, “to commemorate my reception here. Your siblings shall be Doubt, Hostility, Ingratitude and Foolishness.”

“We accept your proposal, Haviland Tuf,” said Guardian Kefira Qay from the bridge of the *Sunrazor*. “Prepare to be boarded.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “Do you like mushrooms?”

The shuttle deck of the *Ark* was as large as the landing field of a major starport, and seemed almost a junkyard for derelict spacecraft. The *Ark*'s own shuttles stood trim in their launch berths, five identical black ships with rakish lines and stubby triangular wings angling back, designed for atmospheric flight and still in good repair. Other craft were less impressive. A teardrop-shaped trading vessel from Avalon squatted wearily on three extended landing legs, next to a driveshift courier scored by battle, and a Karaleo lionboat whose ornate trim was largely gone. Elsewhere stood vessels of stranger, more alien design.

Above, the great dome cracked into a hundred pie-wedge segments, and drew back to reveal a small yellow sun surrounded by stars, and a dull green manta-shaped ship of about the same size as one of Tuf's shuttles. The *Sunrazor* settled, and the dome closed behind it. When the stars had been blotted out again, atmosphere came swirling back in to the deck, and Haviland Tuf arrived soon after.

Kefira Qay emerged from her ship with her lips set sternly beneath her big, crooked nose, but no amount of control could quite conceal the awe in her eyes. Two armed men in golden coveralls trimmed with green followed her.

Haviland Tuf drove up to them in an open three-wheeled cart. “I am afraid that my dinner invitation was only for one, Guardian Qay,” he said when he saw her escort. “I regret any misunderstanding, yet I must insist.”

“Very well,” she said. She turned to her guard. “Wait with the others. You have your orders.” When she got in next to Tuf she told him, “The *Sunrazor* will tear your ship apart if I am not returned safely within two standard hours.”

Haviland Tuf blinked at her. “Dreadful,” he said. “Everywhere my warmth and hospitality is met with mistrust and violence.” He set the vehicle into motion.

They drove in silence through a maze of interconnected rooms and corridors, and finally entered a huge shadowy shaft that seemed to extend the full length of the ship in both directions. Transparent vats of a hundred different sizes covered walls and ceiling as far as the eye could see, most empty and dusty, a few filled with colored liquids in which half-seen shapes stirred feebly. There was no sound but a wet, viscous dripping somewhere off behind them. Kefira Qay studied everything and said nothing. They went at least three kilometers down the great shaft, until Tuf veered off into a blank wall that dilated before them. Shortly thereafter they parked and dismounted.

A sumptuous meal had been laid out in the small, spartan dining chamber to which Tuf escorted the Guardian Kefira Qay. They began with iced soup, sweet and piquant and black as coal, followed by neograss salads with a

gingery topping. The main course was a breaded mushroom top full as large as the plate on which it was served, surrounded by a dozen different sorts of vegetables in individual sauces. The Guardian ate with great relish.

“It would appear you find my humble fare to your taste,” observed Haviland Tuf.

“I haven’t had a good meal in longer than I care to admit,” replied Kefira Qay. “On Namor, we have always depended on the sea for our sustenance. Normally it is bountiful, but since our troubles began...” She lifted a forkful of dark, misshapen vegetables in a yellow-brown sauce. “What am I eating? It’s delightful.”

“Rhiannese sinners’ root, in a mustard sauce,” Haviland Tuf said.

Qay swallowed and set down her fork. “But Rhiannon is so far, how do you...” She stopped.

“Of course,” Tuf said, steepling his fingers beneath his chin as he watched her face. “All this provender derives from the *Ark*, though originally it might be traced back to a dozen different worlds. Would you like more spiced milk?”

“No,” she muttered. She gazed at the empty plates. “You weren’t lying, then. You are what you claim, and this is a seedship of the... what did you call them?”

“The Ecological Engineering Corps, of the long-defunct Federal Empire. Their ships were few in number, and all but one destroyed by the vicissitudes of war. The *Ark* alone survived, derelict for a millennium. The details need not concern you. Suffice it to say that I found it, and made it functional.”

“You *found* it?”

“I believe I just said as much, in those very same words. Kindly pay attention. I am not partial to repeating myself. Before finding the *Ark*, I made a humble living from trade. My former ship is still on the landing deck. Perhaps you chanced to see it.”

“Then you’re really just a trader.”

“Please!” said Tuf with indignation. “I am an ecological engineer. The *Ark* can remake whole planets, Guardian. True, I am but one man, alone, when once this ship was crewed by two hundred, and I do lack the extensive formal training such as was given centuries ago to those who wore the golden theta, the sigil of the Ecological Engineers. Yet, in my own small way, I contrive to muddle through. If Namor would care to avail itself of my services, I have no doubt that I can help you.”

“Why?” the slender Guardian asked warily. “Why are you so anxious to help us?”

Haviland Tuf spread his big white hands helplessly. “I know, I might appear a fool. I cannot help myself. I am a humanitarian by nature, much moved by hardship and suffering. I could no more abandon your people, beset as they are, than I could harm one of my cats. The Ecological Engineers were made of sterner stuff, I fear, but I am helpless to change my sentimental nature. So here I sit before you, prepared to do my best.”

“You want nothing?”

“I shall labor without recompense,” said Tuf. “Of course, I will have operating expenses. I must charge a small fee to offset them. Say, three million standards. Do you think that fair?”

“Fair,” she said sarcastically. “Fairly high, I’d say. There have been others like you, Tuf—arms merchants and soldiers of fortune who have come to grow rich off our misery.”

“Guardian,” said Tuf, reproachfully, “you do me grievous wrong. I take little for myself. The *Ark* is so large, so costly. Perhaps two million standards would suffice? I cannot believe you would grudge me this pittance. Is your world worth less?”

Kefira Qay sighed, a tired look etched on her narrow face. “No,” she admitted. “Not if you can do all you promise. Of course, we are not a rich world. I will have to consult my superiors. This is not my decision alone.” She stood up abruptly. “Your communications facilities?”

“Through the door and left down the blue corridor. The fifth door on the right.” Tuf rose with ponderous dignity, and began cleaning up as she left.

When the Guardian returned he had opened a decanter of liquor, vividly scarlet, and was stroking a black-and-white cat who had made herself at home on the table. “You’re hired, Tuf,” said Kefira Qay, seating herself. “Two million standards. *After* you win this war.”

“Agreed,” said Tuf. “Let us discuss your situation over glasses of this delightful beverage.”

“Alcoholic?”

“Mildly narcotic.”

“A Guardian uses no stimulants or depressants. We are a fighting guild. Substances like that pollute the body and slow the reflexes. A Guardian must be vigilant. We guard and protect.”

“Laudable,” said Haviland Tuf. He filled his own glass.

“*Sunrazor* is wasted here. It has been recalled by Namor Control. We need its combat capabilities below.”

“I shall expedite its departure, then. And yourself?”

“I have been detached,” she said, wrinkling up her face. “We are standing by with data on the situation below. I am to help brief you, and act as your liaison officer.”

The water was calm, a tranquil green mirror from horizon to horizon.

It was a hot day. Bright yellow sunlight poured down through a thin bank of gilded clouds. The ship rested still on the water, its metallic sides flashing silver-blue, its open deck a small island of activity in an ocean of peace. Men and women small as insects worked the dredges and nets, bare-chested in the heat. A great claw full of mud and weeds emerged from the water, dripping, and was sluiced down an open hatchway. Elsewhere bins of huge milky jellyfish baked in the sun.

Suddenly there was agitation. For no apparent reason, people began to run. Others stopped what they were doing and looked around, confused. Still others worked on, oblivious. The great metal claw, open and empty now, swung back out over the water and submerged again, even as another one rose on the far side of the ship. More people were running. Two men collided and went down.

Then the first tentacle came curling up from beneath the ship.

It rose and rose. It was longer than the dredging claws. Where it emerged from the dark green sea, it looked as thick as a big man’s torso. It tapered to the size of an arm. The tentacle was white, a soft slimy sort of white. All along its underside were vivid pink circles big as dinner plates, circles that writhed and pulsed as the tentacle

curled over and about the huge farming ship. The end of the tentacle split into a rat's nest of smaller tentacles, dark and restless as snakes.

Up and up it went, and then over and down, pinioning the ship. Something moved on the other side, something pale stirring beneath all that green, and the second tentacle emerged. Then a third, and a fourth. One wrestled with a dredging claw. Another had the remains of a net draped all about it, like a veil, which didn't seem to hinder it. Now all the people were running—all but those the tentacles had found. One of them had curled itself around a woman with an axe. She hacked at it wildly, thrashing in the pale embrace, until her back arched and suddenly she fell still. The tentacle dropped her, white fluid pulsing feebly from the gashes she had left, and seized someone else.

Twenty tentacles had attached themselves when the ship abruptly listed to starboard. Survivors slid across the deck and into the sea. The ship tilted more and more. Something was pushing it over, pulling it down. Water sloshed across the side, and into the open hatchways. Then the ship began to break up.

Haviland Tuf stopped the projection, and held the image on the large viewscreen: the green sea and golden sun, the shattered vessel, the pale embracing tentacles. "This was the first attack?" he asked.

"Yes and no," replied Kefira Qay. "Prior to this, one other harvester and two passenger hydrofoils had vanished mysteriously. We were investigating, but we did not know the cause. In this case, a news crew happened to be on the site, making a recording for an educational broadcast. They got more than they bargained for."

"Indeed," said Tuf.

"They were airborne, in a skimmer. The broadcast that night almost caused a panic. But it was not until the next ship went down that things began to get truly serious. That was when the Guardians began to realize the full extent of the problem."

Haviland Tuf stared up at the viewscreen, his heavy face impassive, expressionless, his hands resting on the console. A black-and-white kitten began to bat at his fingers. "Away, Foolishness," he said, depositing the kitten gently on the floor.

"Enlarge a section of one of the tentacles," suggested the Guardian beside him.

Silently, Tuf did as she bid him. A second screen lit up, showing a grainy close-up of a great pale rope of tissue arching over the deck.

"Take a good look at one of the suckers," said Qay. "The pink areas, there, you see?"

"The third one from the end is dark within. And it appears to have teeth."

"Yes," said Kefira Qay. "All of them do. The outer lips of those suckers are a kind of hard, fleshy flange. Slapped down, they spread and create a vacuum seal of sorts, virtually impossible to tear loose. But each of them is a mouth, too. Within the flange is a soft pink flap that falls back, and then the teeth come sliding out—a triple row of them, serrated, and sharper than you'd think. Now move down to the tendrils at the end, if you would."

Tuf touched the console, and put another magnification up on a third screen, bringing the twisting snakes into easy view.

"Eyes," said Kefira Qay. "At the end of every one of those tendrils. Twenty eyes. The tentacles don't need to grope around blindly. They can *see* what they are doing."

"Fascinating," said Haviland Tuf. "What lies beneath the water? The source of these terrible arms?"



“There are cross-sections and photographs of dead specimens later on, as well as some computer simulations. Most of the specimens we took were quite badly mangled. The main body of the thing is sort of an inverted cup, like a half-inflated bladder, surrounded by a great ring of bone and muscle that anchors these tentacles. The bladder fills and empties with water to enable the creature to rise to the surface, or descend far below—the submarine principle. By itself it doesn’t weigh much, although it is amazingly strong. What it does, it empties its bladder to rise to the surface, grabs hold, and then begins to fill again. The capacity of the bladder is astounding, and as you can see, the creature is *huge*. If need be, it can even force water *up* those tentacles and out of its mouths, in order to flood the vessel and speed things along. So those tentacles are arms, mouths, eyes, and living hoses all at once.”

“And you say that your people had no knowledge of such creatures until this attack?”

“Right. A cousin of this thing, the Namorian man-of-war, was well-known in the early days of colonization. It was sort of a cross between a jellyfish and an octopus, with twenty arms. Many native species are built along the same lines—a central bladder, or body, or shell, or what have you, with twenty legs or tendrils or tentacles in a ring around it. The men-of-war were carnivores, much like this monster, although they had a ring of eyes on the central body instead of at the end of the tentacles. The arms couldn’t function as hoses, either. And they were much smaller—about the size of a human. They bobbed about on the surface above the continental shelves, particularly above mud-pot beds, where fish were thick. Fish were their usual prey, although a few unwary swimmers met a bloody awful death in their embrace.”

“Might I ask what became of them?” said Tuf.

“They were a nuisance. Their hunting grounds were the same areas we needed—shallows rich with fish and seagrass and waterfruit, over mud-pot beds and scabbler runs full of chameleon-clams and bobbing freddies. Before we could harvest or farm safely, we had to pretty much clean out the men-of-war. We did. Oh, there are still a few around, but they are rare now.”

“I see,” said Haviland Tuf. “And this most formidable creature, this living submarine and ship-eater that plagues you so dreadfully, does it have a name?”

“The Namorian dreadnaught,” said Kefira Qay. “When it first appeared, we theorized it was an inhabitant of the great deeps that had somehow wandered to the surface. Namor has been inhabited for barely a hundred standard years, after all. We have scarcely begun to explore the deeper regions of the seas, and we have little knowledge of the things that might live down there. But as more and more ships were attacked and sunk, it became obvious that we had an army of dreadnaughts to contend with.”

“A navy,” corrected Haviland Tuf.

Kefira Qay scowled. “Whatever. A *lot* of them, not one lost specimen. At that point the theory was that some unimaginable catastrophe had taken place deep under the ocean, driving forth this entire species.”

“You give no credit to this theory,” Tuf said.

“No one does. It’s been disproved. The dreadnaughts wouldn’t be able to withstand the pressures at those depths. So now we don’t know where they came from.” She made a face. “Only that they are here.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “No doubt you fought back.”

“Certainly. A game but losing fight. Namor is a young planet, with neither the population nor the resources for the sort of struggle we have been plunged into. Three million Namorians are scattered across our seas, on more than seventeen thousand small islands. Another million huddle on New Atlantis, our single small continent. Most of our people are fisherfolk and sea-farmers. When this all began, the Guardians numbered barely fifty thousand. Our

guild is descended from the crews of the ships who brought the colonists from Old Poseidon and Aquarius here to Namor. We have always protected them, but before the coming of the dreadnaughts our task was simple. Our world was peaceful, with little real conflict. There was some ethnic rivalry between Poseidonites and Aquarians, but it was good-natured.

The Guardians provided planetary defense, with *Sunrazor* and two similar craft, but most of our work was in fire and flood control, disaster relief, police work, that sort of thing. We had about a hundred armed hydrofoil patrol boats, and we used them for escort duty for a while, and inflicted some casualties, but they were really no match for the dreadnaughts. It soon became clear that there were more dreadnaughts than patrol boats, anyway.”

“Nor do patrol boats reproduce, as I must assume these dreadnaughts do,” Tuf said. Foolishness and Doubt were tussling in his lap.

“Exactly. Still, we tried. We dropped depth charges on them when we detected them below the sea, we torpedoed them when they came to the surface. We killed hundreds. But there were hundreds more, and every boat we lost was irreplaceable. Namor has no technological base to speak of. In better days, we imported what we needed from Brazelourn and Vale Aren. Our people believed in a simple life. The planet couldn’t support industry anyway. It is poor in heavy metals and has almost no fossil fuel.”

“How many Guardian patrol boats remain to you?” asked Haviland Tuf.

“Perhaps thirty. We dare not use them anymore. Within a year of the first attack, the dreadnaughts were in complete command of our sea lanes. All of the great harvesters were lost, hundreds of sea-farms had been abandoned or destroyed, half of the small fisherfolk were dead, and the other half huddled fearfully in port. Nothing human dared move on the seas of Namor.”

“Your islands were isolated from one another?”

“Not quite,” Kefira Qay replied. “The Guardians had twenty armed skimmers, and there were another hundred-odd skimmers and aircars in private hands. We commandeered them, armed them. We also had our airships. Skimmers and aircars are difficult and expensive to maintain here. Parts are hard to come by, and we have few trained techs, so most of the air traffic before the troubles was carried by airships—solar-powered, helium-filled, large. There was quite a sizable fleet, as many as a thousand. The airships took over the provisioning of some of the small islands, where starvation was a very real threat. Other airships, as well as the Guardian skimmers, carried on the fight. We dumped chemicals, poisons, explosives and such from the safety of the air and destroyed thousands of dreadnaughts, although the cost was frightful. They clustered thickest about our best fishing grounds and mud-pot beds, so we were forced to blow up and poison the very areas we needed most. Still, we had no choice. For a time, we thought we were winning the fight. A few fishing boats even put out and returned safely, with a Guardian skimmer flying escort.”

“Obviously, this was not the ultimate result of the conflict,” said Haviland Tuf, “or we would not be sitting here talking.” Doubt batted Foolishness soundly across the head, and the smaller kitten fell off Tuf’s knee to the floor. Tuf bent and scooped him up. “Here,” he said, handing him to Kefira Qay, “hold him, if you please. Their small war is distracting me from your larger one.”

“I—why, of course.” The Guardian took the small black-and-white kitten in hand gingerly. He fit snugly into her palm. “What is it?” she asked.

“A cat,” said Tuf. “He will jump out of your hand if you continue to hold him as if he were a diseased fruit. Kindly put him in your lap. I assure you he is harmless.”

Kefira Qay, appearing very uncertain, shook the kitten out of her hand onto her knees. Foolishness yowled, almost tumbling to the floor again before sinking his small claws into the fabric of her uniform. “*Oh*,” said Kefira Qay. “It has talons.”

“Claws,” corrected Tuf. “Tiny and harmless.”

“They aren’t poisoned, are they?”

“I think not,” said Tuf. “Stroke him, front to back. It will make him less agitated.”

Kefira Qay touched the kitten’s head uncertainly.

“Please,” said Tuf. “I said *stroke*, not pat.”

The Guardian began to pet the kitten. Instantly, Foolishness began to purr. She stopped and looked up in horror. “It’s trembling,” she said, “and making a noise.”

“Such a response is considered favorable,” Tuf assured her. “I beg you to continue your ministrations, and your briefing. If you will.”

“Of course,” said Qay. She resumed petting Foolishness, who settled down comfortably on her knee. “If you would go on to the next tape,” she prompted.

Tuf wiped the stricken ship and the dreadnaught off the main screen. Another scene took their place—a winter’s day, windy and chilly by the look of it. The water below was dark and choppy, flecked with white foam as the wind pushed against it. A dreadnaught was afloat the unruly sea, its huge white tentacles extended all around it, giving it the look of some vast swollen flower bobbing on the waves. It reached up as they passed overhead, two arms with their writhing snakes lifting feebly from the water, but they were too far above to be in danger. They appeared to be in the gondola of some long silver airship, looking down through a glass-bottomed viewport, and as Tuf watched, the vantage point shifted and he saw that they were part of a convoy of three immense airships, cruising with stately indifference above the war-torn waters.

“The *Spirit of Aquarius*, the *Lyle D.*, and the *Skyshadow*,” said Kefira Qay, “on a relief mission to a small island grouping in the north where famine had been raging. They were going to evacuate the survivors and take them back to New Atlantis.” Her voice was grim. “This record was made by a news crew on the *Skyshadow*, the only airship to survive. Watch.”

On and on the airships sailed, invincible and serene. Then, just ahead of the silver-blue *Spirit of Aquarius*, there was motion in the water, something stirring beneath that dark green veil. Something big, but not a dreadnaught. It was dark, not pale. The water grew black and blacker in a great swelling patch, then bulged upward. A great ebony dome heaved into view and grew, like an island emerging from the depths, black and leathery and immense, and surrounded by twenty long black tentacles. Larger and higher it swelled, second by second, until it burst from the sea entirely. Its tentacles hung below it, dripping water, as it rose. Then they began to lift and spread. The thing was fully as large as the airship moving toward it. When they met, it was as if two vast leviathans of the sky had come together to mate.

The black immensity settled atop the long silver-blue dirigible, its arms curling about in a deadly embrace. They watched the airship’s outer skin tear asunder, and the helium cells rip and crumple. The *Spirit of Aquarius* twisted and buckled like a living thing, and shriveled in the black embrace of its lover. When it was over, the dark creature dropped the remains into the sea.

Tuf froze the image, staring with solemn regard at the small figures leaping from the doomed gondola.

“Another one got the *Lyle D.* on the way home,” said Kefira Qay. “The *Skyshadow* survived to tell the story, but it never returned from its next mission. More than a hundred airships and twelve skimmers were lost in the first week the fire-balloons emerged.”

“Fire-balloons?” queried Haviland Tuf. He stroked Doubt, who was sitting on his console. “I saw no fire.”

“The name was coined the first time we destroyed one of the accursed things. A Guardian skimmer put a round of explosive shot into it, and it went up like a bomb, then sank, burning into the sea. They are extremely inflammable. One laser burst, and they go up spectacularly.”

“Hydrogen,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Exactly,” the Guardian confirmed. “We’ve never taken one whole, but we’ve puzzled them out from bits and pieces. The creatures can generate an electric current internally. They take on water, and perform a sort of biological electrolysis. The oxygen is vented into the water or the air, and helps push the things around. Air jets, so to speak. The hydrogen fills the balloon sacs and gives them lift. When they want to retreat to the water, they open a flap on top—see, up there—and all the gas escapes, so the fire-balloon drops back into the sea. The outer skin is leathery, very tough. They’re slow, but clever. At times they hide in cloud banks and snatch unwary skimmers flying below. And we soon discovered, to our dismay, that they breed just as fast as the dreadnaughts.”

“Most intriguing,” said Haviland Tuf. “So, I might venture to suggest, with the emergence of these fire-balloons, you lost the sky as well as the sea.”

“More or less,” admitted Kefira Qay. “Our airships were simply too slow to risk. We tried to keep things going by sending them out in convoys, escorted by Guardian skimmers and aircars, but even that failed. The morning of the Fire Dawn... I was there, commanding a nine-gun skimmer... it was terrible...”

“Continue,” said Tuf.

“The Fire Dawn,” she muttered bleakly. “We were... we had thirty airships, *thirty*, a great convoy, protected by a dozen armed skimmers. A long trip, from New Atlantis to the Broken Hand, a major island grouping. Near dawn on the second day, just as the east was turning red, the sea beneath us began to... seethe. Like a pot of soup that has begun to boil. It was *them*, venting oxygen and water, rising. Thousands of them, Tuf, thousands. The waters churned madly, and they rose, all those vast black shadows coming up at us, as far as the eye could see in all directions. We attacked with lasers, with explosive shells, with everything we had. It was like the sky itself was ablaze. All those things were bulging with hydrogen, and the air was rich and giddy with the oxygen they had vented. The Fire Dawn, we call it. It was terrible. Screaming everywhere, balloons burning, our airships crushed and falling around us, bodies afire. There were dreadnaughts waiting below, too. I saw them snatching swimmers who had fallen from the airships, those pale tentacles coiling around them and yanking them under. Four skimmers escaped from that battle. Four. Every airship was lost, with all hands.”

“A grim tale,” said Tuf.

Kefira Qay had a haunted look in her eyes. She was petting Foolishness with a blind rhythm, her lips pressed tightly together, her eyes fixed on the screen, where the first fire-balloon floated above the tumbling corpse of the *Spirit of Aquarius*. “Since then,” she said at last, “life has been a continuing nightmare. We have lost our seas. On three-fourths of Namor, hunger and even starvation hold sway. Only New Atlantis still has surplus food, since only there is land-farming practiced extensively. The Guardians have continued to fight. and our two other spacecraft have been pressed into service—bombing runs, dumping poison, evacuating some of the smaller islands. With aircars and fast skimmers, we have maintained a loose web of contact with the outer islands. And we have radio, of course. But we are barely hanging on. Within the last year, more than twenty islands have fallen silent. We sent patrols out to investigate in a half-dozen of those cases. Those that returned all reported the same things. Bodies everywhere, rotting in the sun. Buildings crushed and ruined. Scrabblers and crawling maggies feasting on the corpses. And on one island they found something else, something even more frightful. The island was Seastar. Almost forty thousand people lived there, and it was a major spaceport as well, before trade was cut off. It was a terrible shock when Seastar suddenly stopped broadcasting. Go to the next exhibit, Tuf. Go on.”

Tuf pressed a series of lights on the console.

A dead thing was lying on a beach, rotting on indigo sands.

It was a still picture, this one, not a tape. Haviland Tuf and Guardian Kefira Qay had a long time to study the dead thing where it sprawled, rich and rotten. Around and about it was a litter of human corpses, lending it scale by their proximity. The dead thing was shaped like an inverted bowl, and it was as big as a house. Its leathery flesh, cracked and oozing pustulence now, was a mottled grey-green. Spread on the sand around it, like spokes from a central wheel, were the thing's appendages—ten twisted green tentacles, puckered with pinkish-white mouths and, alternately, ten limbs that looked stiff and hard and black, and were obviously jointed.

"Legs," said Kefira Qay bitterly. "It was a walker, Tuf, before they killed it. We have only found that one specimen, but it was enough. We know why our islands fall silent now. They come from out of the sea, Tuf. Things like that. Larger, smaller, walking on ten legs like spiders and grabbing and eating with the other ten, the tentacles. The carapace is thick and tough. A single explosive shell or laser burst won't kill one of these the way it would a fire-balloon. So now you understand. First the sea, then the air, and now it has begun on the land as well. The *land*. They burst from the water in thousands, striding up onto the sand like some terrible tide. Two islands were overrun last week alone. They mean to wipe us from this planet. No doubt a few of us will survive on New Atlantis, in the high inland mountains, but it will be a cruel life and a short one. Until Namor throws something new at us, some new thing out of nightmare." Her voice had a wild edge of hysteria.

Haviland Tuf turned off his console, and the telescreens all went black. "Calm yourself, Guardian," he said, turning to face her. "Your fears are understandable but unnecessary. I appreciate your plight more fully now. A tragic one indeed, yet not hopeless."

"You still think you can help?" she said. "Alone? You and this ship? Oh, I'm not discouraging you, by any means. We'll grasp at any straw. But..."

"But you do not believe," Tuf said. A small sigh escaped his lips. "Doubt," he said to the grey kitten, hoisting him up in a huge white hand, "you are indeed well named." He shifted his gaze back to Kefira Qay. "I am a forgiving man, and you have been through many cruel hardships, so I shall take no notice of the casual way you belittle me and my abilities. Now, if you might excuse me, I have work to do. Your people have sent up a great many more detailed reports on these creatures, and on Namorian ecology in general. It is vital that I peruse these, in order to understand and analyze the situation. Thank you for your briefing."

Kefira Qay frowned, lifted Foolishness from her knee and set him on the ground, and stood up. "Very well," she said. "How soon will you be ready?"

"I cannot ascertain that with any degree of accuracy," Tuf replied, "until I have had a chance to run some simulations. Perhaps a day and we shall begin. Perhaps a month. Perhaps longer."

"If you take too long, you'll find it difficult to collect your two million," she snapped. "We'll all be dead."

"Indeed," said Tuf. "I shall strive to avoid that scenario. Now, if you would let me work. We shall converse again at dinner. I shall serve vegetable stew in the fashion of Arion, with plates of Thorite fire mushrooms to whet our appetites."

Qay sighed loudly. "Mushrooms again?" she complained. "We had stir-fried mushrooms and peppers for lunch, and crisped mushrooms in bitter cream for breakfast."

"I am fond of mushrooms," said Haviland Tuf.

"I am weary of mushrooms," said Kefira Qay. Foolishness rubbed up against her leg, and she frowned down at him. "Might I suggest some meat? Or seafood?" She looked wistful. "It has been years since I've had a mud-pot. I

dream of it sometimes. Crack it open and pour butter inside, and spoon out the soft meat... you can't imagine how fine it was. Or sabrefin. Ah, I'd kill for a sabrefin on a bed of seagrass!"

Haviland Tuf looked stern. "We do not eat animals here," he said. He set to work, ignoring her, and Kefira Qay took her leave. Foolishness went bounding after her. "Appropriate," muttered Tuf, "indeed."

Four days and many mushrooms later, Kefira Qay began to pressure Haviland Tuf for results. "What are you *doing*?" she demanded over dinner. "When are you going to act? Every day you seclude yourself and every day conditions on Namor worsen. I spoke to Lord Guardian Harvan an hour ago, while you were off with your computers. Little Aquarius and the Dancing Sisters have been lost while you and I are up here dithering, Tuf."

"Dithering?" said Haviland Tuf. "Guardian, I do not dither. I have never dithered, nor do I intend to begin dithering now. I work. There is a great mass of information to digest."

Kefira Qay snorted. "A great mass of mushrooms to digest, you mean," she said. She stood up, tipping Foolishness from her lap. The kitten and she had become boon companions of late. "Twelve thousand people lived on Little Aquarius," she said; "and almost as many on the Dancing Sisters. Think of that while you're digesting, Tuf." She spun and stalked out of the room.

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. He returned his attention to his sweet-flower pie.

A week passed before they clashed again. "Well?" the Guardian demanded one day In the corridor, stepping in front of Tuf as he lumbered with great dignity down to his work room.

"Well," he repeated. "Good day, Guardian Qay."

"It is not a good day," she said querulously. "Namor Control tells me the Sunrise Islands are gone. Overrun. And a dozen skimmers lost defending them, along with all the ships drawn up in those harbors. What do you say to that?"

"Most tragic," replied Tuf. "Regrettable."

"When are you going to be ready?"

He gave a great shrug. "I cannot say. This is no simple task you have set me. A most complex problem. Complex. Yes, indeed, that is the very word. Perhaps I might even say mystifying. I assure you that Namor's sad plight has fully engaged my sympathies, however, and this problem has similarly engaged my intellect."

"That's all it is to you, Tuf, isn't it? A problem?"

Haviland Tuf frowned slightly, and folded his hands before him, resting them atop his bulging stomach. "A problem indeed," he said.

"No. It is not just a problem. This is no game we are playing. Real people are dying down there. Dying because the Guardians are not equal to their trust, and because you do nothing. *Nothing.*"

"Calm yourself. You have my assurance that I am laboring ceaselessly on your behalf. You must consider that my task is not so simple as yours. It is all very well and good to drop bombs on a dreadnaught, or fire shells into a fire-balloon and watch it burn. Yet these simple, quaint methods have availed you little, Guardian. Ecological engineering is a far more demanding business. I study the reports of your leaders, your marine biologists, your

historians. I reflect and analyze. I devise various approaches, and run simulations on the *Ark*'s great computers. Sooner or later I shall find your answer."

"Sooner," said Kefira Qay, in a hard voice. "Namor wants results, and I agree. The Council of Guardians is impatient. Sooner, Tuf. Not later. I warn you." She stepped aside, and let him pass.

Kefira Qay spent the next week and a half avoiding Tuf as much as possible. She skipped dinner and scowled when she saw him in the corridors. Each day she repaired to the communications room, where she had long discussions with her superiors below, and kept up on all the latest news. It was bad. All the news was bad.

Finally, things came to a head. Pale-faced and furious, she stalked into the darkened chamber Tuf called his "war room," where she found him sitting before a bank of computer screens, watching red and blue lines chase each other across a grid. "*Tuf!*" she roared. He turned off the screen and swung to face her, batting away Ingratitude. Shrouded by shadows, he regarded her impassively. "The Council of Guardians has given me an order," she said.

"How fortunate for you," Tuf replied. "I know you have been growing restless of late from inactivity." "The Council wants immediate action, Tuf. *Immediate*. Today. Do you understand?"

Tuf steepled his hands beneath his chin, almost in an attitude of prayer. "Must I tolerate not only hostility and impatience, but slurs on my intelligence as well? I understand all that needs understanding about your Guardians, I assure you. It is only the peculiar and perverse ecology of Namor that I do not understand. Until I have acquired that understanding, I cannot act."

"You *will* act," said Kefira Qay. Suddenly a laser pistol was in her hand, aimed at Tuf's broad paunch. "You will act now."

Haviland Tuf reacted not at all. "Violence," he said, in a voice of mild reproach. "Perhaps, before you burn a hole in me and thereby doom yourself and your world, you might give me the opportunity to explain?"

"Go on," she said. "I'll listen. For a little while."

"Excellent," said Haviland Tuf. "Guardian, something very odd is happening on Namor."

"You've noticed," she said drily. The laser did not move.

"Indeed. You are being destroyed by an infestation of creatures that we must, for want of a better term, collectively dub *sea monsters*. Three species have appeared, in less than half a dozen standard years. Each of these species is apparently new, or at least unknown. This strikes me as unlikely in the extreme. Your people have been on Namor for one hundred years, yet not until recently have you had any knowledge of these things you call dreadnaughts, fire-balloons, and walkers. It is almost as if some dark analogue of my *Ark* were waging biowar upon you, yet obviously that is not the case. New or old, these sea monsters are native to Namor, a product of local evolution. Their close relatives fill your seas—the mud-pots, the bobbing freddies, the jellydancers and men-of-war. So. Where does that leave us?"

"I don't know," said Kefira Qay.

"Nor do I," Tuf said. "Consider further. These sea monsters breed in vast numbers. The sea teems with them, they fill the air, they overrun populous islands. They kill. Yet they do not kill each other, nor do they seem to have any other natural enemies. The cruel checks of a normal ecosystem do not apply. I have studied the reports of your scientists with great interest. Much about these sea monsters is fascinating, but perhaps most intriguing is the fact that you know nothing about them except in their full adult form. Vast dreadnaughts prowl the seas and sink ships,

monstrous fire-balloons swirl across your skies. Where, might I ask, are the little dreadnaughts, the baby balloons? Where indeed.”

“Deep under the sea.”

“Perhaps, Guardian, perhaps. You cannot say for certain, nor can I. These monsters are most formidable creatures, yet I have seen equally formidable predators on other worlds. They do not number in hundreds or thousands. Why? Ah, because the young, or the eggs, or the hatchlings, they are less formidable than the parents, and most die long before reaching their terrible maturity. This does not appear to happen on Namor. It does not appear to happen at all. What can it all mean? What indeed.” Tuf shrugged. “I cannot say, but I work on, I think, I endeavor to solve the riddle of your overabundant sea.”

Kefira Qay grimaced. “And meanwhile, we die. We die, and you don’t care.”

“I protest!” Tuf began.

“Silence!” she said, waving the laser. “I’ll talk now, you’ve given your speech. Today we lost contact with the Broken Hand. Forty-three islands, Tuf. I’m afraid to even think how many people. All gone now, in a single day. A few garbled radio transmissions, hysteria, and silence. And you sit and talk about riddles. No more. You *will* take action now. I insist. Or threaten, if you prefer. Later, we will solve the whys and hows of these things. For the moment, we will kill them, without pausing for questions.”

“Once,” said Haviland Tuf, “there was a world idyllic but for a single flaw—an insect the size of a dust mote. It was a harmless creature, but it was everywhere. It fed on the microscopic spores of a floating fungus. The folk of this world hated the tiny insect, which sometimes flew about in clouds so thick they obscured the sun. When citizens went outdoors, the insects would land on them by the thousands, covering their bodies with a living shroud. So a would-be ecological engineer proposed to solve their problem. From a distant world, he introduced another insect, larger, to prey on the living dust motes. The scheme worked admirably. The new insects multiplied and multiplied, having no natural enemies in this ecosystem, until they had entirely wiped out the native species. It was a great triumph. Unfortunately, there were unforeseen side effects. The invader, having destroyed one form of life, moved on to other, more beneficial sorts. Many native insects became extinct. The local analogue of bird life, deprived of its customary prey and unable to digest the alien bug, also suffered grievously. Plants were not pollinated as before. Whole forests and jungles changed and withered. And the spores of the fungus that had been the food of the original nuisance were left unchecked. The fungus grew everywhere—on buildings, on food crops, even on living animals. In short, the ecosystem was wrenched entirely askew. Today, should you visit, you would find a planet dead but for a terrible fungus. Such are the fruits of hasty action, with insufficient study. There are grave risks should one move without understanding.”

“And certain destruction if one fails to move at all,” Kefira Qay said stubbornly. “No, Tuf. You tell frightening tales, but we are a desperate people. The Guardians accept whatever risks there may be. I have my orders. Unless you do as I bid, I will use this.” She nodded at her laser.

Haviland Tuf folded his arms. “If you use that,” he said, “you will be very foolish. No doubt you could learn to operate the *Ark*. In time. The task would take years, which by your own admission you do not have. I shall work on in your behalf, and forgive you your crude bluster and your threats, but I shall move only when I deem myself ready. I am an ecological engineer. I have my personal and professional integrity. And I must point out that, without my services, you are utterly without hope. Utterly. So, since you know this and I know this, let us dispense with further drama. You will not use that laser.”

For a moment, Kefira Qay’s face looked stricken. “You...” she said in confusion; the laser wavered just a bit. Then her look hardened once again. “You’re wrong, Tuf,” she said. “I *will* use it.”

Haviland Tuf said nothing.



“Not on you,” she said. “On your cats. I will kill one of them every day, until you take action.” Her wrist moved slightly, so the laser was trained not on Tuf, but on the small form of Ingratitude, who was prowling hither and yon about the room, poking at shadows. “I will start with this one,” the Guardian said. “On the count of three.”

Tuf’s face was utterly without emotion. He stared. “One,” said Kefira Qay.

Tuf sat immobile.

“Two,” she said.

Tuf frowned, and there were wrinkles in his chalk-white brow.

“Three,” Qay blurted.

“No,” Tuf said quickly. “Do not fire. I shall do as you insist. I can begin cloning within the hour.” The Guardian bolstered her laser.

So Haviland Tuf went reluctantly to war.

On the first day he sat in his war room before his great console, tight-lipped and quiet, turning dials and pressing glowing buttons and phantom holographic keys. Elsewhere on the *Ark*, murky liquids of many shades and colors spilled and gurgled into the empty vats along the shadowy main shaft, while specimens from the great cell library were shifted and sprayed and manipulated by tiny waldoes as sensitive as the hands of a master surgeon. Tuf saw none of it. He remained at his post, starting one clone after another.

On the second day he did the same.

On the third day he rose and strolled slowly down the kilometers-long shaft where his creations had begun to grow, indistinct forms that stirred feebly or not at all in the tanks of translucent liquid. Some tanks were fully as large as the *Ark*’s shuttle deck, others as small as a fingernail. Haviland Tuf paused by each one, studied the dials and meters and glowing spyscopes with quiet intensity, and sometimes made small adjustments. By the end of the day he had progressed, only half the length of the long, echoing row.

On the fourth day he completed his rounds.

On the fifth day he threw in the chronowarp. “Time is its slave,” he told Kefira Qay when she asked him. “It can hold it slow, or bid it hurry. We shall make it run, so the warriors I breed can reach maturity more quickly than in nature.”

On the sixth day he busied himself on the shuttle deck, modifying two of his shuttles to carry the creatures he was fashioning, adding tanks great and small and filling them with water.

On the morning of the seventh day he joined Kefira Qay for breakfast and said, “Guardian, we are ready to begin.”

She was surprised. “So soon?”

“Not all of my beasts have reached full maturity, but that is as it should be. Some are monstrous large, and must be transshipped before they have attained adult growth. The cloning shall continue, of course. We must establish our creatures in sufficient numbers so they will remain viable. Nonetheless, we are now at the stage where it is possible to begin seeding the seas of Namor.”

“What is your strategy?” asked Kefira Qay.

Haviland Tuf pushed aside his plate and pursed his lips. “Such strategy as I have is crude and premature, Guardian, and based on insufficient knowledge. I take no responsibility for its success or failure. Your cruel threats have impelled me to unseemly haste.”

“Nonetheless,” she snapped. “What are you doing?”

Tuf folded his hands atop his stomach. “Biological weaponry, like other sorts of armament, comes in many forms and sizes. The best way to slay a human enemy is a single laser burst planted square in the center of the forehead. In biological terms, the analogue might be a suitable natural enemy or predator, or a species-specific pestilence. Lacking time, I have had no opportunity to devise such an economical solution.

“Other approaches are less satisfactory. I might introduce a disease that would cleanse your world of dreadnaughts, fire-balloons, and walkers, for example. Several likely candidates exist. Yet your sea monsters are close relatives of many other kinds of marine life, and those cousins and uncles would also suffer. My projections indicate that fully three-quarters of Namor’s oceangoing life would be vulnerable to such an attack. Alternatively, I have at my disposal fast-breeding fungi and microscopic animals who would literally fill your seas and crowd out all other life. That choice too is unsatisfactory. Ultimately it would make Namor incapable of sustaining human life. To pursue my analogy of a moment ago, these methods are the biological equivalent of killing a single human enemy by exploding a low-yield thermonuclear device in the city in which he happens to reside. So I have ruled them out.

“Instead, I have opted for what might be termed a scattershot strategy, introducing many new species into your Namorian ecology in the hopes that some of them will prove effective natural enemies capable of winnowing the ranks of your sea monsters. Some of my warriors are great deadly beasts, formidable enough to prey even on your terrible dreadnaughts. Others are small and fleet, semi-social pack hunters who breed quickly. Still others are tiny things. I have hope that they will find and feed on your nightmare creatures in their younger, less potent stages, and thereby thin them out. So you see, I pursue many strategies. I toss down the entire deck rather than playing a single card. Given your bitter ultimatum, it is the only way to proceed.” Tuf nodded at her. “I trust you will be satisfied, Guardian Qay.”

She frowned and said nothing.

“If you are finished with that delightful sweet-mushroom porridge,” Tuf said, “we might begin. I would not have you think that I was dragging my feet. You are a trained pilot, of course?”

“Yes,” she snapped.

“Excellent!” Tuf exclaimed. “I shall instruct you in the peculiar idiosyncrasies of my shuttle craft, then. By this hour, they are already fully stocked for our first run. We shall make long low runs across your seas, and discharge our cargoes into your troubled waters. I shall fly the *Basilisk* above your northern hemisphere. You shall take the *Manticore* to the south. If this plan is acceptable, let us go over the routes I have planned for us.” He rose with great dignity.

For the next twenty days, Haviland Tuf and Kefira Qay crisscrossed the dangerous skies of Namor in a painstaking grid pattern, seeding the seas. The Guardian flew her runs with elan. It felt good to be in action again, and she was filled with hope as well. The dreadnaughts and fire-balloons and walkers would have their own nightmares to contend with now—nightmares from half-a-hundred scattered worlds.

From Old Poseidon came vampire eels and nessesies and floating tangles of web-weed, transparent and razor-sharp and deadly.

From Aquarius Tuf cloned black raveners, the swifter scarlet raveners, poisonous puff-puppies, and fragrant, carnivorous lady's bane.

From Jamison's World the vats summoned sand-dragons and dreerhants and a dozen kinds of brightly colored water snakes, large and small.

From Old Earth itself the cell library provided great white sharks, barracuda, giant squid, and clever semi-sentient orcas.

They seeded Namor with the monstrous grey kraken of Lissador and the smaller blue kraken of Ance, with water-jelly colonies from Noborn, Daronnian spinner-whips, and bloodlace out of Cathaday, with swimmers as large as the fortress-fish of Dam Tullian, the mock-whale of Gulliver, and the ghrin'da of Hruun-2, or as small as the blisterfins of Avalon, the parasitical caesni from Ananda, and the deadly nest-building, egg-laying Deirdran waterwasps. To hunt the drifting fire-balloons they brought forth countless fliers: lashtail mantas, bright red razorwings, flocks of scorn, semi-aquatic howlers, and a terrible pale blue thing—half-plant and half-animal and all but weightless—that drifted with the wind and lurked inside clouds like a living, hungry spiderweb. Tuf called it the-weed-that-weep-and-whispers, and advised Kefira Qay not to fly through clouds.

Plants and animals and things that were both and neither, predators and parasites, creatures dark as night or bright and gorgeous or entirely colorless, things strange and beautiful beyond words or too hideous even for thought, from worlds whose names burned bright in human history and from others seldom heard of. And more, and more. Day after day the *Basilisk* and the *Manticore* flashed above the seas of Namor, too swift and deadly for the fire-balloons that drifted up to attack them, dropping their living weapons with impunity.

After each day's run they would repair to the *Ark*, where Haviland Tuf and one or more of his cats would seek solitude, while Kefira Qay habitually took Foolishness with her to the communications room so she could listen to the reports.

"Guardian Smitt reports the sighting of strange creatures in the Orange Strait. No sign of dreadnaughts."

"A dreadnaught has been seen off Batthern, locked in terrible combat with some huge tentacled thing twice its size. A grey kraken, you say? Very well. We shall have to learn these names, Guardian Qay."

"Mullidor Strand reports that a family of lashtail mantas has taken up residence on the offshore rocks. Guardian Horn says they slice through fire-balloons like living knives—that the balloons flail and deflate and fall helplessly. Wonderful!"

"Today we heard from Indigo Beach, Guardian Qay. A strange story. Three walkers came rushing out of the water, but it was no attack. They were crazed, staggering about as if in great pain, and ropes of some pale scummy substance dangled from every joint and gap. What is it?"

"A dead dreadnaught washed up on New Atlantis today. Another corpse was sighted by on its western patrol, rotting atop the water. Various strange fishes were picking it to pieces."

"*Starsword* swung out to Fire Heights yesterday, and sighted less than a half-dozen fire-balloons. The Council of Guardians is thinking of resuming short airship flights to the Mud-Pot Pearls, on a trial basis. What do you think, Guardian Qay? Would you advise that we risk it, or is it premature?"

Each day the reports flooded in, and each day Kefira Qay smiled more broadly as she made her runs in the *Manticore*. But Haviland Tuf remained silent and impassive.

Thirty-four days into the war, Lord Guardian Lysan told her, "Well, another dead dreadnaught was found today. It must have put up quite a battle. Our scientists have been analyzing the contents of its stomachs, and it appears to have fed exclusively on orcas and blue kraken." Kefira Qay frowned slightly, then shrugged it off.

“A grey kraken washed up on Boreen today,” Lord Guardian Moen told her a few days later. “The residents are complaining of the stink. It has gigantic round bite-marks, they report. Obviously a dreadnaught, but even larger than the usual kind.” Guardian Qay shifted uncomfortably.

“All the sharks seem to have vanished from the Amber Sea . The biologists can’t account for it. What do you think? Ask Tuf about it, will you?” She listened, and felt a faint trickle of alarm.

“Here’s a strange one for you two. Something has been sighted moving back and forth across the Coherine Deep. We’ve had reports from both *Sunrazor* and *Skyknife* , and various confirmations from skimmer patrols. A huge thing, they say, a veritable living island, sweeping up everything in its path. Is that one of yours? If it is, you may have miscalculated. They say it is eating barracuda and blisterfins and lander’s needles by the thousands.” Kefira Qay scowled.

“Fire-balloons sighted again off Mullidor Strand—hundreds of them. I can hardly give credence to these reports, but they say the lashtail mantas just carom off them now. Do you...”

“Men-of-war again, can you believe it? We thought they were all nearly gone. So many of them, and they are gobbling up Tuf’s smaller fish like nobody’s business. You have to...”

“Dreadnaughts spraying water to knock howlers from the sky...”

“Something new, Kefira, a *flyer* , or a glider rather, swarms of them launch from the tops of these fire-balloons. They’ve gotten three skimmers already, and the mantas are no match for them...”

“... all over, I tell you, that thing that hides in the clouds... the balloons just rip them loose, the acid doesn’t bother them anymore, they fling them down...”

“... more dead waterwasps, hundreds of them, thousands, where are they all...”

“... walkers again. Castle Dawn has fallen silent, must be overrun. We can’t understand it. The island was ringed by bloodlace and water-jelly colonies. It ought to have been safe, unless...”

“... no word from Indigo Beach in a week...”

“... thirty, forty fire-balloons seen just off Cabben. The Council fears...” “... nothing from Lobbadoon...”

“... dead fortress-fish, half as big as the island itself...”

“... dreadnaughts came right into the harbor...”

“... walkers...”

“... Guardian Qay, the *Starsword* is lost, gone down over the Polar Sea . The last transmission was garbled, but we think...”

Kefira Qay pushed herself up, trembling, and turned to rush out of the communications room, where all the screens were babbling news of death, destruction, defeat. Haviland Tuf was standing behind her, his pale white face impassive, Ingratitude sitting calmly on his broad left shoulder.

“What is *happening*?” the Guardian demanded.

“I should think that would be obvious, Guardian, to any person of normal intelligence. We are losing. Perhaps we have lost already.”

Kefira Qay fought to keep from shrieking. “Aren’t you going to *do* anything? Fight back? This is all your fault, Tuf. You aren’t an ecological engineer—you’re a trader who doesn’t know what he’s doing. That’s why this is…”

Haviland Tuf raised up a hand for silence. “Please,” he said. “You have already caused me considerable vexation. Insult me no further. I am a gentle man, of kindly and benevolent disposition, but even one such as myself can be provoked to anger. You press close to that point now. Guardian, I take no responsibility for this unfortunate course of events. This hasty biowar we have waged was none of my idea. Your uncivilized ultimatum forced me to unwise action in order to placate you. Fortunately, while you have spent your nights gloating over transient and illusory victories, I have continued with my work. I have mapped out your world on my computers and watched the course of your war shudder and flow across it in all its manifold stages. I’ve duplicated your biosphere in one of my great tanks and seeded it with samples of Namorian life cloned from dead specimens—a bit of tentacle here, a piece of carapace there. I have observed and analyzed and at last I have come to conclusions. Tentative, to be sure, although this late sequence of events on Namor tends to confirm my hypothesis. So defame me no further, Guardian. After a refreshing night’s sleep I shall descend to Namor and attempt to end this war of yours.”

Kefira Qay stared at him, hardly daring to believe, her dread turning to hope once again. “You have the answer, then?”

“Indeed. Did I not just say as much?”

“What is it?” she demanded. “Some new creatures? That’s it—you’ve cloned something else, haven’t you? Some plague? Some monster?”

Haviland Tuf held up his hand. “Patience. First I must be certain. You have mocked me and derided me with such unflagging vigor that I hesitate to open myself to further ridicule by confiding my plans to you. I shall prove them valid first. Now, let us discuss tomorrow. You shall fly no war run with the *Manticore*, Instead, I would have you take it to New Atlantis and convene a full meeting of the Council of Guardians. Fetch those who require fetching from outlying islands, please.”

“And you?” Kefira Qay asked.

“I shall meet with the council when it is time. Prior to that, I shall take my plans and my creature to Namor on a mission of our own. We shall descend in the *Phoenix*, I believe. Yes. I do think the *Phoenix* most appropriate, to commemorate your world rising from its ashes. Markedly wet ashes, but ashes nonetheless.”

Kefira Qay met Haviland Tuf on the shuttle deck just prior to their scheduled departure. *Manticore* and *Phoenix* stood ready in their launch berths amidst the scatter of derelict spacecraft. Haviland Tuf was punching numbers into a mini-computer strapped to the inside of his wrist. He wore a long gray vinyl greatcoat with copious pockets and flaring shoulderboards. A green and brown duck-billed cap decorated with the golden theta of the Ecological Engineers perched rakishly atop his bald head.

“I have notified Namor Control and Guardian Headquarters,” Qay said. “The Council is assembling. I will provide transportation for a half-dozen Lords Guardian from outlying districts, so all of them will be on hand. How about you, Tuf? Are you ready? Is your mystery creature on board?”

“Soon,” said Haviland Tuf, blinking at her.

But Kefira Qay was not looking at his face. Her gaze had gone lower. “Tuf,” she said, “there is something in your pocket. Moving.” Incredulous, she watched the ripple creep along beneath the vinyl.

“Ah,” said Tuf. “Indeed.” And then the head emerged from his pocket, and peered around curiously. It belonged to a kitten, a tiny jet-black kitten with lambent yellow eyes.

“A cat,” muttered Kefira Qay sourly.

“Your perception is uncanny,” said Haviland Tuf. He lifted the kitten out gently, and held it cupped in one great white hand while scratching behind its ear with a finger from the other. “This is Dax,” he said solemnly. Dax was scarcely half the size of the older kittens who frisked about the *Ark*. He looked like nothing but a ball of black fur, curiously limp and indolent.

“Wonderful,” the Guardian replied. “Dax, eh? Where did this one come from? No, don’t answer that. I can guess. Tuf, don’t we have more important things to do than play with cats?”

“I think not,” said Haviland Tuf. “You do not appreciate cats sufficiently, Guardian. They are the most civilized of creatures. No world can be considered truly cultured without cats. Are you aware that all cats, from time immemorial, have had a touch of psi? Do you know that some ancient societies of Old Earth worshipped cats as gods? It is true.”

“Please,” said Kefira Qay irritably. “We don’t have time for a discourse on cats. Are you going to bring that poor little thing down to Namor with you?”

Tuf blinked. “Indeed. This poor little thing, as you so contemptuously call him, is the salvation of Namor. Respect might be in order.”

She stared at him as if he had gone mad. “What? That? Him? I mean, Dax? Are you serious. What are you talking about? You’re joking, aren’t you? This is some kind of insane jest. You’ve got something loaded aboard the *Phoenix*, some huge leviathan that will cleanse the sea of those dreadnaughts—something, anything, I don’t know. But you can’t mean... you can’t... not that.”

“Him,” said Haviland Tuf. “Guardian, it is so wearisome to have to state the obvious, not once but again and again. I have given you raveners and krakens and lashtail mantas, at your insistence. They have not been efficacious. Accordingly, I have done much hard thinking, and I have cloned Dax.”

“A kitten,” she said. “You’re going to use a *kitten* against the dreadnaughts and the fire-balloons and the walkers. One. Small. *Kitten*.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. He frowned down at her, slid Dax back into the roomy confines of his great pocket, and turned smartly toward the waiting *Phoenix*.

Kefira Qay was growing very nervous. In the council chambers high atop Breakwater Tower on New Atlantis, the twenty-five Lords Guardian who commanded the defense of all Namor were restive. All of them had been waiting for hours. Some had been there all day. The long conference table was littered with personal communicators and computer, printouts and empty water glasses. Two meals had already been served and cleared away. By the wide curving window that dominated the far wall, portly Lord Guardian Alis was talking in low urgent tones to Lord Guardian Lysan, thin and stern, and both of them were giving meaningful glances to Kefira Qay from time to time. Behind them the sun was going down, and the great bay was turning a lovely shade of scarlet. It was such a beautiful scene that one scarcely noticed the small bright dots that were Guardian skimmers, flying patrol.

Dusk was almost upon them, the council members were grumbling and stirring impatiently in their big cushioned chairs, and Haviland Tuf had still failed to make an appearance. “When did he say he would be here?” asked Lord Guardian Khem, for the fifth time.

“He wasn’t very precise, Lord Guardian,” Kefira Qay replied uneasily, for the fifth time. Khem frowned and cleared his throat.

Then one of the communicators began to beep, and Lord Guardian Lysan strode over briskly and snatched it up.

“Yes?” he said. “I see. Quite good. Escort him in.” He set down the communicator and rapped its edge on the table for order. The others shuffled to their seats, or broke off their conversations, or straightened. The council chamber grew silent. “That was the patrol. Tuf’s shuttle has been sighted. He is on his way, I am pleased to report.” Lysan glanced at Kefira Qay. “At last.”

The Guardian felt even more uneasy then. It was bad enough that Tuf had kept them waiting, but she was dreading the moment when he came lumbering in, Dax peering out of his pocket. Qay had been unable to find the words to tell her superiors that Tuf proposed to save Namor with a small black kitten. She fidgeted in her seat and plucked at her large, crooked nose. This was going to be bad, she feared.

It was worse than anything she could have dreamed.

All of the Lords Guardian were waiting, stiff and silent and attentive, when the doors opened and Haviland Tuf walked in, escorted by four armed guards in golden coveralls. He was a mess. His boots made a squishing sound as he walked, and his greatcoat was smeared with mud. Dax was visible in his left pocket all right, paws hooked over its edge and large eyes intent. But the Lords Guardian weren’t looking at the kitten. Beneath his other arm, Haviland Tuf was carrying a muddy rock the size of a big man’s head. A thick coating of green-brown slime covered it, and it was dripping water onto the plush carpet.

Without so much as a word, Tuf went directly to the conference table and set the rock down in the center of it. That was when Kefira Qay saw the fringe of tentacles, pale and fine as threads, and realized that it wasn’t a rock after all. “A mud-pot,” she said aloud in surprise. No wonder she hadn’t recognized it. She had seen many a mud-pot in her time, but not until after they had been washed and boiled and the tendrils trimmed away. Normally they were served with a hammer and chisel to crack the bony carapace, and a dish of melted butter and spices on the side.

The Lords Guardian looked on in astonishment, and then all twenty-five began talking at once, and the council chamber became a blur of overlapping voices.

“... it is a mud-pot, I don’t understand...”

“What is the meaning of this?”

“He makes us wait all day and then comes to council as filthy as a mudgrubber. The dignity of the council is...”

“... haven’t eaten a mud-pot in, oh, two, three...”

“... can’t be the man who is supposed to save...”

“... insane, why just look at...”

“... what is that thing in his pocket? Look at it! My God, it *moved!* It’s alive, I tell you, I saw it...”

“*Silence!*” Lysan’s voice was like a knife cutting through the hubbub. The room quieted as, one by one, the Lords Guardian turned toward him. “We have come together at your beck and call,” Lysan said acidly to Tuf. “We expected you to bring us an answer. Instead you appear to have brought us dinner.”

Someone snickered.

Haviland Tuf frowned down at his muddy hands, and wiped them primly on his greatcoat. Taking Dax from his pocket, Tuf deposited the lethargic black kitten on the table. Dax yawned and stretched, and ambled toward the nearest of the Lords Guardian, who stared in horror and hurriedly inched her chair back a bit. Shrugging out of his wet, muddy greatcoat, Tuf looked about for a place to put it, and finally hung it from the laser rifle of one of his escort. Only then did he turn back to the Lords Guardian. “Esteemed Lords Guardian,” he said, “this is not dinner you see before you. In that very attitude lies the root of all your problems. This is the ambassador of the race that shares Namor with you, whose name, regrettably, is far beyond my small capabilities. His people will take it quite badly if you eat him.”

Eventually someone brought Lysan a gavel, and he rapped it long and loud enough to attract everyone’s attention, and the furor slowly ebbed away. Haviland Tuf had stood impassively through all of it, his face without expression, his arms folded against his chest. Only when silence was restored did he say, “Perhaps I should explain.”

“You are mad,” Lord Guardian Harvan said, looking from Tuf to the mud-pot and back again. “Utterly mad.”

Haviland Tuf scooped up Dax from the table, cradled him in one arm, and began to pet him. “Even in our moment of victory, we are mocked and insulted,” he said to the kitten.

“Tuf,” said Lysan from the head of the long table, “what you suggest is impossible. We have explored Namor quite sufficiently in the century we have been here so as to be certain that no sentient races dwell upon it. There are no cities, no roads, no signs of any prior civilization or technology, no ruins or artifacts—*nothing*, neither above nor below the sea.”

“Moreover,” said another councillor, a beefy woman with a red face, “the mud-pots cannot possibly be sentient. Agreed, they have brains the size of a human brain. But that is about *all* they have. They have no eyes, ears, noses, almost no sensory equipment whatever except for touch. They have only those feeble tendrils as manipulative organs, scarcely strong enough to lift a pebble. And in fact, the tendrils are only used to anchor them to their spot on the seabed. They are hermaphroditic and downright primitive, mobile only in the first month of life, before the shell hardens and grows heavy. Once they root on the bottom and cover themselves with mud, they never move again. They stay there for hundreds of years.”

“Thousands,” said Haviland Tuf. “They are remarkably long-lived creatures. All that you say is undoubtedly correct. Nonetheless, your conclusions are in error. You have allowed yourself to be blinded by belligerence and fear. If you had removed yourself from the situation and paused long enough to think about it in depth, as I did, no doubt it would become obvious even to the military mind that your plight was no natural catastrophe. Only the machinations of some enemy intelligence could sufficiently explain the tragic course of events on Namor.”

“You don’t expect us to believe—” someone began.

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I expect you to listen. If you will refrain from interrupting me, I will explain all. Then you may choose to believe or not, as suits your peculiar fancy. I shall take my fee and depart.” Tuf looked at Dax. “Idiots, Dax. Everywhere we are beset by idiots.” Turning his attention back to the Lords Guardian, he continued, “As I have stated, intelligence was clearly at work here. The difficulty was in finding that intelligence. I perused the work of your Namorian biologists, living and dead, read much about your flora and fauna, recreated many of the native lifeforms aboard the *Ark*. No likely candidate for sentience was immediately forthcoming. The traditional hallmarks of intelligent life include a large brain, sophisticated biological sensors, mobility, and some sort of manipulative organ, such as an opposable thumb. Nowhere on Namor could I find a creature with all of these attributes. My hypothesis, however, was still correct. Therefore I must needs move on to unlikely candidates, as there were no likely ones.

“To this end I studied the history of your plight, and at once some things suggested themselves. You believed that your sea monsters emerged from the dark oceanic depths, but where did they first appear? In the offshore shallows—the areas where you practiced fishing and sea-farming. What did all these areas have in common?



Certainly an abundance of life, that must be admitted. Yet not the *same* life. The fish that habituated the waters off New Atlantis did not frequent those of the Broken Hand. Yet I found two interesting exceptions, two species found virtually everywhere—the mud-pots, lying immobile in their great soft beds through the long slow centuries and, originally, the things you called Namorian men-of-war. The ancient native race has another term for those. They call them guardians.

“Once I had come this far, it was only a matter of working out the details and confirming my suspicions. I might have arrived at my conclusion much earlier, but for the rude interruptions of liaison officer Qay, who continually shattered my concentration and finally, most cruelly, forced me to waste much time sending forth grey krakens and razorwings and sundry other such creatures. In the future I shall spare myself such liaisons.

“Yet, in a way, the experiment was useful, since it confirmed my theory as to the true situation on Namor. Accordingly I pressed on. Geographic studies showed that all of the monsters were thickest near mud-pot beds. The heaviest fighting had been in those selfsame areas, my Lords Guardian. Clearly, these mud-pots you find so eminently edible were your mysterious foes. Yet how could that be? These creatures had large brains, to be sure, but lacked all the other traits we have come to associate with sentience, as we know it. And that was the very heart of it! Clearly they were sentient as we do not know it. What sort of intelligent being could live deep under the sea, immobile, blind, deaf, bereft of all input? I pondered that question. The answer, sirs, is obvious. Such an intelligence must interact with the world in ways we cannot, must have its own modes of sensing and communicating. Such an intelligence must be telepathic. Indeed. The more I considered it, the more obvious it became.

“Thereupon it was only a matter of testing my conclusions. To that end, I brought forth Dax. All cats have some small psionic ability, Lords Guardian. Yet long centuries ago, in the days of the Great War, the soldiers of the Federal Empire struggled against enemies with terrible psi powers: Hrangan Minds and *githyanki* soulsucks. To combat such formidable foes, the genetic engineers worked with felines, and vastly heightened and sharpened their psionic abilities, so they could esp in unison with mere humans. Dax is such a special animal.”

“You mean that thing is reading our minds?” Lysan said sharply.

“Insofar as you have minds to read,” said Haviland Tuf, “yes. But more importantly, through Dax, I was able to reach that ancient people you have so ignominiously dubbed *mud-pots*. For they, you see, are entirely telepathic.

“For millennia beyond counting they have dwelled in tranquility and peace beneath the seas of this world. They are a slow, thoughtful, philosophic race, and they lived side by side in the billions, each linked with all the others, each an individual and each a part of the great racial whole. In a sense they were deathless, for all shared the experiences of each, and the death of one was as nothing. Experiences were few in the unchanging sea, however. For the most part their long lives are given over to abstract thought, to philosophy, to strange green dreams that neither you nor I can truly comprehend. They are silent musicians, one might say. Together they have woven great symphonies of dreams, and those songs go on and on.

“Before humanity came to Namor, they had had no real enemies for millions of years. Yet that had not always been the case. In the primordial beginnings of this wet world, the oceans teemed with creatures who relished the taste of the dreamers as much as you do. Even then, the race understood genetics, understood evolution. With their vast web of interwoven minds, they were able to manipulate the very stuff of life itself, more skillfully than any genetic engineers. And so they evolved their guardians, formidable predators with a biological imperative to protect those you call mud-pots. These were your men-of-war. From that time to this they guarded the beds, while the dreamers went back to their symphony of thought.

“Then you came, from Aquarius and Old Poseidon. Indeed you did. Lost in the reverie, the dreamers hardly noticed for many years, while you farmed and fished and discovered the taste of mud-pots. You must consider the shock you gave them, Lords Guardian. Each time you plunged one of them into boiling water, all of them shared the sensations. To the dreamers, it seemed as though some terrible new predator had evolved upon the landmass, a place of little interest to them. They had no inkling that you might be sentient, since they could no more conceive

of a nontelepathic sentience than you could conceive of one blind, deaf, immobile, and edible. To them, things that moved and manipulated and ate flesh were animals, and could be nothing else.

“The rest you know, or can surmise. The dreamers are a slow people lost in their vast songs, and they were slow to respond. First they simply ignored you, in the belief that the ecosystem itself would shortly check your ravages. This did not appear to happen. To them it seemed you had no natural enemies. You bred and expanded constantly, and many thousands of minds fell silent. Finally they returned to the ancient, almost-forgotten ways of their dim past, and woke to protect themselves. They sped up the reproduction of their guardians until the seas above their beds teemed with their protectors, but the creatures that had once sufficed admirably against other enemies proved to be no match for you. Finally they were driven to new measures. Their minds broke off the great symphony and ranged out, and they sensed and understood. At last they began to fashion new guardians, guardians formidable enough to protect them against this great new nemesis. Thus it went. When I arrived upon the *Ark*, and Kefira Qay forced me to unleash many new threats to their peaceful dominion, the dreamers were initially taken aback.

“But the struggle had sharpened them and they responded more quickly now, and in only a very short time they were dreaming newer guardians still, and sending them forth to battle to oppose the creatures I had loosed upon them. Even as I speak to you in this most imposing tower of yours, many a terrible new lifeform is stirring beneath the waves, and soon will emerge to trouble your sleep in years to come—unless, of course, you come to a peace. That is entirely your decision. I am only a humble ecological engineer. I would not dream of dictating such matters to the likes of you. Yet I do suggest it, in the strongest possible terms. So here is the ambassador plucked from the sea—at great personal discomfort to myself, I might add. The dreamers are now in much turmoil, for when they felt Dax among them and through him touched me, their world increased a millionfold. They learned of the stars today, and learned moreover that they are not alone in this cosmos. I believe they will be reasonable, as they have no use for the land, nor any taste for fish. Here is Dax as well, and myself. Perhaps we might commence to talk?”

But when Haviland Tuf fell silent at last, no one spoke for quite a long time. The Lords Guardian were all ashen and numb. One by one they looked away from Tuf’s impassive features, to the muddy shell on the table.

Finally Kefira Qay found her voice. “What do they *want*?” she asked nervously.

“Chiefly,” said Haviland Tuf, “they want you to stop eating them. This strikes me as an eminently sensible proposal. What is your reply?”

“Two million standards is insufficient,” Haviland Tuf said some time later, sitting in the communications room of the *Ark*. Dax rested calmly in his lap, having little of the frenetic energy of the other kittens. Elsewhere in the room Suspicion and Hostility were chasing each other hither and yon.

Up on the telescreen, Kefira Qay’s features broke into a suspicious scowl. “What do you mean? This was the price we agreed upon, Tuf. If you are trying to cheat us... ”

“Cheat?” Tuf sighed. “Did you hear her, Dax? After all we have done, such grim accusations are still flung at us willy-nilly. Yes. Willy-nilly indeed. An odd phrase, when one stops to mull on it.” He looked back at the telescreen. “Guardian Qay, I am fully aware of the agreed-on price. For two million standards, I solved your difficulties. I analyzed and pondered and provided the insight and the translator you so sorely needed. I have even left you with twenty-five telepathic cats, each linked to one of your Lords Guardian, to facilitate further communications after my departure. That too is included within the terms of our initial agreement, since it was necessary to the solution of your problem. And, being at heart more a philanthropist than a businessman, and deeply sentimental as well, I have even allowed you to retain Foolishness, who took a liking to you for some reason that I am entirely unable to fathom. For that, too, there is no charge.”

“Then why are you demanding an additional three million standards?” demanded Kefira Qay.

“For unnecessary work which I was cruelly compelled to do,” Tuf replied. “Would you care for an itemized accounting?”

“Yes, I would,” she said.

“Very well. For sharks. For barracuda. For giant squid. For orcas. For grey kraken. For blue kraken. For bloodlace. For water jellies. Twenty thousand standards per item. For fortress-fish, fifty thousand standards. For the-weed-that-weeps-and-whispers, eight...” He went on for a long, long time.

When he was done, Kefira Qay set her lips sternly. “I will submit your bill to the Council of Guardians,” she said. “But I will tell you straight out that your demands are unfair and exorbitant, and our balance of trade is not sufficient to allow for such an outflow of hard standards. You can wait in orbit for a hundred years, Tuf, but you won’t get any five million standards.”

Haviland Tuf raised his hands in surrender. “Ah,” he said. “So, because of my trusting nature, I must take a loss. I will not be paid, then?”

“Two million standards,” said the Guardian. “As we agreed.”

“I suppose I might accept this cruel and unethical decision, and take it as one of life’s hard lessons. Very well then. So be it.” He stroked Dax. “It has been said that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. I can only blame myself for this wretched turn of events. Why, it was only a few scant months past that I chanced to view a historical drama on this very sort of situation. It was about a seedship such as my own that rid one small world of an annoying pest, only to have the ungrateful planetary government refuse payment. Had I been wiser, that would have taught me to demand my payment in advance.” He sighed. “But I was not wise, and now I must suffer.” Tuf stroked Dax again, and paused. “Perhaps your Council of Guardians might be interested in viewing this particular tape, purely for recreational purposes. It is holographic, fully dramatized, and well-acted, and moreover, it gives a fascinating insight into the workings and capabilities of a ship such as this one. Highly educational. The title is *Seedship of Hamelin*.”

They paid him, of course.

# Tuf Voyaging: Second Helpings

It was more habit than hobby, and it was certainly not anything acquired deliberately, with malice aforethought; nonetheless, it had undoubtedly been acquired. Haviland Tuf collected spacecraft.

Perhaps it is more accurate to say he accumulated spacecraft. He certainly had the room for them. When Tuf had first set foot upon the *Ark*, he had found there five black, rakish, delta-winged shuttles, the gutted hull of a big-bellied Rhiannese merchant, and three alien starships: a heavily-armed Hruun fighter and two much stranger craft whose histories and builders remained an enigma. To that ragtag fleet was added Tuf's own damaged trading vessel, the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*.

That was only the beginning. In his travels, Tuf found other ships gathering on his landing deck much as dust balls gather under a computer console and papers gather on a bureaucrat's desk.

On Freehaven, the negotiator's one-man driveshift courier had been so badly scored by enemy fire while running the blockade that Tuf had been obliged to provide return passage in the shuttle *Manticore* —after a contract had been arrived at, of course. Thus he had acquired one driveshift courier.

On Gonesh, the elephant priests had never actually seen an elephant. Tuf had cloned them a few herds, and for variety had thrown in a brace of mastodon, a woolly mammoth, and a green Trygian trumpet-tusker. The Goneshi, who wished no commerce with the rest of humanity, had paid his fee with the fleet of decrepit starships their colonizing ancestors had arrived in. Tuf had been able to sell two of the ships to museums and the rest of the fleet to a scrapyard, but he had kept one ship on a whim.

On Karaleo, he had bested the Lord of the Burnished Golden Pride in a drinking contest, and had won a luxurious lionboat for his troubles, although the loser had ingratically removed most of the ornate solid-gold trim before handing it over.

The Artificers of Mhure, who were inordinately proud of their craftsmanship, had been so pleased by the clever dragonettes Tuf had provided to check their plague of wing-rats that they had given him an iron-and-silver dragon-shuttle with huge bat-wings.

The knights of St. Christopher, whose resort world had been robbed of much of its charm by the depredations of huge flying saurians they called dragons (partly for effect and partly due to a lack of imagination), had been similarly pleased when Tuf had provided them with georges, tiny hairless simians who loved nothing better than to feast on dragon eggs. So the knights had given him a ship as well. It looked like an egg—an egg built of stone and wood. Inside the yolk were deep padded seats of oiled dragon leather, a hundred fantastical brass levers, and a stained-glass mosaic where a viewscreen ought to be. The wooden walls were hung with rich hand-woven tapestries portraying great feats of chivalry. The ship didn't work, of course—the viewscreen didn't view, the brass levers did nothing, and the life support systems couldn't support life. Tuf accepted it nonetheless.

And so it had gone, a ship here and a ship there, until his landing deck looked like an interstellar junkyard. Thus it was, when Haviland Tuf determined to make his return to S'uthlam, that he had a wide variety of starships at his disposal.

He had long ago reached the conclusion that returning in the *Ark* itself would be unwise. After all, when he had left the S'uthlamese system, the Planetary Defense Flotilla had been in hot pursuit, determined to confiscate the seedship. The S'uthlamese were a highly advanced and technologically sophisticated people who would undoubtedly have made their warships faster and more dangerous in the five standard years since Tuf had last

gone among them. Therefore, a scouting sortie was imperative. Fortunately, Haviland Tuf considered himself a master of disguise.

He took the *Ark* out of drive in the cold, empty darkness of interstellar space a light-year from S'ulstar, and rode down to his landing deck to inspect his fleet. At length he decided upon the lionboat. It was large and swift, its star-drive and life-support systems were functional, and Karaleo was far enough removed from S'uthlam so that commerce between the two worlds was unlikely. Therefore any flaws in his imposture would most likely go unnoticed. Before he made his departure, Haviland Tuf dyed his milk-white skin a deep bronze color, covered his long hairless features with a wig that gave him a formidable red-gold beard and a wild mane, glued on fierce eyebrows, and draped his massive, paunchy frame in all manner of brightly colored furs (synthetic) and golden chains (quasigilt, actually) until he looked the very part of a Karaleo noble. Most of his cats remained safely behind upon the *Ark*, but Dax, the black telepathic kitten with the lambent golden eyes, rode with him, snug in one cavernous pocket.

He gave his ship a likely and appropriate name, stocked it with freeze-dried mushroom stew and two kegs of thick brown St. Christopher Malt, programmed its computer with several of his favorite games, and set out.

When he emerged from drive into normal space near the globe of S'uthlam and its expansive orbital docks, Tuf was hailed at once. Upon the control chamber's huge telescreen—shaped like a large eye, another interesting affectation of the Leonese—appeared the features of a small, spare man with tired eyes. "This is Spiderhome Control, Port of S'uthlam," he identified himself. "We have you, fly. ID, please."

Haviland Tuf reached out and activated his comm unit. "This is *Ferocious Veldt Roarer*," he said in an even, dispassionate voice. "I wish to secure docking permission."

"What a surprise," the controller said, with bored sarcasm. "Dock four-thirty-seven. Out." His face was replaced by a schematic showing the location of the designated berth relative to the rest of the station.

Then the transmission cut off.

A customs team came aboard after docking. One woman inspected his empty holds, ran a swift and cursory safety check to make sure this odd and unlikely craft was not going to explode or melt down or otherwise damage the web, and checked the ship over for vermin. Her companion subjected Tuf to a lengthy inquiry as to his point of origin, destination, business on S'uthlam, and other particulars of his voyage, punching his fictitious answers into a hand computer.

They were almost finished when Dax emerged sleepily from Tuf's pocket and peered at her. "What the..." she said, startled. She rose so suddenly she almost dropped her computer.

The kitten—well, he was almost a cat now, but still the youngest of Tuf's pets—had long, silky hair as black as the depths of space, bright golden eyes, and a curiously indolent manner. Tuf plucked him out, cradled him with one arm, stroked him with the other. "This is Dax," he said. The S'uthlamese had a disconcerting habit of regarding all animals as vermin, and he was anxious to forestall any rash actions on the part of the customs official. "He is a pet, madam, and quite harmless."

"I know what he is," the woman said sharply. "Keep him away from me. If he goes for my throat, you're in big trouble, fly."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. "I will do my best to control his ferocity."

She looked relieved. "It's only a little cat, right? What's that called, a catling?"

"Your knowledge of zoology is astute," Tuf replied.

"I don't know doodles about zoology," the customs inspector said, settling herself back into her seat. "But I watch my vidshows from time to time."

"No doubt you chanced to view an educational documentary, then," Tuf said.

"Yawn," the woman said. "Neg on that, fly. I'm more for romance and adventure vids."

"I see," said Haviland Tuf. "And one such drama featured a feline, I assume."

She nodded, and just then her colleague emerged from the hold. "All clean," the other woman said. She spotted Dax, cradled in Tuf's arms, and smiled. "A cat vermin," she said happily. "Sort of cute, isn't it?"

"Don't be fooled," the first inspector warned. "They're soft and cuddly but they can rip your lungs out in the blink of an eye."

"He looks a little small for that," her partner said.

"Ha! Remember the one in *Tuf and Mune* ."

"*Tuf and Mune*," Haviland Tuf repeated, his voice without expression.

The second inspector sat down next to the first. "*The Pirate and the Portmaster*," she said.

"He was the ruthless lord of life and death, in a ship as large as the sun. She was the spider queen, torn between love and loyalty. Together they changed the world," the first said.

"You can rent it in Spiderhome if you like that sort of thing," the second told him. "It's got a cat in it."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf, blinking. Dax began to purr.

His berth was five kilometers out along the web, so Haviland Tuf caught a pneumatic tubetrain into port center.

He was jostled on every side. On the train there were no seats. He was forced to stand with a stranger's rude elbow thrust into his ribs, the cold plasteel mask of a cybertech mere millimeters from face, and the slick carapace of some alien rubbing up against his back whenever the train slowed. When he disembarked, it was as if the car had decided to vomit out the overabundance of humanity it had ingested. The platform was swarming chaos, noise, and confusion, with passers-by milling all about him. A short young woman with features as sharp as the blade of a stiletto laid an unwelcome hand on his furs and invited him to join her at a sex parlor. No sooner had Tuf disengaged himself than he faced a newsfeed reporter, equipped with third-eye camera and ingratiating smile, who said he was doing a feature on strange flies and wanted an interview.

Tuf pushed past him to a vending booth, purchased a privacy shield, and clipped it on his belt. That provided a certain minimal help. When they saw it, the S'uthlamese politely averted their eyes, in keeping with his wishes, and he was free to proceed through the throngs more or less unmolested.

His first stop was a vidplex. He engaged a private room with couch, ordered up a bulb of watery S'uthlamese beer, and rented a copy of *Tuf and Mune*.

His second stop was the Portmaster's office. "Sir," he said to the man behind the reception console, "a query, if you will. Does Tolly Mune yet serve as Portmaster of S'uthlam?"

The secretary looked him up and down and sighed. “Flies,” he said, sighing. “Of course. Who else?”

“Who else indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “It is imperative that I meet with her at once.”

“Is it now? You and a thousand others. Name?”

“I am named Weemowet, a traveler out of Karaleo, master of the *Ferocious Veldt Roarer*. ”

The secretary grimaced and entered that into the console, then slouched back on his floater chair, waiting. Finally he shook his head. “Sorry, Weemowet,” he said. “Ma’s busy and her computer’s never heard of you, your ship, or your planet. I can get you an appointment in about a week, if you’ll state your business.”

“This is unsatisfactory. My business is of a personal nature, and I would prefer to see the Portmaster immediately.”

The secretary shrugged. “Defecate or evacuate the chamber, fly. Best we can do.”

Haviland Tuf reflected a moment. Then he reached up, grasped the fringe of his mane, and pulled. It made a ripping sound as it came off his face.

“Observe!” he said. “I am not truly Weemowet. I am Haviland Tuf in disguise.”

He draped his mane and beard over the top of the console.

“Haviland Tuf?” the secretary said.

“Correct.”

The man laughed. “I saw that vidshow, fly. If you’re Tuf, I’m Stephan Cobalt Northstar.”

“Stephan Cobalt Northstar has been dead for more than a millennium. Nonetheless, I am Haviland Tuf.”

“You don’t look a thing like him,” the secretary said.

“I am incognito, disguised as a Leonese noble.”

“Oh, right. I forgot.”

“Your memory is short. Will you tell Portmaster Mune that Haviland Tuf has returned to S’uthlam and wishes to speak with her at once?”

“No,” the man said bluntly, “but I’ll be sure to tell all my friends tonight at the orgy.”

“I have the sum of sixteen million five hundred thousand standards which I wish to pay over to her,” Tuf said.

“Sixteen million five hundred thousand standards?” the secretary said, impressed. “That’s a lot of money.”

“You have a keen perception of the obvious,” Tuf said evenly. “I have found ecological engineering to be quite a lucrative profession.”

“Good for you,” the man said. He leaned forward. “Well, Tuf or Weemowet or whoever you are, this all has been very droll, but I have work to do. If you don’t pick up your hair and scuttle out of my sight in the next few seconds, I’m going to have to call security.” He was about to expand on that theme when his console buzzed at

him. "Yes?" he said into his headset, frowning. "Ah, yes. Sure, Ma. Well, big, very big, two and a half meters tall, gut on him that's almost obscene. HmMMM. No, lots of hair, or at least he did before he yanked it off and dumped it on my console. No. Says he's in disguise. Yes. Says he's got millions of standards for you."

"Sixteen million five hundred thousand," Tuf said with some precision.

The secretary swallowed. "Certainly. Right now, Ma." He broke the connection and looked up at Tuf with astonishment. "She wants to see you." He pointed. "Through that door. Careful, her office is zero gee."

"I am aware of the Portmaster's aversion to gravity," said Haviland Tuf. He gathered up his discarded mafta, tucked it under one arm, and moved with stiff dignity toward the indicated door, which slid open at his approach.

She was waiting in the inner office, floating in the center of the clutter, her legs crossed, her long silver-and-iron hair moving lazily about her lean, open, homely face like a wreath of smoke. "So you came back," she said when Tuf swam into view.

Haviland Tuf was uncomfortable in zero gee. He pulled himself to her visitor's chair, securely bolted to what should have been the floor, and strapped himself in. He folded his hands neatly atop the great curve of his stomach. His mane, abandoned, drifted about on the air currents. "Your secretary refused to relay my messages," he said. "How did you come to suspect that it was me?"

She grinned. "Who else would call his ship *Ferocious Veldt Roarer*?" she said. "Besides, it's been five years almost to the day. I had a feeling you'd be the punctual sort, Tuf."

"I see," said Haviland Tuf. With deliberate dignity, he reached inside his synthafurs, broke the sealseam on the inner pocket, and extracted a vinyl wallet lined with crystal datachips in tiny pouches. "Herewith, madam, I am most pleased to tender you the sum of sixteen million five hundred thousand standards, in payment of the first half of my debt to the Port of S'uthlam for the restoration and refitting of the *Ark*. You will find the funds secure in appropriate financial depositories on Osiris, ShanDellor, Old Poseidon, Ptola, Lysis, and New Budapest. These chips will permit access."

"Thanks," she said. She took the wallet, flipped it open, glanced at it briefly, and let it loose. It floated up toward the mane. "Somehow I knew you'd find the standards, Tuf."

"Your faith in my business acumen is reassuring," said Haviland Tuf. "Now, concerning this vidshow?"

"*Tuf and Mune*? You've seen it, then?"

"Indeed," said Tuf.

"Goddamn," Tolly Mune said, grinning crookedly. "So what'd you think, Tuf?"

"I am forced to admit that it evoked a certain perverse fascination in me, for obvious reasons. The idea of such a drama has an undeniable appeal to my vanity, but the execution left much to be desired."

Tolly Mune laughed. "What bothers you the most?"

Tuf raised a single long finger. "In a word, inaccuracy."

She nodded. "Well, the vidshow Tuf masses about half what you do, I'd say, his face is a lot more mobile, his speech wasn't half as stilted, and he had a spinneret's musculature and an acrobat's coordination, but they *did* shave his head in the interests of authenticity."



“He wore a mustache,” said Haviland Tuf. “I do not.”

“They thought it looked roguish. Then again, look what they did to me. I don’t mind that they took fifty years off my age, and I don’t mind that they enhanced my face until I looked like a Vandeeni dream-princess, but those goddamned *breasts!*”

“No doubt they wished to emphasize the certainty of your mammalian evolution,” said Tuf. “These might be put down as minor alterations in the interests of presenting a more aesthetic entertainment, but I regard the wanton liberties taken with my opinions and philosophies to be a far more serious matter. In particular, I object to my final speech, wherein I opine that the genius of evolving humanity can and will solve all problems, and that eco-engineering has freed the S’uthlamese to multiply without fear or limit, and thus evolve to greatness and ultimate godhood. This is in utter contradiction to the actual views I expressed to you at the time, Portmaster Mune. If you will recall our conversations, I told you distinctly that any solution to your food problem, whether technological or ecological in nature, must of necessity be only a stopgap if your people continued to practice unrestrained reproduction.”

“You were the hero,” Tolly Mune said. “They couldn’t very well have you sound anti-life, could they?”

“Other flaws are also present in the narrative. Those unfortunate enough to view this fiction have received a wildly distorted view of the events of five years ago. Havoc is a harmless though spirited feline whose ancestors have been domesticated since the veritable dawn of human history, and it is my recollection that when you treacherously seized her on a legal technicality in a backhanded scheme to force me to hand over the *Ark*, she and I both tendered our surrender peacefully. At no point did she rip even a single security man apart with her claws, let alone six of them.”

“She did claw the back of my hand once,” said Tolly Mune. “Anything else?”

“I have nothing but approbation for the policies and conduct of Josen Rael and the High Council of S’uthlam,” Tuf said. “It is true that they, and particularly First Councillor Rael, behaved in an unethical and unscrupulous manner. Nonetheless, on their behalf, it must be said that at no point did Josen Rael subject me to torture, nor did he kill any of my cats in an effort to bend me to his will.”

“He didn’t sweat that much either,” said Tolly Mune, “and he *never* drooled. He was actually a decent man.” She sighed. “Poor Josen.”

“Finally we come to the crux of the matter. Crux indeed—a strange word when one rolls it upon the tongue, but quite appropriate to this discussion. The crux, Portmaster Mune, was and is the nature of our wager. When I brought the newly salvaged *Ark* in for refitting, your High Council resolved to have her. I refused to sell, and as you had no legal pretext for seizing the ship, you confiscated Havoc as vermin, and threatened to destroy her unless I thumbed a transfer. Is this correct in its essentials?”

“Sounds right to me,” Tolly Mune said amiably.

“We resolved the impasse with a wager. I would attempt to forestall S’uthlam’s food crisis via eco-engineering, thus averting the great famine that threatened you. If I failed, the *Ark* was yours. If I succeeded, you were to return Havoc and, moreover, perform the refitting and repairs that I required and allow me ten standard years to pay the resulting bill.”

“Right,” she said.

“To my best recollection, at no point was carnal knowledge of your body included in my terms, Portmaster Mune. I would be the last to diminish the bravura you displayed in adversity, when the High Council shut down the tubes and secured all the docks. You risked your person and career, smashed through a plasteel window, flew across kilometers of stark vacuum clad only in skinthins and propelled by airjets, dodged security squads all the way, and

in the end barely avoided destruction by your own Planetary Defense Flotilla as they moved against me. Even one as plain and blunt as myself must admit that these acts possess a certain heroic, even romantic, quality that in ancient days might be the stuff of legends. However, the purpose of this melodramatic albeit daring voyage was to return Havoc to my custody, as per the terms of our agreement, and not to deliver up your body to my,” he blinked, “lusts. Furthermore, you made it perfectly clear at that time that your actions were motivated by a sense of honor and fear of the corrupting influence the *Ark* might have upon your leaders. As I recall, neither physical passion nor romantic love played any part in your calculations.”

Portmaster Tolly Mune grinned. “Look at us, Tuf. A damned unlikely pair of star-crossed lovers. But you’ve got to admit, it makes a better story.”

Tuf’s long face was still and expressionless. “Surely you do not defend this grossly inaccurate vidshow,” he said flatly.

The Portmaster laughed again. “Defend it? Puling hell, I *wrote* it!” Haviland Tuf blinked six times. Before he could frame a reply, the outer door slid open and the newsfeed peeps came swarming in, a good two dozen of them, yammering and exclaiming and shouting out rude questions. In the center of each forehead, a third eye whirred and blinked.

“This way, Tuffer. Smile.”

“Do you have any cats with you?”

“Will you be taking out a marriage contract, Portmaster?”

“Where’s the *Ark*?”

“Let’s have an embrace, hey!”

“When did you turn brown, trader?”

“Where’s the mustache?”

“Any opinion of *Tuf and Mune*, Citizen Tuf?”

“How’s Havoc these days?”

Strapped immobile into his chair, Haviland Tuf glanced up, down, and all around with a series of quick, precise head motions. He blinked and said nothing. The torrent of questions continued until Portmaster Tolly Mune came swimming effortlessly through the pack, pushing peeps aside with either hand, and settled down next to Tuf. She slid her arm through his and kissed him lightly on the cheek.

“Puling hell,” she said, “hold your goddamned bladders, he just got here.” She raised a hand. “No questions, sorry. We’re invoking privacy. It’s been five years, after all. Give us some time to get reacquainted.”

“Are you going off to the *Ark* together?” one of the more aggressive reporters asked. She was floating a half-meter in front of Tuf’s face, her third eye whirring.

“Of course,” said Tolly Mune. “Where else?”

It was not until the *Ferocious Veldt Roarer* was well out of the web, en route back to the *Ark*, that Haviland Tuf deigned to walk back to the cabin he had assigned to Tolly Mune. He was freshly showered, cleansed, and scrubbed, all traces of disguise removed. His long hairless face was as white and unreadable as blank paper. He

wore a plain gray coverall that did little to conceal his formidable paunch, and a green duck-billed cap adorned with the golden theta of the Ecological Engineers covered his bald pate. Dax rode upon one broad shoulder.

Tolly Mune had been reclining and sipping on a bulb of St. Christopher Malt, but she grinned when he entered.

“This is damn good stuff,” she said. “Well now, who’s that? Not Havoc.”

“Havoc is safely back aboard the *Ark*, with her mate and her kittens, though in truth they can scarcely be said to be kittens any longer. The feline population of my ship has grown somewhat since my last call at S’uthlam, albeit not as precipitously as the human population of S’uthlam is wont to grow.” He lowered himself stiffly into a seat.

“This is Dax. While every cat is of course special, Dax might accurately be said to be extraordinary. All cats have a touch of psi; this is well known. Due to an unusual set of circumstances I encountered upon the world known as Namor, I initiated a program to enhance and expand upon this innate feline ability. Dax is the end result, madam. We share a certain rapport, and Dax is gifted with a psi ability that is far from rudimentary.”

“In short,” said Tolly Mune, “you cloned yourself a mindreading cat.”

“Your perspicacity remains acute, Portmaster,” Tuf replied. He folded his hands. “We have much to discuss. Perhaps you will be so kind as to explain why you have requested that I bring the *Ark* back to S’uthlam, why you have insisted on accompanying me, and most crucially why you have embroiled me in this strange though colorful deception, and even gone so far as to make free with my person?”

Tolly Mune signed. “Tuf, you remember how things stood when we parted five years ago?”

“My memory is unimpaired,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Good. Then you might recall that you left me in a real puling mess.”

“You anticipated immediate removal from your post as Portmaster, trial on charges of high treason, and a sentence to a penal farm on the Larder,” said Tuf. “Nonetheless, you declined my effort to provide you with free transport to another system of your choice, preferring instead to return to face imprisonment and disgrace.”

“Whatever the hell I am, I’m S’uthlamese,” she said. “These are my people, Tuf. Big puling fools at times, but still my goddamned people.”

“Your loyalty is no doubt commendable. Since you are still Portmaster, I must assume that circumstances changed.”

“I changed them,” Tolly Mune said.

“Indeed.”

“Had to, if I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life driving a weeder-wheel through the neoglass while gravity pulled me apart.” She made a face. “As soon as I got back to port, security grabbed me. I’d defied the High Council, broken laws, damaged property, and helped you escape with a ship they wanted to confiscate. Damned dramatic, wouldn’t you say?”

“My opinion has no bearing on the matter.”

“So dramatic, in fact, that it had to be either a crime of enormous magnitude or an act of enormous heroism. Josen was sick about it. We went way back, him and me, and he wasn’t a bad man really, I told you that. But he was First Councillor, and he knew what he had to do. He had to try me for treason. And I’m no damned fool either, Tuf. I knew what I had to do.” She leaned forward. “I wasn’t that pleased by my cards either, but I had to play

them or fold. To save my bony ass, I had to destroy Josen—discredit him and most of the High Council. I had to make myself a heroine and him a villain, in terms that would be perfectly clear to every goddamned drooling slackjaw in the undercity.”

“I see,” said Tuf. Dax was purring; the Portmaster was perfectly sincere. “Ergo the overblown melodrama that was called *Tuf and Mune*.”

“I needed calcs for legal costs,” she said. “That was real enough, puling hell, but I used it as an excuse to sell my version of events to one of the big vidnets. I, let us say, seasoned the story a bit. They were so excited they decided to follow the newsfeed exclusive with a dramatized version. I was more than happy to provide the script. Had a collaborator, of course, but I told him what to write. Josen never understood what was happening. He wasn’t as canny a pol as he thought, and his heart was never in it. Besides, I had help.”

“From what source?” Tuf inquired.

“A young man named Cregor Blaxon, mostly.”

“The name is unknown to me.”

“He was on the High Council. Councillor for agriculture. A very crucial post, Tuf, and Blaxon was the youngest man ever to fill it. Youngest man on the Council, too. You’d think he’d be satisfied, right?”

“Please do not presume to tell me my thoughts, unless you have developed psionic abilities in my absence. I would think no such thing, madam. I have found that it is almost always a mistake to assume that any human being is ever satisfied.”

“Cregor Blaxon is and was a very ambitious man,” Tolly Mune said. “He was part of Josen’s administration. Both of them were technocrats, but Blaxon aspired to the First Councillor’s seat and that was where Josen Rael had planted his buttocks.”

“I grasp his motivation.”

“Blaxon became my ally. He was quite impressed with what you’d provided anyway. The omni-grain, the fish and that plankton, the slime-molds, all the damn mushrooms. And he saw what was happening. He used every bit of his power to cut short bio-testing and put your stuff in the field. Screamer priorities all around. Did a smash-run on any puling fool tried to slow things down. Josen Rael was too preoccupied to notice.”

“The intelligent and efficient politician is a species virtually unknown in the galaxy,” said Haviland Tuf. “Perhaps I might secure a scraping from Cregor Blaxon for the *Ark*’s cell library.”

“You’re getting ahead of me.”

“The end of the story is obvious. The appearance of vanity notwithstanding, I will venture a guess that my small effort at eco-engineering was deemed a success, and that Cregor Blaxon’s energetic implementation of my solutions rebounded to his credit.”

“He called it Tuf’s Flowering,” Tolly Mune said with a certain cynical twist to the corner of her mouth. “The newsfeeds took up the term. Tuf’s Flowering, a new golden age for S’uthlam. Soon we had edible fungus growing along the walls of our sewer systems. We started huge mushroom farms in every undercity. Carpets of neptune’s shawl crept across the surface of our seas, and underneath, your fish multiplied at an astounding rate. We planted your omni-grain instead of neograin and nanowheat, and the first crop gave us almost triple the caloric yield. You did one nova-class job of eco-engineering for us, Tuf.”

“The compliment is noted with due appreciation,” said Tuf.

“Fortunately for me, the Flowering was already in full bud when *Tuf and Mune* hit the nets, long before I went to trial. Creg was extolling your brilliance to the newsfeeds daily and telling billions that our food crisis was done, finished, over.” The Portmaster shrugged. “So he made you a hero, for his own reasons. Couldn’t help it, if he wanted to replace Josen. And that helped make me a heroine. It all ties together in one big neat puling knot—prettiest goddamned thing you’d ever want to see. I’ll spare you the details. The end of it was, Tolly Mune acquitted, restored to office in triumph. Josen Rael in disgrace, denounced by all the opinionaters, forced to resign. Half the High Council resigned with him. Cregor Blaxon became the new technocratic leader and won the elections that followed. Creg’s now First Councillor. Josen, poor soul, died two years ago. And you and I have become the stuff of legends, Tuf, the most celebrated lovers since, oh, puling hell, since all those famous romantic couples from ancient times—you know, Romeo and Juliet, Samson and Delilah, Sodom and Gomorrah, Marx and Lenin.”

Perched on Tuf’s shoulder, Dax began to emit a low, frightened growl. Tiny claws dug through the fabric of Tuf’s jumpsuit into his flesh. Haviland Tuf blinked, then reached over and stroked the kitten soothingly. “Portmaster Mune, your smile is broad and your news seems to indicate nothing but the trite yet nonetheless eternally popular happy ending, but Dax has grown alarmed, as if you seethe with turmoil beneath this placid surface. Perhaps, you are omitting some crucial part of the tale.”

“Just the footnote, Tuf,” the Portmaster said. “Indeed. What might that be?”

“Twenty-seven years, Tuf. Does that trip any claxons in your head?”

“Indeed. Before I embarked upon my program of ecological engineering, your projections indicated S’uthlam to be twenty-seven standard years from mass famine, given the alarming population growth and the declining food resources.”

“That was five years ago,” said Tolly Mune.

“Indeed.”

“Twenty-seven minus five.”

“Twenty-two,” said Tuf. “I assume there is a point in this exercise in elementary arithmetic.”

“Twenty-two years left,” Portmaster Tolly Mune said. “Ah, but that was before the *Ark*, before the genius ecologist Tuf and the daring spinneret Mune fixed it all, before the miracle of the loaves and fishes, before courageous young Cregor Blaxon ushered in Tuf’s Flowering.”

Haviland Tuf turned his head to look at the cat on his shoulder. “I detect a certain note of sarcasm in her voice,” he said to Dax.

Tolly Mune sighed, reached into a pocket, and extracted a case of crystalline data-chips. “Here you go, lover,” she said. She tossed them through the air.

Tuf reached up, caught the spinning case in a large white hand, said nothing.

“Everything you need is there. Straight from the council databanks. The hard-classified files, of course. All the reports, all the projections, all the analyses, and it’s for your eyes only. You understand? That’s why I was so puling mysterious and that’s why we’re heading back to the *Ark*. Creg and the High Council figured our romance made a terrific cover. Let the billions of newsfeed viewers think we’re sexing up a storm. As long as their heads are full of visions of the pirate and Portmaster blazing new sexual frontiers, they won’t stop to ponder what we’re

really up to, and everything can be done quietly. We want loaves and fishes, Tuf, but this time on a covered platter, you understand? Those are my instructions.”

“What is the most recent projection?” said Haviland Tuf, his voice even and expressionless.

Dax stood up, hissing in alarm, and sudden fear.

Tolly Mune sipped on her beer, and slumped back deep into her chair. She closed her eyes. “Eighteen years,” she said. She looked like the hundred-year-old woman she was, instead of a youngster of sixty, and her voice was infinitely weary. “Eighteen years,” she repeated, “and counting.”

Tolly Mune was far from unsophisticated. Having spent her life on S’uthlam, with its vast continent-wide cities, its teeming billions, its towers rising ten kays into the sky, its deep underways far below the surface, and its great orbital elevator, she was not a woman easily impressed by mere size. But there was something about the *Ark*, she thought.

She felt it from the moment of their arrival, as the great dome of the landing deck cracked open beneath them and Tuf took the *Ferocious Veldt Roarer* down into darkness and settled it among his shuttles and junked starships, upon a circular landing pad that glowed a dim blue in welcome. The dome closed over them and atmosphere was pumped back in; to fill so large a space so quickly it came with gale force, howling and sighing all around them. Finally Tuf opened their locks and preceded her down an ornate stair that slid from the lionboat’s mouth like a gilded tongue. Below, a small three-wheeled cart was waiting. Tuf drove past the clutter of dead and abandoned ships, some more alien than any Tolly Mune had ever seen. He drove in silence, looking neither right nor left, Dax a limp, boneless, purring ball of fur stretched across his knees.

Tuf gave her an entire deck to herself. Hundreds of sleeping berths, computer stations, labs, accessways, sanitary stations, recreation halls, kitchens, and no tenants but her. On S’uthlam, a cityspace this large would have housed a thousand people, in apartments smaller than the *Ark*’s storage closets.

Tuf turned off the gravity grid on that level, since he knew she preferred zero-gee.

“If you have need of me, you will find my own quarters on the top deck, under full gravity,” he told her. “I intend to address all my energies to the problems of S’uthlam. I will not require your counsel or assistance. No offense is intended, Portmaster, but it has been my bitter experience that such liaisons are more trouble than they are worth and serve only to distract me. If there is an answer to your most vexing quandary, I shall arrive at it soonest by my own efforts, left undisturbed. I shall program a leisurely voyage toward S’uthlam and its web; it is my hope that when we arrive I will be able to solve your difficulty.”

“If you can’t,” she reminded him sharply, “we get the ship. Those were the terms.”

“I am fully aware of this,” said Haviland Tuf. “In the event you grow restive, the *Ark* offers a full spectrum of diversions, entertainments, and occupations. Feel free to avail yourself to the automated food facilities as well. The fare so provided is not equal to the meals I prepare personally, though it will acquit itself admirably when compared to typical S’uthlamese provender, I have no doubt. Partake of as many meals as you require during the day; I will be pleased to have you join me each evening for dinner at eighteen-hundred ship’s time. Kindly be punctual.”

And so saying, he took his leave.

The computer system that ran the great ship observed cycles of light and darkness, to simulate the passage of day and night. Tolly Mune spent her nights before a holo monitor, viewing dramas several millennia old recorded upon worlds half-legendary. Her days she spent exploring—first the deck that Tuf had ceded her, and then the rest of the ship. The more she saw and learned, the more awed and uneasy Tolly Mune became.

She sat for days in the old captain's chair on the tower ridge that Tuf had bypassed as inconvenient, watching random selections from the ancient log roll down the great vidscreen.

She walked a labyrinth of decks and corridors, found three skeletons in scattered parts of the *Ark* (only two of them human), wondered at one corridor intersection where the thick duralloy bulkheads were blistered and cracked, as if by great heat.

She spent hours in a library she discovered, touching and handling old books, some printed on thin leaves of metal or plastic, others on real paper.

She returned to the landing deck and climbed around a few of the derelict starships Tuf had there. She stood in the armory and gazed on a frightening array of weapons, some of them obsolete, some of them unrecognizable, some of them forbidden.

She wandered down the dim vastness of the central shaft that cored the ship, walked the full thirty kays of its length, her bootsteps echoing overhead, her breath coming hard by the end of her daily treks. Around her were cloning vats, growth tanks, microsurgeries, and computer stations in staggering profusion. Ninety percent of the vats were empty, but here and there the Portmaster found life growing. She peered through dusty glass and thick, translucent fluids at dim, living shapes, shapes as small as her hand, and shapes as large as a tubetrain. It made her feel cold.

In fact, the whole ship seemed chilly and somehow frightening to Tolly Mune.

The only real warmth was to be found on the tiny portion of the top deck where Haviland Tuf spent his nights and days. The long, narrow communications room he had refitted as his central control was cozy and comfortable. His quarters were crowded with worn, overstuffed furniture and an amazing assortment of bric-a-brac accumulated in his voyagings. The smell of food and beer permeated the air here, bootsteps did not echo so, and there was light and noise and life. And cats.

Tuf's cats had free run of most of the ship, but most of them seemed to prefer to stay close to Tuf himself. He had seven now. Chaos, a long-haired gray tom with imperious eyes and an indolent, dominating manner, was the lord of all he surveyed. He could most often be found sitting on top of Tuf's master console in the control chamber, his bushy tail twitching like a metronome. Havoc had lost energy and gained weight in five years. She did not seem to recognize the Portmaster at first, but after a few days the old familiarity returned, and Havoc took up the acquaintance where it had dropped, and sometimes even accompanied Tolly on her wanderings.

Then there were Ingratitude, Doubt, Hostility, and Suspicion. "The kittens," Tuf called them, though they were really young cats now, "born of Chaos and Havoc, madam. Originally they comprised a litter of five. I left Foolishness behind on Namor."

"It's always best to leave foolishness behind," she said. "I never figured you to part with a cat, though."

"Foolishness developed an inexplicable fondness for a vexing and unpredictable young woman of Namorian origin," he said. "Since I had many cats and she had none, it seemed the appropriate gesture under the circumstances. Although the feline is a splendid and admirable creature, it remains relatively scarce in this sad modern galaxy. Thus my innate generosity and sense of duty to my fellow humans prompt me to offer cats to worlds such as Namor. A culture with cats is richer and more humane than one deprived of their unique companionship."

"Right," said Tolly Mune, smiling. Hostility was near at hand. She scooped him up carefully, stroked him. His fur was very soft. "Strange names you gave this lot."

"Perhaps more apt to human nature than to the feline," Tuf agreed. "I bestowed them on a whim."

Ingratitude, Doubt, and Suspicion were gray, like their father; Hostility was black and white like Havoc. Doubt was noisy and fat, Hostility was aggressive and rambunctious, Suspicion was shy and liked to hide under Tuf's chair. They liked to play together, a boisterous cat pack, and seemed to find Tolly Mune endlessly fascinating, climbing all over her whenever she paid Tuf a visit. Sometimes they turned up in the least likely places. Hostility landed on her back one day as she ascended an escalator, and the surprise left her breathless and shocked. She grew accustomed to having Doubt in her lap during meals, begging slivers of food.

And then there was the seventh cat: Dax.

Dax, with fur the color of night and eyes like small golden lamps. Dax, the single most lethargic vermin she had ever seen, who preferred being carried to walking. Dax, who peered from Tuf's pocket, or out from beneath his cap, who sat on his knees or rode on his shoulder. Dax; who never played with the older kittens, who seldom made a sound, whose golden glance could somehow displace even huge, lordly Chaos from a chair both of them coveted. The black kitten was with Tuf constantly.

"Your familiar," Tolly Mune said to him one mealtime, after she had been aboard for nearly twenty days. She pointed a knife. "That makes you a... what was the term?"

"There were several," Tuf said. "Witch, wizard, warlock. The nomenclature derives from Old Earth myth, I believe."

"It fits," said Tolly Mune. "Sometimes I feel this ship is haunted."

"This suggests why it is wiser to rely upon intellect rather than feelings, Portmaster. Accept my assurance that if ghosts or other supernatural entities did in fact exist, they would be represented aboard the *Ark* by cell samples, in order that they might be cloned. I have never encountered such samples. My stock in trade does include species sometimes referred to as hooded draculas, wind-wraiths, lycanthropes, vampires, garghoul, witchweed, and other such terms, but these are not the genuine mythic articles, I fear."

Tolly Mune smiled. "Good thing."

"More wine, perhaps? It is an excellent Rhiannese vintage."

"That's one good idea," she said, splashing some into her glass. She still would have preferred a squeeze bulb; open liquids were sneaky things always waiting to spill. "My throat's dry anyway. You don't need monsters, Tuf. This ship of yours could destroy worlds as it is."

"This is obvious," said Tuf. "Equally obvious, it can save worlds."

"Like ours? You have a second miracle up your sleeve, Tuf?"

"Alas, miracles are as mystic as ghosts and goblins, and there is nothing up my sleeves but my arms. However, the human intellect is still capable of certain less-than-miraculous breakthroughs." He rose slowly to his full height. "If you are quite finished with your pop-onion pie and wine, perhaps you will accompany me to the computer room. I have applied myself diligently to your problems and have arrived at a few conclusions."

Tolly Mune got up quickly. "Lead on," she said.

"Note," said Haviland Tuf. He pressed a command key; a projection flashed upon one of the screens.

"What's this?" asked Molly Tune.



“The projection I made five years ago,” he said. Dax hopped into his lap; Tuf reached out and stroked the black kitten. “The parameters used were the then-current S’uthlamese population figures and the projected population growth, as of that time. My analysis indicated that the additional food resources introduced into your society by means of what Cregor Blaxon was so kind as to dub Tuf’s Flowering should have given you at minimum ninety-four standard years before the specter of planetary famine again threatened S’uthlam.”

“Well, that’s one goddamned projection that wasn’t worth a pot of vermin,” Tolly Mune said bluntly.

Tuf raised a finger. “A more volatile man than myself might take umbrage at the implication that his analysis was defective. Fortunately, I am of a cool and tolerant nature. Nonetheless, you are most incorrect, Portmaster Mune. My projections were as accurate as they could possibly have been.”

“Then you’re saying that we *don’t* have starvation and collapse staring down at us eighteen years in the future? That we’ve got, what, almost a century?” She shook her head. “I’d like to believe that, but—”

“I said no such thing, Portmaster. Within its prescribed margin of error, the latest S’uthlamese projection also appears to be quite accurate insofar as I have been able to determine.”

“Both projections can’t be correct,” she said. “That’s impossible, Tuf.”

“You are wrong, madam. During the intervening five years, the parameters changed. Attend.” He reached out and depressed another button. A new line, rising sharply, curved across the screen. “This represents the present curve of population increase on S’uthlam. Note how it climbs, Portmaster. An astonishing rate of ascent. Were I of a poetic turn of mind, I might even say it soars. Fortunately, I am not so afflicted. I am a blunt man who speaks bluntly.” He raised a finger. “Before we can hope to rectify your situation, it is necessary to understand that situation and how it came to be. Here all is clarity. Five years ago, I employed the resources of the *Ark*, and, if I may be so bold as to put my accustomed modesty aside, tendered to you extraordinarily efficient service. The S’uthlamese wasted no time in undoing everything I had done. Let me put it succinctly, Portmaster. No sooner had the Flowering taken root, so to speak, than your people rushed back to their private chambers, unleashed their carnal lusts and parental urges, and began reproducing faster than ever. Mean family size is greater now than five years ago, by .0072 persons, and your average citizen becomes a parent sooner by .0102 years. Small changes, you may protest, but when factored into the enormous base population of your world, and modified by all other relevant parameters, they make a dramatic difference. The difference, to be precise, between ninety-four years and eighteen.”

Tolly Mune stared at the lines crossing upon the screen. “Puling hell,” she muttered. “I should have figured, goddamn it. This sort of information is classified, for obvious reasons, but I should have known.” Her hands clenched into fists. “Goddamn it to hell,” she said. “Creg made such a newsfeed carnival out of the goddamned Flowering, no wonder this is happening. Why should anyone refrain from birthing—the food problem has been solved, right? The goddamned First Councillor said so. Good times had arrived, right? All the damned zeros had turned out to be puling anti-life alarmists once more, the technocrats had worked another miracle. How could anyone doubt that they’d do it again, and again, and again? Oh, yes. So be a good church member, have more kids, help humanity evolve to godhood and defeat entropy. Hey, why not?” She made a disgusted noise. “Tuf, why are people such puling idiots?”

“This quandary is even more perplexing than the dilemma that is S’uthlam,” said Tuf, “and I fear I am not equipped to answer it. So long as you are engaged in the division of blame, you might also assign some to yourself, Portmaster. Whatever misleading impression might have been given by First Councillor Cregor Blaxon was most certainly confirmed in the popular mind by that unfortunate final oration delivered by my impersonator in *Tuf and Mune*. ”

“All right, damn it. I’m guilty, I helped gnarl it up. That’s past now. The question is, what can we do about it?”

“You can do little, I fear,” said Haviland Tuf, his face expressionless.

“And you? You worked the loaves and fishes miracle once. Can we get a second helping, Tuf?”

Haviland Tuf blinked. “I am a more experienced ecological engineer now than when I first attempted to deal with the problem of S’uthlam. I am more familiar with the full range of species contained within the *Ark*’s cell library, and the effect of each upon individual ecosystems. I have even increased my stock in trade to a certain extent during the course of my travels hither and yon. Indeed, I can be of service.” He cleared the screens and folded his hands atop his stomach. “There will be a price.”

“A price? We paid your damn price, remember? My spinnerets fixed your goddamned ship.”

“Indeed they did, even as I repaired your ecology. I do not require any further repairs or refitting of the *Ark* at this time. You, however, appear to have damaged your ecology once again so you have further need of my services. It strikes me as only equitable that I be compensated for my efforts. I have many operating expenses, chief among which is my still-formidable debt to the Port of S’uthlam. By dint of exhausting and unremitting labor on numerous scattered worlds, I have raised the first half of the thirty-three million standards you assessed me, but an equal amount remains to be paid, and I have but five additional years to earn it. How can I say if this will be possible? Perhaps the next dozen worlds on which I call will have ecologies without blemish, or will be so impoverished that I will be forced to grant them severe discounts if I am to serve them at all. Day and night the size of my debt preys upon my mind, often interfering with the clarity and precision of my thoughts and thus making me less effective at my profession. Indeed, I have a sudden hunch that when wrestling with a challenge of the vast magnitude of that posed by S’uthlam, my performance might be far superior were my mind to be clear and untroubled.”

Tolly Mune had expected something like this. She had told Creg as much, and he’d given her limited budgetary discretion. Still, she managed a frown. “How much do you want, Tuf?”

“The sum of ten million standards leaps to mind,” he said. “Being a round number, it might be deducted from my bill easily without posing any knotty problems of arithmetic.”

“Too damn much,” she said. “Maybe I could get the High Council to agree to lop off, say, two million. No more.”

“Let us compromise on nine million,” said Tuf. A long finger scratched Dax behind a small black ear; the cat silently turned its golden eyes on Tolly Mune.

“Nine isn’t much of a compromise between ten and two,” she said drily.

“I am a better ecological engineer than mathematician,” said Tuf. “Perhaps eight?”

“Four. No more. Cregor will implode on me as it is.”

Tuf fixed her with an unblinking stare, and said nothing. His face was cool and still and impassive.

“Four and a half million,” she said under the weight of his gaze. She felt Dax staring, too, and suddenly wondered if that damn cat was reading her mind. She pointed. “Damn it,” she said, “that little black bastard knows just how high I’m authorized to go, doesn’t he?”

“An interesting notion,” said Tuf. “Seven million might be acceptable to me. I am in a generous mood.”

“Five and one-half,” she snapped. What was the use?

Dax began to purr loudly.

“Leaving a net principal of eleven million standards to be paid within five years,” said Tuf. “Accepted, Portmaster Mune, with one additional proviso.”

“What’s that?” she said suspiciously.

“I will present my solution to First Councillor Cregor Blaxon and yourself at a public conference, to be attended by newsfeed peeps from all of your vidnets, and broadcast live over the entirety of S’uthlam.”

Tolly Mune laughed aloud. “Incredible,” she said. “Creg will never agree. You can forget that idea.”

Haviland Tuf sat petting Dax, and said nothing.

“Tuf, you don’t understand the difficulties. The situation is too damned volatile. You’ll have to give on this one.”

The silence lingered.

“Puling hell,” she swore. “Tell you what, write down what you want to say, and let us look it over. If you avoid anything that might stir up problems, I suppose we can give you access.”

“I prefer that my remarks be spontaneous,” Tuf said.

“Maybe we can record the conference and broadcast it after editing,” she said. Haviland Tuf kept silent. Dax stared at her, unblinking.

Tolly Mune looked deep into those knowing golden eyes, and sighed. “You win,” she said. “Cregor will be furious, but I’m a puling heroine and you’re a returning conqueror, I suppose I can cram it down his gullet. But why, Tuf?”

“A whim,” said Haviland Tuf. “I am often taken by such fancies. Perhaps I wish to savor a moment in the light of publicity and enjoy my role as savior. Perhaps I wish to show the S’uthlamese billions that I do not wear a mustache.”

“I’ll believe in goblins and ghouls before I pay one standard for that load of ore,” said Tolly Mune. “Tuf, there are reasons why our population size and the gravity of the food crisis are kept secret, you know. Policy reasons. Now, you wouldn’t be thinking about, ah, opening that particular box of vermin, would you?”

“An interesting concept,” Tuf said, blinking, his face blank and noncommittal. Dax purred.

“Unaccustomed as I am to public speaking and the unflattering glare of publicity,” Haviland Tuf began, “I felt it incumbent upon myself to come before you and explain certain things.”

He stood before a four-meter-square telescreen in the largest hall in Spiderhome, with a seating capacity for almost a thousand. The room was packed; newsfeed reporters were jammed in elbow-to-elbow up front, twenty rows of them, a tiny miniaturized camera in the center of each forehead busily recording the scene. Farther back were the curious who had come to watch—spinnerets of all ages, sexes, and professions, from cybertechs and bureaucrats to eroticists and poets, wealthy groundworms who had come up the elevator for the show, flies from distant systems passing through the web. On the platform with Tuf were Portmaster Tolly Mune and First Councillor Cregor Blaxon. Blaxon’s smile looked forced; perhaps he was recalling how the newsfeed peeps had all captured the long, awkward moment when Tuf blinked at his proffered hand. For that matter, Tolly Mune looked a bit uneasy.

Haviland Tuf, however, looked impressive. He loomed over every man and woman in the hall, his gray vinyl greatcoat sweeping the floor, the sigil of the EEC upon his green billed cap.

“First,” he said, “permit me to point out that I do not wear a mustache.” The statement provoked general laughter. “Nor have your esteemed Portmaster and myself ever united in physical congress, vidshows notwithstanding, though I have no reason to doubt that she is a skillful practitioner of the erotic arts whose favors would be held in high esteem by any who enjoy that sort of diversion.”

The horde of newspeeps, like one clamorous hundred-headed beast, turned and fixed their third eyes upon Tolly Mune. The Portmaster was slumped deep in her seat, with a hand rubbing her temples. Her sigh was audible as far as the fourth row.

“These points of information are minor in nature,” said Tuf, “and are advanced solely in the interest of veracity. The major reason that I have insisted upon this gathering is professional rather than personal, however. I have no doubt that each of you listening to this newsfeed is aware of the phenomenon that your High Council called Tuf’s Flowering.”

Cregor Blaxon smiled and nodded his head.

“I must presume, however, that you are unaware of the imminence of what I will be so bold as to call S’uthlam’s Wilting.”

The First Councillor’s smile wilted, too, and Portmaster Tolly Mune winced. The newspeeps swung back to Tuf en masse.

“You are indeed fortunate that I am a man who honors his debts and obligations, since my timely return to S’uthlam has allowed me to intervene once more in your behalf. Your leaders have been less than frank with you. But for the aid I am about to render you, your world would face starvation within the short span of eighteen standard years.”

A moment of stunned silence occurred. Then a small riot began in the rear of the hall. Several people were forcibly ejected. Tuf paid the incident no mind.

“On my last visit, the program of ecological engineering I initiated produced dramatic increases in your food supply, through relatively conventional means, to wit, the introduction of new plant and animal species designed to maximize your agricultural productivity without seriously altering your ecology. Further efforts in this direction are undoubtedly possible, but I fear that the point of diminishing returns has long been passed, and such schemes would avail you little. Accordingly, this time I have accepted as fundamental the need to make radical alterations in your ecosystem and food chain. Some of you will find my suggestions unpleasant. I assure you that the other options you face—to wit, famine, plague, and war—are even more disagreeable.

“The choice, of course, remains yours, and I would not dream of making it for you.”

The room was as cold as a cryonic storage facility, and deathly silent but for the whirring of the massed third eyes.

Haviland Tuf raised a finger. “First,” he said. Behind him an image filled the telescreen, broadcast directly from the *Ark*’s computers—the image of a swollen monstrosity as big as a hill, its skin oily and glistening, its bulk shimmering like opaque pink gelatin. “The meatbeast,” said Haviland Tuf. “A significant portion of your agricultural land is devoted to the raising of herds of meat animals of various sorts, whose flesh is the delectation of a very small, wealthy minority of S’uthlamese who can afford such luxury and enjoy eating cooked animal matter. This is extremely inefficient. These beasts consume far more calories than they yield after slaughter, and being themselves the product of natural evolution, much of their body mass is inedible. I therefore suggest you eliminate these species from your world’s ecosystem immediately.

“The meatbeasts, as depicted, are among the most notable triumphs of genetic tailoring; except for a small nucleus, these creatures are ever-replicating masses of undifferentiated cells, with no body mass wasted on nonessentials like sensory organs, nerves, or mobility. If one chose to employ metaphor, one might liken them to giant edible cancers. The flesh of the meatbeast contains all essential human nutrients and is high in protein, vitamins, and minerals. One adult meatbeast, growing in the basement of a S’uthlamese apartment tower, will yield as much edible flesh in a standard year as two of your present herds, and the grasslands now employed to raise these herds would be freed for agricultural cultivation.”

“How do the damn things taste?” someone shouted out from the back of the room.

Haviland Tuf’s head moved slightly, and he looked directly at the speaker. “As I am not myself an eater of animal flesh, I cannot answer that question from personal authority. I imagine, however, that meatbeast would taste very good to any starving man.” He raised a hand, palm outward. “Let us proceed,” he said, and the picture behind him changed. Now the telescreen showed an endless flat plain under a double sun. The plain was filled from horizon to horizon with plants—ugly looking things as tall as Tuf himself, their stalks and leaves an oily black, their heads drooping beneath the weight of swollen whitish pods that dripped a pale thick fluid.

“These, for reasons unknown to me, are called jersey-pods,” said Tuf. “Five years ago, I gave you omni-grain, whose caloric yield per square meter is dramatically higher than that of nanowheat, neograss, and the other grains you had hitherto been planting. I note that you have sowed omni-grain extensively and reaped the benefits thereof. I also note that you have continued to plant nanowheat, neograss, spicepods, smackles, and numerous other types of fruit and vegetables, no doubt for the sake of variety and culinary pleasure. This must cease. Culinary variety is a luxury the S’uthlamese can no longer afford. Caloric efficiency alone must henceforth be your byword. Every square meter of agricultural land on S’uthlam and your so-called Larder asteroids must immediately be turned over to jersey-pods.”

“What kind of gunk is that dripping there?” someone called.

“Is that thing a fruit or a vegetable?” a newspeep demanded to know. “Can you make bread from it?” another asked.

“The jersey-pod,” said Tuf, “is inedible.”

A sudden clamorous uproar swept over the room, as a hundred people shouted and waved and threw questions and began speeches.

Haviland Tuf waited calmly until there was silence. “Each year,” he said, “as your First Councillor could tell you, were he only so inclined, your agricultural lands yield an ever-diminishing percentage of the caloric needs of the swelling S’uthlamese population, the difference being made up by increased production from your food factories, where petrochemicals are processed into nutritious wafers and paste and clever synthetic edibles. Alas, however, petroleum is a nonrenewable resource, and you are running out. This process may be delayed, but ultimately it is inexorable. No doubt you are importing some from other worlds, but that interstellar pipeline can yield you only so much. Five years ago, I introduced into your seas a plankton of a variety called neptune’s shawl, colonies of which now creep up your beaches and float upon the waves above your continental shelves. When dead and decayed, neptune’s shawl can serve as a substitute for petrochemicals in your food factories.

“Jersey-pods might be looked upon as a nonaquatic analogue to neptune’s shawl. The pods produce a fluid with certain biochemical similarities to raw crude oil. It is similar enough so that your food factories, after a minimal retooling easily accomplished by a world of your undoubted technological expertise, can make efficient use of it for processing into foodstuffs. Yet I must stress that you cannot simply plant these pods here and there as a supplement to your present crops. For maximum benefit, they must be planted universally, entirely supplanting the omni-grain, neograss, and other flora on which you have become accustomed to rely for provender.”

A slender woman in the back stood up on her chair to be seen above the throng. “Tuf, who are you to tell us that we have to give up real food?” she screamed, anger in her tone.

“I, madam? I am but a humble ecological engineer engaged in the practice of his profession. It is not for me to make your decisions. My task, so obviously thankless, consists of presenting you with the facts and suggesting certain possible remedies which might be efficacious, however unpleasant. Thereafter, the government and people of S’uthlam must make the ultimate determination as to what course to follow.”

The audience was getting unruly again. Tuf raised a finger. “Quiet, please. I will soon conclude my presentation.”

The picture on the telescreen changed once more. “Certain species and ecological strategies that I introduced five years ago, when first employed by S’uthlam, can and should remain in place. The mushroom and fungus farms beneath your undercities should be maintained and expanded. I have several new varieties of fungus to demonstrate to you. More efficient methods of farming the seas are certainly possible, methods which include use of the ocean floor as well as its watery ceiling. The growth of neptune’s shawl can be stimulated and encouraged until it covers every square meter of S’uthlam’s salt-water surface. The snow-oats and tunnel-tubers you have in place remain optimal food species for your frigid arctic regions. Your deserts have been made to bloom, your swamps have been drained and made productive. All that might be done on land or sea is being attempted. There remains only the air. I therefore propose the introduction of a complete living ecosystem into your upper atmosphere.

“Behind me, upon the screen, you see the final link in this new food chain I propose to forge for you. This huge dark creature with the black triangular wings is a Claremontine wind-rider, also called the *ororo*, a distant analogue to better-known species such as the black banshee of High Kavalaan and the lashtail manta of Hemador. It is a predator of the upper atmosphere, a glider and hunter, born aloft, a creature of the winds that lives and dies in flight, never touching land or sea. Indeed, once having landed, such wind-riders soon perish, as it is impossible for them to go aloft again. On Claremont, the species is small and lightweight, its flesh reported to be tough and leathery. It consumes any birds with the misfortune to venture into the altitudes it hunts, and also several varieties of airborne microorganisms, flying fungi, and windborne slime-molds that I also propose to introduce into your upper atmosphere. I have produced a genetically tailored wind-rider for S’uthlam, with a wing-span of some twenty meters, the ability to descend almost to treetop level, and nearly six times the body mass of the original. A small hydrogen sac behind the sensory organs will enable the beast to maintain flight despite this greater body weight. With your aircars and fliers, you will have no difficulty hunting and killing the wind-riders, and you will find them an excellent source of protein.

“In the interests of full and complete honesty, I must add that this ecological modification will not be without cost. The microorganisms, fungus, and slime-molds will reproduce very quickly in your skies, having no natural enemies. The upper stories of your taller residential towers will be covered with mold and fungus, and more frequent cleaning will be required. Most of the native S’uthlamese birds and those species you brought to this world from Tara and Old Earth will die out, displaced by this new aerial ecosystem. Ultimately, the skies themselves will darken, you will receive significantly less sunlight, and your climate will undergo a permanent change. I do not project this happening for some three hundred years, however. Since you face disaster in a far shorter time if nothing is done, I continue to recommend the course of action I have outlined.”

The newsfeed reporters leaped to their feet and began shouting questions. Tolly Mune was slumped and scowling. First Councillor Cregor Blaxon was sitting quite still, staring straight ahead with a fixed smile on his sharp, thin face, his eyes glassy.

“A moment, if you will,” Haviland Tuf said to the turmoil. “I am about to conclude. You have heard my recommendations and seen the species with which I intend to redesign your ecology. Now, attend. Assuming your High Council does indeed opt to deploy the meatbeast, the jersey-pod, and the *ororo* in the ways that I have outlined, the *Ark*’s computers project a significant improvement in your food crisis. Observe.”

All eyes went to the telescreen. Even Tolly Mune craned her head around, and First Councillor Cregor Blaxon, smile still firmly in place, rose from his seat and faced the screen boldly, his thumbs hooked into his pockets. A grid flashed into place, a red line chased a green line across the display, and dates lined up along one axis, population figures along the other.

The noise died.

The silence lingered.

Even way to the back, they heard Cregor Blaxon when he cleared his throat. "Ah, Tuf," he said, "this must be wrong."

"Sir," said Haviland Tuf, "I assure you, it is not."

"It's, ah, the before, isn't it? Not the after." He pointed. "I mean, look, all that eco-engineering, growing nothing but these pods, our seas covered with neptune's shawl, the skies growing darker with flying food, meat-mountains in every cellar."

"Meatbeasts," Tuf corrected, "although I concede that 'meat mountains' has a certain flair. You have a gift for colorful language and memorable terminology, First Councillor."

"All this," Blaxon said doggedly, "is pretty radical, Tuf. We have a right to expect radical improvement, I'd say."

A few loyalists began cheering him on.

"But this," the First Councillor concluded, "this projection says, ah, maybe I'm reading it wrong."

"First Councillor," said Haviland Tuf, "and people of S'uthlam, you are reading it correctly. If you adopt every one of my suggestions, you will indeed postpone your day of catastrophic reckoning. Postpone, sir, not forestall. You will have mass famine in eighteen years, as per your current projection, or in one hundred nine, as this projection indicates, but you will most certainly have mass famine." He raised a finger. "The only true and permanent solution is to be found not aboard my *Ark*, but in the minds and loins of each individual S'uthlamese citizen. You must practice restraint and implement immediate birth control. You must stop your indiscriminate procreation at once!"

"Oh, no," groaned Tolly Mune. But she had seen it coming, and she was on her feet, moving toward him and shouting for a security cordon, well before all hell broke loose.

"Rescuing you is getting to be a puling habit," Tolly Mune said, much later, when they had returned to the safety of Tuf's shuttle *Phoenix*, in its berth way out along spur six. Two whole squads of security, armed with nerveguns and tanglers, stood outside the ship, keeping the growing and unruly crowd at bay. "You have any beer?" she asked. "I could use one. Puling hell." It had been a harrowing run back to the ship, even with guards flanking them to either side. Tuf ran with a strange awkward lope, but he had surprising speed, she had to admit. "How are you doing, anyway?" she asked him.

"A thorough scrubbing has removed most of the spittle from my person," Haviland Tuf said, folding himself into his seat with dignity. "You will find beer in the refrigerated compartment under the gaming-board. Make free with it, if you will." Dax began to scale Tuf's leg, digging tiny claws into the fabric of the pale blue jumpsuit into which he had changed. Tuf reached down with a large hand and helped him up. "In the future," he said to the cat, "you shall accompany me at all times, so that I will have ample warning of the onset of such demonstrations."

“You’d have had ample goddamned warning this time,” said Tolly Mune, pulling out a beer, “if you’d told me that you intended to condemn our beliefs, our church, and our whole puling way of life. Did you expect they’d give you a medal?”

“A rousing hand of applause would have been sufficient.”

“I warned you a long time ago, Tuf. On S’uthlam, it’s not popular to be anti-life.”

“I decline to be thus labeled,” said Tuf. “I stand squarely in favor of life. Indeed, daily I create life in my cloning vats. I have a decided personal aversion to death, I find entropy distasteful, and if invited to the heat death of the universe, I would most certainly make other plans.” He raised a finger. “Nonetheless, Portmaster Mune, I said what had to be said. Unlimited procreation as taught by your Church of Life Evolving and practiced by the majority of S’uthlamese, yourself and your fellow zeros excluded, is irresponsible and foolish, producing as it does a geometric population increase that will most assuredly pull down your proud civilization.”

“Haviland Tuf, prophet of doom,” the Portmaster said with a sigh. “They liked you better as a rogue ecologist and a lover.”

“Everywhere I visit, I find heroes to be an endangered species. Perhaps I am more aesthetically pleasing when mouthing reassuring falsehoods through a filter of facial hair in melodramatic vidshows reeking of false optimism and post-coital complacency. This is a symptom of a great S’uthlamese affliction, your blind preference for things as you would have them rather than as they are. It is time that your world looked upon naked truth, be it my hairless face or the near certainty of famine in your future.”

Tolly Mune swallowed some beer and stared at him. “Tuf,” she said, “you remember what I said five years ago?”

“As I recall, you said a great many things.”

“At the end,” she said impatiently, “when I decided to help you escape with the *Ark* instead of helping Josen Rael take it from you. You asked me why, and I explained my reasons.”

“You said,” Tuf stated, “that power corrupts, that absolute power corrupts absolutely, that the *Ark* had already corrupted First Councillor Josen Rael and his associates, and that I was better fitted to retain possession of the seedship because I was an incorruptible man.”

She gave him a wan smile. “Not quite, Tuf. I said I didn’t think there was such a thing as an incorruptible man, but if there was, you were the item.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf, stroking Dax. “I stand corrected.”

“Now you’re making me wonder,” she said. “You know what you just did, back there? For starters, you toppled another government. Creg can’t survive this. You told the whole world he’s a liar. Maybe that’s fair enough; you made him, now you unmade him. First Councillors don’t seem to last long when you come calling, do they? But never mind that. You also told, oh, some thirty-odd billion members of the Church of Life Evolving that their most deeply held religious beliefs are so much bladder bloat. You as much as said that the entire basis of the technocratic philosophy that has dominated council policy for centuries is mistaken. We’ll be lucky if the next damned election doesn’t bring the expansionists back in, and if that happens, it means war. Vandeen and Jazbo and the other allies will not tolerate another expansionist government. You probably ruined me, too. Again. Unless I’m even faster on my goddamned feet than I was last time around. Instead of a star-crossed lover, I’m now the sort of gnarly old bureaucrat who likes to lie about her sexual escapades, and I helped Citizen Anti-Life, too.” She sighed. “You seem determined to see me in disgrace. But that’s nothing, Tuf. I can take care of myself. The main thing is, you took it upon yourself to dictate policy to forty-plus billion people, with only the vaguest conception of the consequences. By what authority? Who gave you the right?”



“I would maintain that any human has the right to speak the truth.”

“And the right to demand a worldwide all-net newsfeed to speak it on? Where did that puling right come from?” she said. “There are several million people on S’uthlam who belong to the zero faction, me included. You didn’t say much that we haven’t said for years. You just said it louder.”

“I am aware of this. It is my hope that the words spoken this evening, no matter how bitterly they were received, will ultimately have a beneficial effect upon S’uthlamese politics and society. Perhaps Cregor Blaxon and his technocrats will grasp the truth that no true salvation can be found in what he calls Tuf’s Flowering and what you once referred to as ‘the miracle of loaves and fishes’. Perhaps from this point on, policies and opinions will be changed. Perhaps your zero faction may even triumph in the next election.”

Tolly Mune scowled. “That’s damned unlikely, and you should know it. And even if the zero faction won, the question arises as to what the hell we could do.” She leaned forward. “Would we have the right to *enforce* population control? I wonder. Never mind about that, though. My point is that you don’t have any damned monopoly on truth. Any zero could have given your damned speech. Hell, half the damned technocrats know what the ledger looks like. Creg’s no fool. Neither was poor Josen. What allowed you to do that was *power*, Tuf. The power of the *Ark*. The help you can give us, or withhold, as you choose.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. He blinked. “I cannot take issue with you. The sad truth of history has always been that the unreasoning masses follow the powerful, and not the wise.”

“And which are you, Tuf?”

“I am but a humble—”

“Yes, yes,” she snapped, “I know, a goddamned humble ecological engineer. A humble ecological engineer who has taken it on himself to play prophet. A humble ecological engineer who has visited S’uthlam exactly twice in his life, for a total of maybe a hundred days, and yet feels competent to topple our government, discredit our religion, and lecture forty-odd billion strangers about how many puling children they ought to have. My people may be stupid, they may be shortsighted, and they may be blind, but they are still my people, Tuf. I don’t think I entirely approve of you arriving here and trying to remake us according to your own enlightened values.”

“I deny this charge, madam. Whatever my personal standards might be, I do not seek to impose them upon S’uthlam. I merely took it upon myself to elucidate certain truths, and to make your population aware of certain cold, hard equations, the sum of which is assuredly disaster, and cannot be changed by beliefs, prayers, or melodramatic romances on your vidnets.”

“You’re being paid—” Tolly Mune started.

“Insufficiently,” Tuf interrupted.

She smiled despite herself. “You’re being paid for ecological engineering, Tuf, not for religious or political instruction, thank you.”

“You are most welcome, Portmaster Mune.” He made a steeple of his hands. “Ecology,” he said. “Consider the word, if you will. Meditate upon its meaning. An ecosystem might be likened to a great biological machine, perhaps. If this analogy is pursued, humanity must be seen as part of the machine. No doubt an important part—an engine, a key circuit—but in no case apart from the mechanism, as is often fallaciously assumed. Ergo, when one such as myself re-engineers an ecology, he must by necessity refit as well the humans who inhabit it.”

“Now you’re giving me a chill, Tuf. You’ve been alone in this ship for too long.”

“This is an opinion I do not share,” said Tuf.

“People aren’t old pulse-rings, or blast-tubes to be recalibrated, you know.”

“People are more complex and recalcitrant than any simple mechanical, electronic, or biochemical component,” Tuf agreed.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“The S’uthlamese are especially difficult,” Tuf said.

Tolly Mune shook her head. “Remember what I said, Tuf. Power corrupts.”

“Indeed,” he said. In this context, she hadn’t a clue as to what it meant.

Haviland Tuf rose from his seat. “My stay here shortly will be at an end,” he said. “At this very instant, the *Ark*’s chronowarp is accelerating the growth of the organisms in my cloning tanks. The *Basilisk* and *Manticore* are being prepared to effect delivery, on the assumption that Cregor Blaxon or his successor will ultimately decide to accept my recommendations. I would estimate that within ten days S’uthlam will have its meatbeasts, jersee-pods, ororos, etcetera. At that point I shall take my leave, Portmaster Mune.”

“Abandoned by my star-bound lover once again,” Tolly Mune said crossly. “Maybe I can make something out of that.”

Tuf looked at Dax. “Levity,” he said, “flavored with bitterness.” He looked up again, and blinked. “I believe I have rendered great service to S’uthlam,” he said. “I regret any personal distress that my methods have caused you. Such was not my intent. Permit me to make some small redress.”

She cocked her head and looked at him hard. “How are you going to do that, Tuf?”

“A trifling gift,” said Tuf. “Aboard the *Ark*, I could not help but notice the affection with which you treated the kittens. Nor did it go entirely unreciprocated. I would like to give you two of my cats, as a token of my esteem.”

Tolly Mune snorted. “Hoping that stark terror will keep the security men away when they come to arrest me? No, Tuf. I appreciate the offer and I’m tempted, really, but vermin are illegal in the web, remember? I couldn’t keep them.”

“As Portmaster of S’uthlam, you have the authority to change the applicable regulations.”

“Oh, right, and wouldn’t that look great? Anti-life and corrupt, too. I’d be real puling popular.”

“Sarcasm,” Tuf informed Dax.

“And what happens when they replace me as Portmaster?” she said.

“I have every faith in your ability to survive this political tempest, even as you weathered the last,” said Tuf.

Tolly Mune laughed raucously. “Good for you, but no, really, it just won’t work.”

Haviland Tuf was silent, his face blank of all expression. Finally he raised a finger. “I have devised a solution,” he said. “In addition to two of my kittens, I will give you a starship. As you know, I have a surfeit of them. You may keep the kittens there, aboard ship, technically outside the jurisdiction of the Port of S’uthlam. I will even leave you with sufficient food for five years, so that it cannot be said that you are giving so-called vermin calories

needed by hungry human beings. To further bolster your flagging public image, you may tell the newsfeeds that these two felines are hostages against my promised return to S'uthlam five years hence."

Tolly Mune let a crooked smile creep across her homely features. "That might work, damn it. You're making this hard to resist. A starship, too, you say?"

"Indeed."

She grinned. "You're too convincing. All right. Which two cats, now?"

"Doubt," said Haviland Tuf, "and Ingratitude."

"There's a pointed comment in that, I'm sure," Tolly Mune said. "I won't pursue it. And five years' worth of food?"

"Sufficient until the day, five years hence, when I return again to repay the remainder of my note."

Tolly Mune looked at him—the long, still, white face, the pale hands folded neatly atop his bulging stomach, the duck-billed cap resting on his bald head, the small black cat in his lap. She looked at him long and hard and then, for no particular reason she could name, her hand trembled just a little, and beer spilled from her open glass onto her sleeve. She felt the cold wetness soak into her shirt and trickle down her wrist.

"Oh, joy," she said. "Tuf and Tuf again. I can hardly wait."

# Tuf Voyaging: A Beast for Norn

Haviland Tuf was drinking alone in the darkest corner of an alehouse on Tamber when the thin man found him. His elbows rested on the table and the top of his bald head almost brushed the low wooden beam above. Four empty mugs sat before him, their insides streaked by rings of foam, while a fifth, half-full, was cradled in his huge white hands.

If Tuf was aware of the curious glances the other patrons gave him from time to time, he showed no sign of it; he quaffed his ale methodically, his face without expression. He made a singular solitary figure drinking alone in his booth.

He was not *quite* alone though; Dax lay asleep on the table before him, a ball of dark fur. Occasionally, Tuf would set down his mug of ale and idly stroke his quiet companion. Dax would not stir from his comfortable position among the empty mugs. The cat was fully as large, compared to other cats, as Haviland Tuf was compared to other men.

When the thin man came walking up to Tuf's booth, Tuf said nothing at all. He merely looked up, blinked, and waited for the other to begin.

"You are Haviland Tuf, the animal-seller," the thin man said. He was indeed painfully thin. His garments, all black leather and grey fur, hung loose on him, bagging here and there. Yet he was plainly a man of some means, since he wore a slim brass coronet around his brow, under a mop of black hair, and his fingers were adorned with a plenitude of rings.

Tuf scratched Dax behind one black ear. "It is not enough that our solitude must be intruded upon," he said to the cat, his voice a deep bass with only a hint of inflection. "It is insufficient that our grief be violated. We must also bear calumnies and insults, it seems." He looked up at the thin man. "Sir," he said. "I am indeed Haviland Tuf, and perhaps it might be said that I do in some sense trade in animals. Yet perhaps I do not consider myself an animal-seller. Perhaps I consider myself an ecological engineer."

The thin man waved his hand in an irritated gesture, and slid uninvited into the booth opposite Tuf. "I understand that you own an ancient EEC seedship. That does not make you an ecological engineer, Tuf. They are all dead, and have been for centuries. But if you would prefer to be called an ecological engineer, then well and good. I require your services. I want to buy a monster from you, a great fierce beast."

"Ah," said Tuf, speaking to the cat again. "He wishes to buy a monster, this stranger who seats himself at my table uninvited." Tuf blinked. "I regret to inform you that your quest has been in vain. Monsters are entirely mythological, sir, like spirits, werebeasts, and competent bureaucrats. Moreover, I am not at this moment engaged in the selling of animals, nor in any other aspect of my profession. I am at this moment consuming this excellent Tamberkin ale, and mourning."

"Mourning?" the thin man said. "Mourning what?" He seemed most unwilling to take his leave.

"A cat," said Haviland Tuf. "Her name was Havoc, and she had been my companion for long years, sir. She has recently died, on a world called Alyssar that I had the misfortune to call upon, at the hands of a remarkably unpleasant barbarian princeling." He looked at the thin man's brass coronet. "You are not by chance a barbarian princeling yourself, sir?"

"Of course not."

“That is your good fortune,” said Tuf.

“Well, pity about your cat, Tuf. I know your feeling, yes, yes, I’ve been through it a thousand times myself.”

“A thousand times,” Tuf repeated flatly. “You might consider a strenuous effort to take better care of your pets.”

The thin man shrugged. “Animals do die, you know. Can’t be helped. Fang and claw and all that, yesyes, that’s their destiny. I’ve had to grow accustomed to watching my best get slaughtered right in front of my eyes. But that’s what I’ve come to talk to you about, Tuf.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“My name is Herold Norn. I am the Senior Beast-Master of my House, one of the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica.”

“Lyronica,” Tuf stated. “The name is not entirely unfamiliar to me. A small, sparsely settled planet, I seem to recall, of a somewhat savage bent. Perhaps this explains your transgressions of civilized manners.”

“Savage?” Norn said. “That’s Tamberkin rubbish, Tuf. Damned farmers. Lyronica is the jewel of this sector. You’ve heard of our gaming pits, haven’t you?”

Haviland Tuf scratched Dax behind the ear once more, a peculiar rhythmic scratch, and the tomcat slowly uncurled, yawning, and glanced up at the thin man with large, bright, golden eyes. He purred softly.

“Some small nuggets of information have fallen in my ears during my voyagings,” Tuf said. “Perhaps you would care to elaborate, Herold Norn, so Dax and I might consider your proposition.”

Herold Norn rubbed thin hands together, nodding. “Dax?” he said. “Of course. A handsome animal, although personally I have never been fond of beasts who cannot fight. Real beauty lies in killing-strength, I always say.”

“An idiosyncratic attitude,” Tuf commented.

“No, no,” said Norn, “not at all. I hope that your work here has not infected you with Tamberkin squeamishness.”

Tuf drained his mug in silence, then signaled for two more. The barkeep brought them promptly. “Thank you,” Norn said, when the mug was set golden and foaming in front of him.

“Proceed, sir.”

“Yes. Well, the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica compete in the gaming pits. It began—oh, centuries ago. Before that, the houses warred. This way is much better. Family honor is upheld, fortunes are made, and no one is injured. You see, each house controls great tracts, scattered widely over the planet, and since the land is very thinly settled, animal life teems. The Lords of the Great Houses, many years ago during a time of peace, started to have animal fights. It was a pleasant diversion, rooted deep in history. You are aware, maybe, of the ancient custom of cock-fighting and the Old Earth folk called Romans who would set all manner of strange beasts against each other in their great arena?”

Norn paused and drank some ale, waiting for an answer, but Tuf merely stroked Dax and said nothing.

“No matter,” the thin Lyronican finally said, wiping foam from his mouth with the back of his hand. “That was the beginning of the sport, you see. Each house has its own particular land, its own particular animals. The House of Varcour, for example, sprawls in the hot, swampy south, and they are fond of sending huge lizard-lions to the

gaming pits. Feridian, a mountainous realm, has bred and championed its fortunes with a species of rock-ape which we call, naturally, *feridians*. My own house, Norn, stands on the grassy plains of the large northern continent. We have sent a hundred different beasts into combat in the pits, but we are most famed for our ironfangs.”

“Ironfangs,” Tuf said. “The name is evocative.”

Norn gave a sly smile. “Yes,” he said proudly. “As Senior Beast-Master, I have trained thousands. Oh, but they are lovely animals! Tall as you are, with fur of the most marvelous blue-black color, fierce and relentless.”

“Might I assume your ironfangs to be of canine descent?”

“But *such* canines,” Norn said.

“Yet you require from me a monster.”

Norn drank more of his ale. “True, true. Folks from a dozen near worlds voyage to Lyronica, to watch the beasts fight in the gaming pits and gamble on the outcome. Particularly they flock to the Bronze Arena that has stood for six hundred years in the City of All Houses. That’s where the greatest fights are fought. The wealth of our Houses and our world has come to depend on this. Without it, rich Lyronica would be as poor as the farmers of Tamber.”

“Yes,” said Tuf.

“But you understand, this wealth, it goes to the houses according to their honor, according to their victories. The House of Arneht has grown greatest and most powerful because of the many deadly beasts in their varied lands; the others rank according to their scores in the Bronze Arena.”

Tuf blinked. “The House of Norn ranks last and least among the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica,” he said, and Dax purred more loudly.

“You know?”

“Sir. It was obvious. Yet an objection occurs to me. Under the rules of your Bronze Arena, might it not be considered unethical to purchase and introduce a species not native to your own fabled world?”

“There are precedents. Some seventy-odd years ago, a gambler came from Old Earth itself, with a creature called a timber wolf that he had trained. The House of Colin backed him, in a fit of madness. His poor beast was matched against a Norn ironfang, and proved far from equal to its task. There are other cases as well.

“In recent years, unfortunately, our ironfangs have not bred well. The wild species has all but died out on the plains, and the few who remain become swift and elusive, difficult for our housemen to capture. In the breeding kennels, the strain seems to have softened, despite my efforts and those of the Beast-Masters before me. Norn has won few victories of late, and I will not remain Senior for long unless something is done. We grow poor. When I heard that your *Ark* had come to Tamber, then, I determined to seek you out. I will begin a new era of glory for Norn, with your help.”

Haviland Tuf sat very still. “I comprehend the dilemma you face. Yet I must inform you that I am not commonly in the habit of selling monsters. The *Ark* is an ancient seedship, designed by the Earth Imperials thousands of years ago, to decimate the Hrangans through biowar. I can unleash a veritable cornucopia of disease and pestilence, and in my cell library is stored cloning material for untold numbers of species from more than a thousand worlds, but true monsters of the sort that I have inferred you require are in somewhat shorter supply.”

Herold Norn looked crestfallen. “You have nothing, then?”

“These are not my words,” said Haviland Tuf. “The men and women of the vanished Ecological Engineering Corps did in truth make use, from time to time, of species that the uninformed or superstitious might label monstrous, for reasons as much psychological as ecological. Thus I do indeed have a few such animals in stock—a trifling number, a few thousand perhaps, certainly no more than ten thousand. To quote a more accurate figure, I must need consult my computers.”

“A few thousand monsters!” Norn was excited again. “That is more than enough selection! Surely, among all those, we can find a beast for Norn!”

“Perhaps,” Tuf said. “Or perhaps not. Both possibilities exist.” He considered Norn, his long face cool and dispassionate. “This matter of Lyronica does pique my interest in a trifling way, and as I am at the moment without professional engagement, having given the Tamberkin a bird to check their rootworm infestation, I am moved to investigate your world and plight more closely. Return to Norn, sir. I will take the *Ark* to Lyronica and see your gaming pits, and we will decide what is to be done with them.”

Norn smiled. “Excellent,” he said. “Then I will buy this round of ale.” Dax purred as loud as a descending shuttle.

The Bronze Arena stood square in the center of the City of All Houses, at the point where sectors dominated by the Twelve Great Houses met like slices in a vast pie. Each enclave of the rambling stone city was walled off, each flew a flag with its distinctive colors, each had its own ambience and style, but all met in the Bronze Arena.

The Arena was not bronze after all, but mostly black stone and polished wood. It bulked upwards, taller than all but a few of the city’s scattered towers and minarets, topped by a shining bronze dome that gleamed with the orange rays of the sunset. Gargoyles peered from the various narrow windows, carved of stone and hammered from bronze and wrought iron. The great doors in the black stone walls were fashioned of metal as well, and there were twelve of them, each facing a different sector of the City of All Houses. The colors and the etching on each gateway were distinctive to its house.

Lyronica’s sun was a fist of red flame smearing the western horizon when Herold Norn led Haviland Tuf to the games. The housemen had just fired gas torches, metal obelisks that stood like dart teeth in a ring about the Bronze Arena, and the hulking ancient building was surrounded by flickering pillars of blue-and-orange flame. In a crowd of gamblers and gamesters, Tuf followed Herold Norn from the half-deserted streets of the Nornic slums down a path of crushed rock, passing between twelve bronze ironfangs who snarled and spit in timeless poses on either side of the street, and then through the wide Norn Gate. The doors were intricate ebony and brass. The uniformed guards, clad in the same black leather and grey fur as Herold Norn himself, recognized the Beast-Master and admitted them; others stopped to pay with coins of gold and iron.

The Arena was the greatest gaming pit of all. It *was* a pit, the sandy combat-floor sunk deep below ground level, with stone walls four meters high surrounding it. Then the seats began, just atop the walls, circling the arena in ascending tiers until they reached the doors. Enough seating for thirty thousand, Norn boasted, although Tuf observed that those in the back had a poor view at best, and other seats were blocked off by iron pillars. Betting stalls were scattered throughout the building.

Herold Norn took Tuf to the best seats in the arena, in the front of the Norn section, with only a stone parapet separating them from the four-meter drop to the combat sands. The seats here were not rickety wood and iron, like those in the rear, but thrones of leather, huge enough to accommodate even Tuf’s vast bulk without difficulty, and opulently comfortable.

“Every seat is bound in the skin of a beast that has died nobly below,” Herold Norn told Tuf as they seated themselves.

Beneath them, a work crew of men in one-piece blue coveralls was dragging the carcass of some gaunt feathered animal toward one of the entryways.

“A fighting bird of the House of Wrai Hill,” Norn explained. “The Wrai Beast-Master sent it up against a Varcour lizard-lion. Not the most felicitous choice.”

Haviland Tuf said nothing. He sat stiff and erect, dressed in a grey vinyl greatcoat that fell to his ankles, with flaring shoulder-boards and a visored green cap emblazoned with the golden theta of the Ecological Engineers. His large pale hands interlocked atop his bulging stomach while Herold Norn kept up a steady stream of conversation.

When the arena announcer spoke, the thunder of his magnified voice boomed all around them.

“Fifth match,” he said. “From the House of Norn, a male ironfang, aged two years, weight 2.6 quintals, trained by Junior Beast-Master Kers Norn. New to the Bronze Arena.”

Immediately below them, metal grated harshly on metal, and a nightmare creature came bounding into the pit. The ironfang was a shaggy giant, with sunken red eyes and a double row of curving teeth that dripped slaver—a wolf grown all out of proportion and crossed with a saber-toothed tiger, its legs as thick as young trees, its speed and killing grace only partially disguised by the blue-black fur that hid the play of muscles. The ironfang snarled and the arena echoed to the noise; scattered cheering began all around them.

Herold Norn smiled. “Kers is a cousin, and one of our most promising juniors. He tells me this beast will do us proud. Yesyes, I like its looks, don’t you?”

“Being new to Lyronica and your Bronze Arena, I have no standard of comparison,” Tuf said in a flat voice.

The announcer began again. “From the House of Arneth-in-the-Gilded-Wood, a strangling-ape, aged six years, weight 3.1 quintals, trained by Senior Beast-Master Danel Leigh Arneth. Three times a veteran of the Bronze Arena, three times surviving.”

Across the combat pit, another of the entryways—the one wrought in gold and crimson—slid open, and the second beast lumbered out on two squat legs and looked around. The ape was short but immensely broad, with a triangular torso and a bullet-shaped head, eyes sunk deep under a heavy ridge of bone. Its arms, double-jointed and muscular, dragged in the arena sand. From head to toe the beast was hairless, but for patches of dark red fur under its arms; its skin was a dirty white. And it smelled. Across the arena, Haviland Tuf still caught the musky odor.

“It sweats,” Norn explained. “Danel Leigh has driven it to killing frenzy before sending it forth. His beast has the edge in experience, you understand, and the strangling-ape is a savage creature. Unlike its cousin, the mountain feridian, it is naturally a carnivore and needs little training. But Kers’s ironfang is younger. The match should be of interest.”

The Norn Beast-Master leaned forward while Tuf sat calm and still.

The ape turned, growling deep in its throat, and already the ironfang was streaking towards it, snarling, a blue-black blur that scattered arena sand as it ran. The strangling-ape waited for it, spreading its huge gangling arms, and Tuf had a blurred impression of the great Norn killer leaving the ground in one tremendous bound. Then the two animals were locked together, rolling over and over in a tangle of ferocity, and the arena became a symphony of screams.

“The throat,” Norn was shouting. “Tear out its throat! Tear out its throat!”



The two beasts parted as suddenly as they had met. The ironfang spun away and began to move in slow circles, and Tuf saw that one of its forelegs was bent and broken. It limped on its three remaining limbs, yet still it circled. The strangling-ape gave it no opening, but turned constantly to face it. Long gashes had been opened across the ape's broad chest, where the ironfang's sabers had slashed, but the beast seemed little weakened. Herold Norn had begun to mutter softly.

Impatient with the lull, the watchers in the Bronze Arena began a rhythmic chant, a low wordless noise that swelled louder and louder as new voices joined the chorus. Tuf saw at once that the sound affected the animals below. They began to snarl and hiss, calling battlecries in savage voices, and the strangling-ape moved from one leg to the other, back and forth in a macabre little jig, while bloody slaver ran from the gaping jaws of the ironfang.

The killing chant rose and fell, swelling ever louder until the dome above thrummed with the noise. The beasts below went into frenzy. Suddenly the ironfang was charging again, and the ape's long arms reached to meet it in its wild lunge. The impact of the leap threw the strangler backwards, but Tuf saw that the ironfang's teeth had closed on air while the ape wrapped its hands around the blue-black throat. The canine thrashed wildly as they rolled in the sand. Then came a sharp, horribly loud snap, and the wolf-creature was nothing but a rag of fur, its head lolling grotesquely to one side.

The watchers ceased their moaning chant, and began to applaud and whistle. Afterwards, the gold and crimson door slid open once again and the strangling-ape returned to whence it had come. Four men in Norn black and grey came out to carry off the corpse of the ironfang.

Herold Norn was sullen. "Another loss. I will speak to Kers. His beast did not find the throat."

"What will become of the carcass?" inquired Tuf.

"Skinned and butchered," Herold Norn muttered. "House Arneith will use the pelt to upholster a seat in their section of the arena. The meat will be distributed to the beggars who clamor outside their gold and crimson door. The Great Houses are all of a charitable mien."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. He rose from his seat, unfolding with slow dignity. "I have seen your Bronze Arena."

"Are you going?" Norn asked anxiously. "Surely not so soon! There are five more matches. In the next, a giant feridian fights a water-scorpion from Amar Island!"

"I wished only to determine if all that I had heard of Lyronica's far-famed Bronze Arena was so. I see that it is. Therefore there is no need for me to remain any longer. One need not consume the whole of a flask of mushroom wine to ascertain whether the vintage has a pleasant taste."

Herold Norn got to his feet. "Well," he said, "come with me out to Norn House, then. I can show you the kennels, the training pits. We will feast you as you have never been feasted!"

"This will not be necessary," said Haviland Tuf. "Having seen your Bronze Arena, I will trust my imagination and powers of deduction to visualize your kennels and training pits. I shall return to the *Ark* forthwith."

Norn reached out an anxious hand toward Tuf's arm to restrain him. "Will you sell us a monster, then? You've seen our plight."

Tuf sidestepped the Beast-Master's grip with a deftness belying his size and weight. "Sir. Restrain yourself. I am not fond of being rudely seized and grasped." When Norn's hand had fallen, Tuf looked down into his eyes. "I have no doubt that a problem exists upon Lyronica. Perhaps a more practical man than myself would judge it none of his concern, but being at heart an altruist, I cannot find it in myself to leave you as I have found you. I will

ponder your situation and address myself to devising the proper corrective measures. You may call upon me in the *Ark* on the third day hence. Perhaps by that time I will have a thought or two to share.”

Then, without further ado, Haviland Tuf turned and walked from the Bronze Arena, back to the spaceport of the City of All Houses, where his shuttle *Basilisk* sat waiting.

Herald Norn had obviously not been prepared for the *Ark*. He emerged from his tiny, battered, black and gray shuttle into the immensity of the landing deck and stood with his mouth open, craning his head this way and that, peering at the echoing darkness above, at the looming alien ships, at the thing that looked like a metal dragon nesting amid the distant shadows. When Haviland Tuf came rolling up to meet him, driving an open three-wheeled cart, the Beast-Master made no effort to disguise his reaction.

“I should have known,” he kept repeating. “The size of this ship, the size. But of course I should have known.”

Haviland Tuf sat unmoved, cradling Dax in one arm and stroking the cat slowly. “Some might find the *Ark* excessively large, and perhaps even daunting in its spaciousness, but I am comfortable,” he said impassively. “The ancient EEC seedships once had two hundred crewmen, and I can only assume that they, like myself, abhorred cramped quarters.”

Herold Norn seated himself beside Tuf. “How many men do you have in your crew?” he asked casually as Tuf set them in motion.

“One, or five, depending on whether one counts feline crew members or only humanoids.”

“You are the *only* crewman?” Norn said.

Dax stood up in Tuf’s lap; his long black fur stirred and bristled. “The *Ark*’s inhabitants consist of myself, Dax, and three other cats, named Chaos, Hostility, and Suspicion. Please do not take alarm at their names, Beast-Master Norn. They are gentle and harmless creatures.”

“One man and four cats,” Herold Norn said speculatively. “A small crew for a big ship, yesyes.”

Dax hissed. Tuf, steering the cart with one large pale hand, used the other to stroke and soothe his pet. “I might also make mention of the sleepers, since you seem to have developed such an acute interest in the various living inhabitants of the *Ark*. ”

“The sleepers?” said Herold Norn. “What are they?”

“Certain living organisms, ranging in size from the microscopic to the monstrous, fully cloned but comatose, held in a perpetual stasis in the *Ark*’s cloning vats. Though I have a certain fondness for animals of all sorts, in the case of these sleepers I have wisely allowed my intellect to rule my emotions and have therefore taken no steps to disturb their long dreamless slumber. Having investigated the nature of these particular species, I long ago decided that they would be decidedly less pleasant traveling companions than my cats. I must admit that at times I find the sleepers a decided nuisance. At regular intervals I must enter a bothersome secret command into the *Ark*’s computers so that their long sleep may continue. I have a great abiding dread that one day I shall forget to do this, for whatever reasons, and then my ship will be filled with all manner of strange plagues and slaving carnivores, requiring a time-consuming and vexing clean-up and perhaps even wreaking harm to my person or my cats.”

Herold Norn stared at Tuf’s expressionless face and regarded his large, hostile cat. “Ah,” he said. “Yesyes. Sounds dangerous, Tuf. Perhaps you ought to, ah, abort all these sleepers. Then you’d be, ah, safe.”

Dax hissed at him again.

“An interesting concept,” Tuf said. “Doubtless the vicissitudes of war were responsible for inculcating such paranoid attitudes into the men and women of the Ecological Engineering Corps that they felt obliged to program in these fearsome biological defenses. Being myself of a more trusting and honest nature, I have often contemplated doing away with the sleepers, but the truth is, I cannot find it in myself to unilaterally abolish a historic practice that has endured for over a millennium. Therefore, I allow the sleepers to sleep, and do my utmost to remember the secret countermands.”

Herold Norn scowled. “Yesyes,” he said. Dax sat down in Tuf’s lap again, and purred. “Have you come up with anything?” Norn asked.

“My efforts have not entirely been for naught,” said Tuf flatly, as they rolled out of the wide corridor into the *Ark*’s huge central shaft. Herold Norn’s mouth dropped open again. Around them on all sides, lost in dimness, was an unending panorama of vats of all sizes and shapes. In some of the medium-sized tanks, dark shapes hung in translucent bags, and stirred fitfully.

“Sleepers,” Norn muttered.

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. He stared straight ahead as he drove, with Dax curled in his lap, while Norn looked wonderingly from side to side.

They departed the dim, echoing shaft at last, drove through a narrow corridor, climbed out of the cart, and entered a large white room. Four wide, padded chairs dominated the four corners of the chamber, with control panels on their thick, flaring arms; a circular plate of blue metal was built into the floor amidst them. Haviland Tuf dropped Dax into one of the chairs before seating himself in a second. Norn looked around, then took the chair diagonally opposite Tuf.

“I must inform you of several things,” Tuf began.

“Yesyes,” said Norn.

“Monsters are expensive.” Tuf said. “I will require one hundred thousand standards.”

“*What!* That’s an outrage! I told you, Norn is a poor house.”

“So. Perhaps then a richer House would meet the required price. The Ecological Engineering Corps has been defunct for centuries, sir. No ship of theirs remains in working order, save the *Ark* alone. Their science is largely forgotten. Techniques of cloning and genetic engineering such as they practiced exist now only on distant Prometheus and perhaps on Old Earth itself, yet Earth is closed and the Prometheans guard their biological secrets with jealous fervor.” Tuf looked across to Dax. “And yet Herold Norn feels my price to be excessive.”

“Fifty thousand standards,” Norn said. “We can barely meet that price.”

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

“Eighty thousand standards, then! I can go no higher. The House of Norn will be bankrupt! They will tear down our bronze ironfangs and seal the Norn Gate!”

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

“Curse you! A hundred thousand, yesyes. But only if your monster meets our requirements.”

“You will pay the full sum on delivery.”

“Impossible!”

Tuf was silent again.

Herold Norn tried to wait him out. He looked around with studied nonchalance. Tuf stared straight ahead. He ran his fingers through his hair. Tuf stared straight ahead. He squirmed around in his chair. Tuf stared straight ahead.

“Oh, very well,” Norn said in frustration.

“As to the monster itself,” said Tuf, “I have studied your requirements closely, and have consulted my computers. Within the cell library of the *Ark* are samples of thousands upon thousands of predators from uncounted worlds, including fossilized tissue samples, locked within which can be found the genetic patterns of creatures of legend long extinct upon their original homeworlds, thus allowing me to replicate such species. Therefore, the choices are many. To simplify matters, I have taken into account several additional criteria beyond the mere ferocity of the animals under consideration. For example, I have limited myself to oxygen-breathing species, and furthermore to those who might be comfortable in a climate such as prevails upon House Norn’s windswept prairies.”

“An excellent point,” Herold Norn said. “We have, from time to time, attempted to raise lizard-lions and feridians and other beasts of the Twelve Houses, with ill success. The climate, the vegetation...” He made a disgusted gesture.

“Precisely,” said Haviland Tuf. “I see you comprehend the various and sundry difficulties incumbent in my search.”

“Yesyes, but get to the point. What have you found? What is this hundred-thousand-standard monster?”

“I offer you a selection,” Tuf said. “From among some thirty species. Attend!”

He touched a glowing button on the arm of his chair, and suddenly a beast was squatting on the blue-metal plate between them. Two meters tall, with rubbery pink-grey skin and thin white hair, the creature had a low forehead and a swinish snout, plus a set of nasty curving horns and daggerlike claws on its hands.

“I will not trouble you with the formal nomenclature, since I have observed that informality is the rule of the Bronze Arena,” Haviland Tuf said. “This is the so-called stalking-swine of Heydey, native to both forests and plains. It is chiefly an eater of carrion, but has been known to relish fresh meat, and it fights viciously when attacked. Furthermore, it is reliably reported to be quite intelligent, yet impossible to domesticate. The stalking-swine is an excellent breeder. The colonists from Gulliver eventually abandoned their Heydey settlement because of this animal. That was some twelve hundred years past.”

Herold Norn scratched his scalp between dark hair and brass coronet. “No. It is too thin, too light. Look at the neck! Think what a feridian would do to it.” He shook his head violently. “Besides, it is *ugly*. And I resent the offer of a scavenger, no matter how ill-tempered. The House of Norn breeds proud fighters, beasts who kill their own game!”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. He touched the button, and the stalking-swine vanished. In its place, bulking large enough to touch the plates and fade into them, was a massive ball of armored grey flesh as featureless as battle plate.

“This creature’s barren homeworld has neither been named nor settled, yet an exploratory party from Old Poseidon once charted and claimed it, and cell samples were taken. Zoo specimens existed briefly but did not thrive. The beast was nicknamed the rolleram. Adults weigh approximately six metric tons. On the plains of their homeworld, the rollerams achieve speed in excess of fifty kilometers per hour, crushing prey beneath them. The beast is, in a sense, all mouth. Thusly, as any portion of its skin can be made to exude digestive enzymes, it simply rests atop its meal until the meat has been absorbed. I can vouch for the mindless hostility of this species. Once,

through an unusual set of circumstances that we need not go into, a rolleram was loosed to run free on one of my decks, where it did a truly astonishing amount of damage to bulkheads and instrumentation before finally battering itself to an early and futile death. Moreover, it was quite implacable in its aggression, and attempted to crush me beneath its bulk whenever I descended into its domain to bring it sustenance.”

Herold Norn, himself half-immersed in the looming holograph, sounded impressed. “Ah, yes. Better, much better. An awesome creature. Perhaps... but no.” His tone changed suddenly. “No, no, this will never do. A creature weighing six tons and rolling that fast might smash its way out of the Bronze Arena and kill hundreds of our patrons. Besides, who would pay hard coin to watch this *thing* crush a lizard-lion or a strangler? No. No sport. Your rolleram is *too* monstrous, Tuf.”

Tuf, unmoved, hit the button once again. The vast grey bulk gave way to a sleek, snarling cat, fully as large as an ironfang, with slitted yellow eyes and powerful muscles bunched beneath a coat of dark-blue fur. The fur was striped; long thick lines of smoky silver ran lengthwise down the creature’s gleaming flanks.

“Ahhhhhhhh,” Norn said. “A beauty, in truth, in truth.”

“The cobalt panther of Celia’s World,” Tuf said, “often called the cobalcat. One of the largest and deadliest of the great cats, or their analogues. The beast is a truly superlative hunter, its senses miracles of biological engineering. It can see into the infrared for night prowling, and the ears—note the size and the spread, Beast-Master—the ears are extremely sensitive. Being of felinoid stock, the cobalcat has psionic ability, but in its case this ability is for more developed than the usual. Fear, hunger, and bloodlust all act as triggers; then the cobalcat becomes a mindreader.”

Norn looked up, startled. “What?”

“Psionics, sir. Surely you are aware of the concept. The cobalcat is quite deadly, simply because it knows what moves an antagonist will make before those moves are made. Do you comprehend?”

“Yes.” Norn’s voice was excited. Haviland Tuf looked over at Dax, and the big tomcat—who’d been not the least disturbed by the parade of scentless phantoms flashing on and off—blinked and stretched lazily. “Perfect, perfect! Why, I’ll venture to say that we can even train these beasts as we’d train ironfangs, eh? And *mindreaders!* Perfect. Even the colors are right—dark blue, you know, and our ironfangs were blue-black—so the cats will be most Nornic, yesyes!”

Tuf touched his chair arm, and the cobalcat vanished. “Indeed. I would assume, therefore, that we have no need to proceed further, I shall commence the cloning process immediately upon your departure. Delivery will be in three weeks standard, if that pleases you. For the agreed-upon sum, I will provide three pair—two set of younglings who should be released in your wildlands as breeding stock, and one mated set full-grown, who might be immediately sent into the Bronze Arena.”

“So soon,” Norn began. “Fine, but...”

“I employ a chronowarp, Beast-Master. It requires vast energies, true, but has the power to accelerate the very tread of time itself, producing within the tank a chronic distortion that enables me to hurry the clone to maturity. It would perhaps be prudent to add that, although I provide Norn with six animals, only three actual individuals are represented. The *Ark* carries a triple cobalcat cell. I will clone each specimen twice, male and female, and hope for a viable genetic mix when they crossbreed on Lyronica.”

“Fine, whatever you say,” Norn said. “I will send the ships for the animals promptly. Then we will pay you.”

Dax uttered a tiny little yowl.

“Sir,” said Tuf. “A better thought has occurred to me. You may pay the full fee before any beasts are handed over.”

“But you said on delivery!”

“Admitted. Yet I am given to impulsive whims, and impulse now tells me to collect first, rather than simultaneously.”

“Oh, very well,” Norn said. “Though your demands are arbitrary and excessive. With these cobalcats, we shall soon recoup our fee.” He started to rise.

Haviland Tuf raised a single finger. “One moment. You have not seen fit to inform me over much of the ecology of Lyronica, nor the particular realms of Norn House. Perhaps prey exists. I must caution you, however, that your cobalcats are hunters, and therefore require suitable game species.”

“Yesyes, of course.”

“Fortunately, I am equipped to be of help to you. For an additional five thousand standards, I might clone you a breeding stock of Celian hoppers, delightful furred herbivores celebrated on a dozen worlds for their succulent flesh, among diners of a carnivorous inclination.”

Herold Norn frowned. “Bah. You ought to give them to us without charge. You have extorted enough money, Tuf.”

Tuf rose and gave a ponderous shrug. “The man berates me, Dax,” he said to his cat. “What am I to do? I seek only an honest living, and everywhere I am taken advantage of.” He looked at Norn. “Another of my impulses comes to me. I feel, somehow, that you will not relent, not even were I to offer you an excellent discount. Therefore I shall yield. The hoppers are yours without charge.”

“Good. Excellent.” Norn turned toward the door. “We shall take them at the same time as the cobalcats, and release them about the estates.”

Haviland Tuf and Dax followed him from the chamber, and they rode in silence back to Norn’s ship.

The fee was sent up by the House of Norn the day before delivery was due. The following afternoon, a dozen men in black and gray ascended to the *Ark*, and carried six tranquilized cobalcats from Haviland Tuf’s holding tanks to the waiting cages in their shuttlecraft. Tuf bid them a passive farewell, and heard no more from Herold Norn. But he kept the *Ark* in orbit about Lyronica.

Less than three of Lyronica’s shortened days passed before Tuf observed that his clients had slated a cobalcat for a bout in the Bronze Arena.

On the appointed evening, Tuf donned a disguise, consisting of a false beard and shoulder-length wig of red hair, plus a gaudy puff-sleeved suit of canary yellow complete with a furred turban, and shuttled down to the City of All Houses with the hope of escaping attention. When the match was called, he was seated in the back of the Arena, a rough stone wall against his shoulders and a narrow wooden seat attempting to support his weight. He had paid a few irons for admission, but had scrupulously bypassed the betting booths.

“Third match,” the announcer cried, even as workers pulled off the scattered meaty chunks of the loser in the second match. “From the House of Varcour, a female lizard-lion, aged nine months, weight 1.4 quintals, trained by Junior Beast-Master Ammari y Varcour Otheni. Once a veteran of the Bronze Arena, once surviving.” Those customers close to Tuf began to cheer and wave their hands wildly, as might be anticipated; he had chosen to enter

by the Varcour Gate this time, walking down a green concrete road and through the gaping maw of a monstrous golden lizard, and thus was surrounded by Varcour partisans. Away and below, a great door enameled in green and gold slid up. Tuf lifted his rented binoculars to his eyes, and saw the lizard-lion scabble forward—two meters of scaled green reptile with a whiplike tail thrice its own length and the long snout of an Old Earth alligator. Its jaws opened and closed soundlessly, displaying an array of impressive teeth.

“From the House of Norn, imported from offworld for your amusement, a female cobalcat. Aged—” The announcer paused. “Aged three, ah, years,” he said at last, “weight 2.3 quintals, trained by Senior Beast-Master Herold Norn. New to the Bronze Arena.” The metallic dome overhead rang to the cacophonous cheering of the Norn sector. Herold Norn had packed the Bronze Arena with his housemen, dressed in Norn colors and betting the grey and black standard.

The cobalcat came from the darkness slowly, with cautious fluid grace, and its great golden eyes swept the arena. It was every bit the beast that Tuf had promised—a bundle of deadly muscle and frozen motion, dark-blue fur marbled with silvery streaks. Its growl could scarcely be heard, so far was Tuf from the action, but he saw its mouth gape through his glasses.

The lizard-lion saw it, too, and came waddling forward, its short scaled legs kicking in the sand while the long impossible tail arched above it like the stinger of some reptilian scorpion. When the cobalcat turned its liquid eyes on the enemy, the lizard-lion brought the tail down hard. With a bone-breaking crack the whip made contact, but the cobalcat had smoothly slipped to one side, and nothing shattered but air and sand.

The cat circled, growling. The lizard-lion, implacable, turned and raised its tail again, opened its jaws, lunged forward. The cobalcat avoided both teeth and whip. Again the tail cracked, and yet again; the cat was too quick. Someone in the audience began to moan the killing chant, others picked it up; Tuf turned his binoculars, and saw swaying in the Norn seats. The lizard-lion gnashed its long jaws in frenzy, smashed its whip across the nearest entry door, and began to thrash.

The cobalcat, sensing an opening, moved behind its enemy with a graceful leap, pinned the struggling lizard with one great blue paw, and clawed the soft greenish flanks and belly to ribbons. After a time and a few futile snaps of its whip that only distracted the cat, the lizard-lion lay still.

The Norns were cheering very loudly. Haviland Tuf, his pale features concealed behind his beard, rose from his cramped seat and took his leave.

Weeks passed; the *Ark* remained in orbit around Lyronica. Haviland Tuf carefully monitored results from the Bronze Arena and noted that the Norn cobalcats were winning match after match. Herold Norn still lost a contest or two, when using an ironfang to fill up his Arena obligations, but those defeats were easily outweighed by his long string of victories.

Tuf sat communing with Dax, played with his other cats, entertained himself with recently acquired holo dramas, ran numerous detailed ecological projections upon his computers, drank many tankards of brown Tamberkin ale and aged mushroom wine, and waited.

Some three standard weeks after the debut of the cobalcats, he had the callers he had anticipated.

Their slim, needle-prowed shuttlecraft was done in green and gold, and the men themselves dressed in scaled armor of gilded plate and green enamel. Three stood stiffly at attention when Tuf rolled up to meet them. The fourth, a florid and corpulent man who wore a golden helmet with a bright green plume to conceal a mottled pate as bald as Tuf's, stepped forward and offered a meaty hand.

“Your intent is appreciated,” Tuf told him, keeping both of his own hands firmly on Dax, “and I have noted the fact that you are not clutching a weapon. Might I inquire as to your name and business, sir?”

“Morho y Varcour Otheni,” the leader began.

Tuf raised one palm. “So. And you are the Senior Beast-Master of the House of Varcour, come to buy a monster. This turn of events is not entirely unanticipated, I must confess.”

The fat Beast-Master’s mouth puckered in an “o.”

“Your housemen should remain here,” Tuf said. “You may seat yourself beside me, and we will proceed.”

Haviland Tuf let Morho y Varcour Otheni utter scarcely a word until they were alone in the same chamber to which he had taken Herold Norn, sitting diagonally opposite. “You heard of me from the Norns,” Tuf said then, “obviously.”

Morho smiled toothily. “Indeed we did. A Norn houseman was persuaded to reveal the source of their cobalcats. To our delight, your *Ark* was still in orbit. You seem to have found Lyronica diverting?”

“Diversion is not the crux of the matter,” Tuf said. “When problems exist, my professional pride requires me to be of whatever small service I can. Lyronica is rife with problems, alas. Your own individual difficulty, for example. Varcour is, in all probability, now the last and least of the Twelve Great Houses. A man of a more critical turn of mind than myself might remark that your lizard-lions are deplorably marginal monsters at best, and since I understand your realms are chiefly swampland, your choice of arena combatants must therefore be somewhat limited. Have I divined the essence of your complaint?”

“Hmpf. Yes, indeed. You do anticipate me, sir. But you do it well. We were holding our own well enough until you interfered. Since then, well, we have not taken a match from Norn once, and they were previously our chief victims. A few paltry wins over Wrai Hill and Amar Island, a lucky score against Feridian, a pair of death-draws with Arneth and Sin Doon—that has been our lot this past month. Pfui. We cannot survive. They will make me a Brood-Tender and ship me back to the estates unless I act.”

Tuf stroked Dax, and quieted Morho with an upraised hand. “No need to belabor these matters further. Your distress is noted. Since my dealings with Herold Norn, I have been fortunate enough to be gifted with a great deal of leisure. Accordingly, as an exercise of the mind, I have been able to devote myself to the problems of the Great Houses, each in its turn. We need not waste precious time. I can solve your present difficulties. There will be some cost, however.”

Morho grinned. “I come prepared. I heard about your price. It’s high, there is no arguing, but we are prepared to pay, if you can...”

“Sir,” Tuf said. “I am a man of charity. Norn was a poor House, its Beast-Master all but a beggar. In mercy, I gave him a low price. The domains of Varcour are richer, its standards brighter, its victories more wildly sung. For you, I must charge two hundred seventy-five thousand standards, to make up for the losses I incurred in dealing so generously with Norn.”

Morho made a shocked blubbing sound, and his scales gave metallic clinks as he shifted in his seat. “Too much, too much,” he protested. “I implore you. Truly, we are more glorious than Norn, but not so great as you suppose. To pay this price of yours, we must need starve. Lizard-lions would run over our battlements. Our towns would sink on their stilts, until the swamp mud covered them over and the children drowned.”

Dax shifted in Tuf’s lap and made a small meow. “Quite so,” Tuf said. “I am abashed to think that I might cause such suffering. Perhaps two hundred thousand standards would be more equitable.”

Morho y Varcour Otheni began to protest and implore again, but this time Tuf merely sat silently, arms on their armrests, until the Beast-Master, red-faced and sweating, finally ran down and agreed to pay his price.



Tuf touched a button on the arm of his chair. The image of a great muscular saurian materialized between him and Morho; it stood two meters high, covered in grey-green plate scales and standing on four squat clawed legs as thick as tree stumps. Its head was a massive thing, armored by a thick yellowish plate of bone that jutted forward like the ramming prow of an ancient warship, with two curving horns at its upper corners. The creature had a short, thick neck; dim yellow eyes peered from under the jut of its brow ridge. Between them, square in the center of the head, a large, dark, round hole pierced the thick skull plate.

Morho swallowed. "Oh," he said. "Yes. Very, ah, large. But it looks—was there originally a third horn in the center, there? It looks as though it has been, ah, removed. Our specimens must be intact, Tuf."

"The *tris neryei* of Cable's Landing," Tuf said, "or so it was named by the Fyndii, whose colonists preceded humanity on that world by several millennia. The term translates, literally, as 'living knife.' There is no missing horn, sir." A long finger made a small, precise motion, pressed down upon a control. The *tris neryei* turned its massive head toward the Varcour Beast-Master, who hiked his bulk forward awkwardly to inspect its image.

As he reached out toward the phantom, tendons bulged in the creature's thick neck, and a sharpened bone stake, as thick around as Tuf's forearm and more than a meter long, came thrusting out of the beast's head in a blur of motion. Morho y Varcour Otheni uttered a high thin squeak and turned gray as the bone spear skewered him and pinned him to his seat. An unfortunate odor filled the chamber.

Tuf said nothing. Morho, blubbering, looked down at where the horn entered his swollen stomach as if he were about to be sick, and it took him a long horrid minute before he realized there was no blood and no pain and the monster was only a hologram. His mouth made an "o." No sound came out. He swallowed. "Very, ah, dramatic," he said to Tuf.

The end of the long, discolored bone spear was held tightly within rings and ropes of pulsing blue-black muscle. Slowly the shaft began to pull back into the monster's head. "The bayonet, if we may be so bold as to call it that, is concealed within a mucous-lined sheath along the creature's upper neck and back, and the surrounding rings of musculature can deliver it at a speed approximating seventy kilometers per standard hour, with commensurate force. This species' native habitat is not entirely dissimilar to the areas of Lyronica under the control of the House of Varcoijr."

Morho moved forward so his seat creaked beneath his weight. Dax purred loudly. "Excellent!" the Beast-Master said, "though the name is a bit, oh, alien. We shall call them, let me think, ah, spear-carriers! Yes!"

"Call them what you will," said Tuf. "That is of small concern to me. These saurians have many obvious advantages for the House of Varcour, and should you choose to take them, I will also give you, without any additional charge, a breeding stock of Cathadayn tree-slugs. You will find that..."

Tuf followed the news from the Bronze Arena with diligence, although he never again ventured forth to the soil of Lyronica. The cobalcats continued to sweep all before them; in the latest featured encounter, one of the Norn beasts had destroyed a prime Arneth strangling-ape and an Amar Island fleshfrog during a special triple match.

But Varcour fortunes were also on the upswing; the newly introduced spear-carriers had proved a Bronze Arena sensation, with their booming cries and their heavy tread and the swift and relentless death dealt out in sudden thrusts of their massive bone bayonets. In three matches so far, a huge feridian, a water-scorpion, and a Gnethin spidercat had all proved impossibly unequal to the Varcour saurians. Morho y Varcour Otheni was ecstatic. Next week, cobalcat would face spear-carrier in a struggle for supremacy, and a packed arena was being predicted.

Herold Norn called up once, shortly after the spear-carriers had scored their first victory. "Tuf!" he said sternly, "you have sold a monster to Varcour. We do not approve."

“I was not aware that your approval was required,” Tuf said. “I labored under the impression that I was a free agent, as were the lords and Beast-Masters of all the Great Houses of Lyronica.”

“Yesyes,” Herold Norn snapped, “but we won’t be cheated, you hear?”

Haviland Tuf sat calmly, regarding Norn’s twisted frown while petting Dax. “I take great care to be fair in all my dealings,” he said. “Had you insisted upon an exclusive monster franchise for Lyronica, perhaps we might have discussed that possibility, but to the best of my recollection no such matter was ever broached or suggested. Of course, I could hardly afford to grant the House of Norn such exclusive privileges without an appropriate charge, since my doing so would undoubtedly have deprived me of considerable much-needed revenue. At any rate, I fear this discussion is moot, since my transaction with the House of Varcour is now complete and it would be highly unethical, to say nothing of impossible, for me to negate it now.”

“I don’t like this, Tuf,” Norn said.

“I fail to see that you have a legitimate cause for complaint. Your own monsters perform as expected, and it is hardly generous of you to take umbrage simply because another house shares Norn’s good fortune.”

“Yes. No. That is—well, never mind. I suppose I can’t stop you. If the other houses get animals that can beat our cats, however, you will be expected to provide us with something that can beat whatever you sell *them*. You understand?”

“This principle is easily grasped.” He looked down at Dax. “I have given the House of Norn unprecedented victories, yet Herold Norn casts aspersions on my honesty and my comprehension. We are unappreciated, I fear.”

Herold Norn scowled. “Yesyes. Well, by the time we need more monsters, our victories should have mounted high enough to afford whatever outlandish price you intend to charge.”

“I trust that all goes well otherwise?” Tuf said.

“Well, yes and no. In the Arena, yesyes, definitely. But otherwise, well, that was what I called about. The four young cats don’t seem interested in breeding, for some reason. And our Brood-Tender keeps complaining that they are getting thin. He doesn’t think they’re healthy. Now, I can’t say personally, as I’m here in the City and the animals are back on the plains around Norn House. But some worry does exist. The cats run free, of course, but we have tracers on them, so we can...”

Tuf made a steeple of his hands. “Undoubtedly their mating season has yet to arrive. I would counsel patience. All living creatures engage in reproduction, some even to excess, and you have my assurances that once the female cobalcat enters estrus, matters will proceed with alacrity.”

“Ah. That makes sense. Just a question of time then, I suppose. The other question I wanted to go over concerned these hoppers of yours. We set them loose, you know, and they have demonstrated no difficulty whatever in breeding. The ancestral Norn grasslands have been chewed bare. It is very annoying. They hop about everywhere. What are we to do?”

“This matter will also resolve itself when the cobalcats begin to breed,” Tuf said. “The cobalt panthers are voracious and efficient predators, splendidly equipped to check your hopper plague.”

Herold Norn looked puzzled, and mildly distressed. “Yes, yes,” he said, “but...”

Tuf rose. “I fear I must end our conversation,” he said. “A shuttlecraft has entered into docking orbit with the *Ark*. Perhaps you would recognize it. It is blue-steel, with large triangular grey wings.”

“The House of Wrai Hill!” Norn said.

“Fascinating,” said Tuf. “Good day.”

Beast-Master Denis Lon Wrai paid two hundred thirty thousand standards for his monster, a powerful red-furred ursoid from the hills of Vagabond. Haviland Tuf sealed the transaction with a brace of scampersloth eggs.

The week following, four men in orange silk and flame red capes visited the *Ark*. They returned to the House of Feridian two hundred fifty thousand standards poorer, with a contract for the delivery of six great armored poison-elk, plus a gift herd of Hrangan grass pigs.

The Beast-Master of Sin Doon received a giant serpent; the emissary from Amar Island was pleased by his godzilla. A committee of a dozen Dant seniors in milk-white robes and silver buckles delighted in the slaving garghoul that Haviland Tuf offered them, with a trifling gift. And so, one by one, each of the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica sought him out, each received its monster, each paid the ever-increasing price.

By that time, both of Norn’s fighting cobalcats were dead, the first skewered on the bayonet of a Varcour spear-carrier, the second crushed between the massive clawed paws of a Wrai Hill ursoid (though in the latter case, the ursoid, too, had died). Undoubtedly the great cats had espied their fate, but in the closed and deadly confines of the Bronze Arena, they had nonetheless proved unable to avoid it. Herold Norn had been calling the *Ark* daily, but Tuf had instructed his computer to refuse the calls.

Finally, when eleven Houses had come and made their buys and taken their gifts and their leave, Haviland Tuf sat down across from Danel Leigh Arneth, Senior Beast-Master of Arneth-in-the-Gilded-Wood, once the greatest and proudest of the Twelve Great Houses of Lyronica, now the last and least. Arneth was an immensely tall man, standing eye-to-eye with Tuf himself, but he had none of Tuf’s fat. His skin was hard ebony, all muscle, his face a hawk-nosed axe, his hair short and iron grey. The Beast-Master came to the conference in cloth-of-gold, with crimson belt and boots and a tiny crimson beret aslant upon his head. He carried a trainer’s pain-prod like a walking stick.

Dax bristled as Danel Leigh Arneth emerged from his ship, and hissed when the man climbed in the cart next to Tuf. Accordingly, Haviland Tuf at once commenced his lengthy rambling discourse about the sleepers. Arneth stared and listened; finally Dax grew calm again.

“The strength of Arneth-in-the-Gilded-Wood has always been in variety,” Danel Leigh Arneth said early on. “When the other Houses of Lyronica threw all their fortunes on the backs of a single beast, our fathers and grandfathers worked with dozens. Against any animal of theirs, we had an optimal choice, a strategy. That has been our greatness and our pride. But we can have no strategy against these demon-beasts of yours, trader. No matter which of our hundred fighters we send onto the sand, it comes back dead. You have forced us to deal with you.”

“I must take exception,” said Tuf. “How could a mere seller of animals force the greatest Beast-Master of Lyronica to do anything he did not desire? If you truly have no desire to engage my services, please accept my word that I will take no offense. We may share a meal and some conversation together, and put all thought of business aside.”

“Don’t play word games, trader,” Arneth snapped. “Business is the only reason I’m here. I have no great desire for your odious company.”

Haviland Tuf blinked. “I am cut to the quick,” he said in a flat voice. “Still, far be it from me to turn away any patron, whatever his personal opinion of me. Feel free to look over my stock, a few poor species that might pique your interest in some small way. Perhaps fortune will see fit to give you back your strategic options.”

He played upon the controls on the arm of his chair, and conducted a symphony in light and illusory flesh. A parade of monsters came and went before the eyes of the Arneth Beast-Master, creatures furred and scaled and feathered and covered by armor plate, beasts of hill and forest and lake and plain, predators and scavengers and deadly herbivores of sizes great and small.

Danel Leigh Arneth, his lips pressed tightly together, finally ordered four each of the dozen largest and deadliest species, at a cost of one million standards.

The conclusion of the transaction—complete, as with all the other Houses, with a gift of some small harmless animal—did nothing to soothe Arneth’s foul temper. “Tuf,” he said when the dealing was over, “you are a clever and devious man, but you do not fool me.”

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

“You have made yourself immensely wealthy, and you have cheated all who bought from you and thought to profit. The Norns, for example. Their cats are worthless. They were a poor House; your price brought them to the edge of bankruptcy, just as you have done to all of us. They thought to recoup through victories. Bah! There will be no Norn victories now! Each house that came to you gained the advantage over those who purchased previously. Thus Arneth, the last to purchase, remains the greatest House of all. Our monsters will wreak devastation. The sands of the Bronze Arena will darken with the blood of the lesser beasts.”

Tuf’s hands locked on the bulge of his stomach. His face was placid.

“You have changed nothing! The Great Houses remain—Arneth the greatest and Norn the least. All you have done is bleed us, like the profiteer you are, until every Lyronican lord must struggle and scrape to get by. Our rivals now wait for victory, pray for victory, depend on victory, but all the victories will be Arneth’s. We alone have not been cheated, because I thought to buy last and thus best.”

“The foresight and acumen are remarkable,” said Haviland Tuf. “Obviously, I am out of my depth with a man as wise and sagacious as yourself, and it would do me scant good to dissemble, deny, or try to outwit you. One as canny as you would easily see through my poor ploys. Perhaps it might be best were I to say nothing.”

“You can do even better than that, Tuf,” Arneth said. “You won’t say anything, and you won’t do anything either. This is your last sale on Lyronica.”

“Perhaps,” said Tuf, “and yet again, perhaps not. Circumstances may arise that will cause the Beast-Masters of the other Great Houses to bring me their custom once again, and then I fear I could hardly turn them away.”

“You can and you will,” Danel Leigh Arneth said coldly. “Arneth has made the last purchase, and we will not be trumped. Clone us up our animals and leave immediately upon making delivery. Henceforth you will deal no longer with the Great Houses. I doubt that fool Herold Norn could meet your price a second time, but even if he found the standards somewhere, you will not sell to him. *Do you understand?* We will not go round and round forever, playing this futile game of yours, paupering ourselves by buying monsters, losing them, buying more, and accomplishing nothing. I’m sure you would sell to us until there wasn’t a standard left on Lyronica, but the House of Arneth forbids it. Ignore this warning and it could be worth your life, trader. I am not a forgiving man.”

“Your point is well-taken,” Tuf said, scratching Dax behind the ear, “although I have no great affection for the manner in which you have expressed it. Still, while the arrangement you suggest so forcefully will undoubtedly be of benefit to the House of Arneth-in-the-Gilded-Wood, the other Great Houses of Lyronica will be the losers for it, and I myself will have to sacrifice the potential for further profit. Perhaps I do not understand the whole of your proposal. I am easily distracted and I may have failed to hear the part wherein you explained the incentive you will offer me for acceding to your request to deal no more with the Great Houses of Lyronica.”

“I’m prepared to offer you another million standards,” Arneth said, glaring. “I’d like to cram it down your gullet, to tell the truth, but it’s cheaper in the long run than playing another round in this damnable game of yours.”

“I see,” said Tuf. “Ergo, the choice is mine. I may take a million standards and depart, or remain in the face of your wrath and dire threats. I have pondered more difficult decisions, it must be admitted. In any case, I am scarcely the sort of man to remain on a world where his presence is no longer desired, and I confess that lately I have felt an urge to resume my wanderings. Very well. I bow to your demand.”

Danel Leigh Arneth grinned a savage grin, while Dax began to purr.

The last of the fleet of twelve glittering gold-flecked shuttles had just departed, carrying the purchases of Danel Leigh Arneth down to Lyronica and the Bronze Arena, when Haviland Tuf finally condescended to take the call from Herold Norn.

The thin Beast-Master looked positively skeletal. “Tuf!” he exclaimed. “Everything is going wrong.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf impassively.

Norn pressed his features together in a grimace. “No, listen. The cobalcats are all dead, all sick. Four of them died in the Bronze Arena—we knew the second pair were too young, you understand, but when the first couple lost, there was nothing else to do. It was that or go back to ironfangs. Now we have only two left. They don’t eat much—catch a few hoppers, but nothing else. And we can’t train them, either. A trainer comes into the pen with a pain-prod, and the damn cats know what he intends. They’re always a move ahead, you understand? In the arena, they won’t respond to the killing chant at all. It’s *terrible*. The worst thing is that they won’t even breed. We need *more* of them. What are we supposed to enter in the gaming pits?”

“It is not cobalcat mating season,” Tuf said. “We have discussed this point before, you may recall.”

“Yesyes. When *is* their breeding season?”

“A fascinating question,” said Tuf. “A pity you did not ask sooner. As I understand the matter, the female cobalt panther goes into heat each spring, when the snowtufts blossom on Celia’s World. It is my understanding that some type of biological trigger is involved.”

Herold Norn scratched at his scalp under the thin brass coronet. “But,” he said, “but Lyronica has no snowthings, whatever it was you called them. Now I suppose you intend to charge us a fortune for these flowers.”

“Sir, you do me a disservice. I would scarcely dream of taking advantage of your plight. Were the option mine, I would gladly donate the necessary Celian snowtufts to the House of Norn gratis. However, as it happens, I have struck a bargain with Danel Leigh Arneth to deal no more with the Great Houses of Lyronica.” He gave a ponderous shrug.

“We won victories with your cats,” Norn said, with an edge of desperation in his voice. “Our treasury has been growing—we have something like forty thousand standards now. It is yours. Sell us these flowers. Or better, a new animal. Bigger. Fiercer. I saw the Dant garghous. Sell us something like that. We have nothing to enter in the Bronze Arena!”

“Nothing? What of your ironfangs? The pride of Norn, I was told.”

Herold Norn waved impatiently. “Problems, you understand, we have been having problems. These hoppers of yours, they eat anything, everything. They’ve gotten out of control. Thousands of them, maybe millions of them, all over, eating all the grass, and all the crops. The things they’ve done to farmland—the cobalcats love them, yes, but we don’t have enough cobalcats. And the wild ironfangs won’t touch the hoppers. They don’t like the taste, I suppose. I don’t know, not really. But, you understand, all the other game is gone, driven out by these hoppers of

yours, and the ironfangs went with them. Where, I don't know. Gone, though. Into the unclaimed lands, beyond the realms of Norn. There are some villages out there, a few farmers, but they hate the Great Houses. Tamberkin don't even have dog fights. They'll probably try to *tame* the ironfangs, if you can believe it! That's the sort they are."

"Shocking," said Tuf dispassionately. "Nonetheless, you have your kennels, do you not?"

"Not anymore," Norn said. He sounded harried. "I ordered them shut. The ironfangs were losing every match, especially after you began to sell to the other houses. It seemed a foolish waste to maintain dead weight. Besides, the expense—we needed every standard. You bled us dry. We had Arena fees to pay, and of course we had to wager, and lately we've had to buy some food from Tamber just to feed all our housemen and trainers. I mean, you would never *believe* the things the hoppers have done to our crops."

"Sir," said Tuf. "Kindly give me a certain amount of credit. I am an ecologist. I know a great deal about hoppers and their ways. Am I to understand that you no longer have your ironfangs, then?"

"Yesyes. We turned the useless things loose, and now they're gone with the rest. What are we going to do? The hoppers are overrunning the plains, the cats won't mate, and our money will run out soon if we must continue to import food and pay Arena fees without any hope of victory."

Tuf folded his hands together. "You do indeed face a series of delicate problems. And I am the very man to help you to their solution. Unfortunately, I have pledged my bond to Danel Leigh Arneth, and accepted his money in good faith."

"Is it hopeless, then? Tuf, I am a man begging—I, a Senior Beast-Master of Norn. Soon we will drop from the games entirely. We will have no funds for Arena fees or betting, no animals to enter. We are cursed by ill fortune. No Great House has ever failed to provide its allotment of fighters—not even Feridian during its Twelve-Year Drought. We will be shamed. The House of Norn will sully its proud history by sending snufflers and barnyard animals onto the sand, to be shredded ignominiously by the huge monsters that you have sold the other houses."

"Sir," Tuf said. "If you will indulge me in a bit of prognostication, it occurs to me that perhaps Norn will not be alone in its quandaries. I have a hunch—*hunch*, yes, that is the proper word, and a curious word it is, too—a hunch, as I was saying, that the monsters you fear may be in short supply in the weeks and months to come. For example, the adolescent ursoids of Vagabond may very shortly go into hibernation. They are less than a year old, you understand. I hope the lords of Wrai Hill are not unduly disconcerted by this, yet I fear that they may be. Vagabond, as I'm sure you are aware, has an extremely irregular orbit about its primary, so that its Long Winters last approximately twenty standard years. The ursoids are attuned to this cycle. Soon their body processes will slow to such an extent that an untrained observer might even assume them to be dead. I fear that they will not be easily awakened. Perhaps, as the trainers of Wrai Hill are men of keen intellect, they might find a way. But I would be strongly inclined to further suspect that most of their energies and their funds will be devoted to feeding their populace, in the light of the voracious appetites of scampersloths.

"In quite a like manner, the men of the House of Varcour will be forced to deal with an explosion of Cathadayn tree-slugs. The tree-slugs are particularly fascinating creatures. At one point in their life cycle, they become veritable sponges, and double in size. A large enough grouping is fully capable of drying up even an extensive swampland." Tuf paused, and his thick fingers beat in drumming rhythms across his stomach. "I ramble unconscionably, I am afraid, and perhaps I am boring you. Do you grasp my point? My thrust?"

Herold Norn looked like a dead man. "You are mad. You have destroyed us. Our economy, our ecology... in five years, we will all be dead of starvation."

"Unlikely," said Tuf. "My experience in these matters suggests that Lyronica may indeed suffer a certain interlude of ecological instability and hardship, yet it will be of limited duration and ultimately I have no doubt that a new

ecosystem will emerge. It appears unlikely that this successor ecology will offer niches for large predators, alas, but I am optimistic that the quality of Lyronican life will be otherwise unimpaired.”

“No predators? No... but the games, the arena... no one will pay to see a hopper fight a slug! How can the games go on? No one will send fighters to the Bronze Arena!”

Haviland Tuf blinked. “Indeed,” he said. “An intriguing thought. I will have to consider it thoroughly.” He cleared the screen, and began to talk to Dax.

# Tuf Voyaging: Call Him Moses

Rumors were seldom of any concern to Haviland Tuf. For one thing, he seldom heard any. Tuf was not averse to acting the tourist on most of the worlds he visited, but even when he was mingling with others in public places he remained somehow apart and unapproachable. His chalk-white skin and utterly hairless face and body usually made him conspicuous among the peoples of the planets on which he plied his trade, and even on those infrequent occasions when his complexion might have allowed him to pass, his size made him stand out. Thus, though people might stare at Tuf and talk of him everywhere he went, few of them talked *to* him unless they had business to transact.

Given his nature, then, it was hardly remarkable that Haviland Tuf had never heard of the man called Moses until the evening that he and Dax were assaulted by Jaime Kreen in a restaurant on K'theddion.

It was a small shabby place just off the spaceport. Tuf had finished a plate of smokeroots and neograss and was relaxing with his third liter of mushroom wine when abruptly Dax raised his head from the table. Tuf shook a bit, slopping some wine on his sleeve, and ducked his head quickly to one side, barely far enough so that the bottle Kreen was wielding smashed open against the back of Tuf's chair instead of the back of Tuf's skull.

Glass exploded, and the liquid within—a smelly local liquor—went everywhere, soaking the chair, the table, the cat, and both men. Jaime Kreen, a thin blond youth with drunken blue eyes, stood blinking stupidly, holding the broken bottle in a bleeding fist.

Haviland Tuf rose ponderously to his feet, his long white face singularly impassive. He glanced at his assailant, blinked, and then reached down to pick up Dax, who was wet and unhappy. "Can you fathom this, Dax?" he said in a deep bass. "We have here a mystery, albeit an inconvenient one. Why does this odd stranger attack us, I wonder? Do you have any ideas?" He stroked Dax slowly as he cradled him in his arms, and only when the cat began to purr did he look at Jaime Kreen again. "Sir," he said. "It might be wise of you to release the fragments of that bottle. It appears to me that your hand is full of glass and blood and that particularly noxious brew, and I have severe doubts that the combination will enhance your health."

The stricken Kreen seemed to come alive. His thin lips drew back in anger, and he flung the bottle away from him. "Are you mocking me, criminal?" he said in a slurred, dangerous voice.

"Sir," said Haviland Tuf. The restaurant had grown very still: the other patrons were quiet and staring, and the proprietor had vanished. Tuf's deep voice could be heard in every corner of the room. "I would venture that the title 'criminal' as more applicable to you than to myself, but perhaps that is not to the point. No, I am not mocking you. You appear to be upset. Under such conditions it would be folly to mock you, and I am not given to folly." He placed Dax back on the table and scratched the tomcat behind the ear.

"You *are* mocking me," Jaime Kreen said. "I'll *hurt* you!"

Haviland Tuf betrayed no emotion. "You will not, sir, although I believe you are thinking of attacking me once again. I do not approve of violence. However, your boorish behavior leaves me with little choice." So saying, he stepped forward quickly, and lifted Jaime Kreen high off the floor before the younger man could react. Then, carefully, he broke both of his arms.



Kreen emerged pale and blinking from the tomblike dark of Kytheddene Prison into the bright street. His arms were in slings. He looked baffled and tired.

Haviland Tuf stood by the curbside, cradling Dax in one arm and petting him with the other. He looked up when Kreen came forth. "Your mood appears to have quieted somewhat," Tuf commented. "Moreover, you are now sober."

"You!" Kreen looked more baffled than ever; his face was so screwed up that it threatened to collapse in upon itself. "Do I understand that *you* bought my freedom?"

"You raise an interesting point," Haviland Tuf said. "I did indeed pay a certain sum—two hundred standards, actually, if we want to be precise—and upon that payment you were handed over to me. Yet it is incorrect to say that I bought your freedom. The crux of the matter is that you are not free. Under Kytheddene law, you belong to me, a bound servant whom I may work as I see fit until such time as you have discharged your debt."

"Debt?"

"I calculate it as follows," said Haviland Tuf. "Two hundred standards for the sum I paid to the local authorities in order to bask in your presence. One hundred standards for my suit, which was genuine Lambereen cotton, and which you quite ruined. Forty standards for the damage to the eatery, which damages I paid in order to settle the proprietor's claims against you. Seven standards for the delightful mushroom wine that you gave me no opportunity to drink. Mushroom wine is a noted specialty of K'theddion, and that was a particularly choice vintage. These total some three hundred forty-seven standards in actual damages. Furthermore, your unprovoked assault made Dax and myself the center of a highly unpleasant scene, and much disturbed our tranquility. For that I am assessing you an additional fifty-three standards, which is a generously low sum, to bring your total to an even four hundred standards."

Jaime Kreen chuckled maliciously. "You'll have a hard time getting even a tenth of that out of me, animal-seller," he said. "I have no funds, and I won't be good for much in the way of work. My arms are broken, you know."

"Sir," said Haviland Tuf. "If you had any significant funds of your own, you could have paid your own fines, in which case my assistance would not have been necessary. And since I myself broke your arms, I am aware of that condition as well. Kindly do not belabor the obvious with statements that convey no meaningful information. Despite your handicaps, I intend to take you with me back to my ship, and work you until your obligation has been discharged. Come."

Haviland Tuf turned and took two steps down the street. When Kreen made no move to follow, Tuf stopped and turned back to him. Kreen smiled. "If you want me anywhere, you can carry me," he said.

Tuf stroked Dax dispassionately. "I have no intention of carrying you," he said in even tones. "You forced me to touch you once, and that experience was sufficiently unpleasant that I have no intention of repeating it. If you decline to follow me, I will return to the authorities and hire two guards to take you bodily where I wish you to be. Their wages will be tallied to your debt. The choice is yours." Tuf turned again and moved off toward the spaceport.

Jaime Kreen, suddenly docile, followed behind, muttering under his breath.

The ship that waited for them at K'theddion Star Port was impressive enough to Kreen's eyes. An ancient, deadly looking craft of pitted black metal, with small rakish wings, it loomed half again as tall as the modern big-bellied trading ships that surrounded it. Like virtually all of Haviland Tuf's infrequent visitors, Kreen was awed (though he did not admit it) to discover that the *Griffin* was only a shuttle, that the *Ark* itself waited above, in orbit.

The shuttle deck of the *Ark* was twice the size of the landing field at K'theddion Star Port, and full of ships; four other shuttles identical to the *Griffin*, an old cargo ship with the teardrop shape characteristic of Avalon sitting on its three bent landing legs, a wicked-looking military flyer, an absurd golden barge with baroque ornamentation and a primitive harpoon gun mounted atop it, two craft that looked alien and vaguely untrustworthy, another that appeared to be nothing but a large square plate with a pole in its center. "Do you collect spacecraft?" Jaime Kreen asked, after Tuf had docked the *Griffin* and they had emerged onto the deck.

"An interesting concept," Tuf replied. "But no. The five landing shuttles are part of the *Ark* itself, and I retain the old trader for sentimental reasons, since it was my first ship. The others I have acquired along the way. Perhaps I should clean out the deck at some point, but there is the possibility that some of these vessels might have some commercial value, so I have refrained up to now. I will have to give the matter some thought. Now, come along with me."

They moved past a series of reception rooms and down several corridors, to a motor pool where several small three-wheeled vehicles were parked side-by-side. Haviland Tuf ushered Kreen into one, set Dax between them, and drove them down a great echoing tunnel that seemed to go on and on for kilometers. The shaft was lined by glass vats of many different sizes and shapes, each filled with fluids and gels. In some vats, dark shapes moved sluggishly within translucent bags, and seemed to peer out at them as they passed. Kreen found the suggestive motions somehow terrible and frightening. Haviland Tuf never noticed; he looked neither right nor left as he drove.

Tuf stopped the vehicle in a room identical to the one that they had started from, gathered up Dax, and led his prisoner down another corridor into a cramped, dustily comfortable chamber full of overstuffed furniture. He motioned Kreen to a seat and took one himself, setting Dax in a third chair since, when seated, he had no apparent lap. "Now," said Haviland Tuf, "we shall talk."

The vast dimensions of Tuf's ship had left Jaime Kreen somewhat subdued, but now a bit of spirit returned to his face. "We have nothing to talk about," he said.

"You think not?" said Haviland Tuf. "I disagree. It was not simply the generosity of my soul which bid me to rescue you from the ignominy of imprisonment. You pose a mystery to me, as I remarked to Dax when you first assaulted us. Mysteries disturb me. I desire some clarification."

Jaime Kreen's thin face took on a calculating look. "Why would I help you out? Your false charges put me in prison and now you've bought me as a slave. And you broke my arms, too! I don't owe you anything."

"Sir," said Haviland Tuf, locking his large hands together on his immense paunch, "we have already established that you owe me four hundred standards. I am prepared to be reasonable. I will ask you questions. You will give me answers. For each answer, I will deduct one standard from the sum you owe me."

"One standard! Absurd. Whatever you want to know is worth more than that! Ten standards for each answer! Not a tenth less!"

"I assure you," said Haviland Tuf, "that whatever information you possess is probably worth nothing at all. I am merely curious. I am a slave to curiosity. It is a fault of mine, one I am helpless to correct, and one that you are now in a position to take advantage of. Yet you should not attempt to press me too far. I refuse to be cheated. Two standards."

"Nine," said Kreen.

"Three, and I will go no higher. I grow impatient." Tuf's face was completely emotionless.

"Eight," said Kreen. "Don't try to bluff me."

Haviland Tuf was silent. He sat unmoving except for his eyes, which wandered over to Dax. The big black tomcat yawned and stretched himself.

After five minutes of silence, Kreen said, "Six standards, and that's cheap. I know a lot of important things, things that Moses would want to know. Six."

Haviland Tuf said nothing. Minutes passed. "Five," said Kreen, swearing.

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

"All right," Kreen said at last. "Three standards. You are a cheat and a scoundrel, as well as a criminal. You have no ethics."

"I will ignore your bombast," said Haviland Tuf. "Three standards is the agreed sum, then. A sudden hunch comes to me that you may attempt to give evasive or confusing answers, so that I would have to ask many questions in order to elicit a small particle of information. I warn you that I will brook no such nonsense. Nor will I tolerate any deception. For each lie you attempt to tell me, I will add an additional ten standards on to your debt."

Kreen laughed. "I have no intention of lying, Tuf. But even if I did, how would you ever know? I am not that transparent."

Haviland Tuf permitted himself a smile, a tiny tight-lipped smile that barely touched his face and then was gone again. "Sir," he said, "I assure you that I would know at once. Dax would tell me, in precisely the same manner that he told me how far you would come down from your absurd demand for ten standards, and warned me of your cowardly attack on K'theddion. Dax is a feline, sir, as no doubt even you will perceive. All felines are at least partially psionic, as mankind has known throughout history, and Dax is the end product of generations of breeding and genetic manipulation that have greatly strengthened this trait in him. So you will save all of us a good deal of time and effort if you will give complete, honest answers. While Dax's talents are not sufficiently sophisticated to pluck difficult abstract concepts from your mind, I assure you that he can easily tell if you are lying or holding something back. So, with this in mind, shall we begin?"

Jaime Kreen was glaring at the big tomcat with venom in his eyes. Dax yawned again. "Go ahead," Kreen said sullenly.

"First," said Tuf, "there is the mystery of your assault upon us. I do not know you, sir. You are utterly a stranger to me. I am a simple merchant, and my services benefit all those who employ me. I had in no way given you offense. Yet you attacked me. This raises several questions! Why? What was your motive? Did you know me in some way? Had I given you offense in some action I have since forgotten?"

"Is that one question or four?" Kreen said.

Haviland Tuf folded his hands against his stomach again. "A point, sir. Begin with this: do you know me?"

"No," said Kreen, "but I know *of* you, by reputation. You and your *Ark* are unique and widely famed, Tuf. And you were easy to recognize, when I chanced across you in that slimy Kytheddene restaurant. Gross hairless white giants are not exceptionally common, you know."

"Three standards," Tuf said. "I will take notice of neither your insults nor your flattery. You did not know me, then. Why did you assault me?"

"I was drunk."

“Insufficient. It is true that you were drunk. But there were a number of other patrons in the eatery, any of whom might have obliged you if you were simply looking for a brawl. You were not. You chose me out of all those others. Why?”

“I dislike you. You are a criminal, by my standards.”

“Standards vary, of course,” Haviland Tuf replied. “On some worlds, my size itself would be a crime. On others, the fact that you wear boots made of cowhide would be punishable by long imprisonment. So in that sense, we are both criminals. Yet it is my feeling that it is unjust to judge a man by any laws save those of the culture in which he lives, or is presently moving. In that sense, I am no criminal, and your answer is still insufficient. Explain your dislike of me. What crimes do you charge against me?”

“I am a Charitan,” Kreen said. He coughed. “Or perhaps I should say I was formerly a Charitan. In fact, I was an administrator, although only sixth grade. Moses destroyed my career. I charge you with the crime of assisting Moses. It is well known. Do not bore me with your denials.”

Haviland Tuf glanced at Dax. “You appear to be telling the truth, and your answer contains a fair amount of information, although it raises several questions as well, and is far from clear. Nonetheless, I will do you a kindness and count it as an answer. Six standards, then. And my next questions will be simple ones. Who is Moses and what is a Charitan?”

Jaime Kreen looked incredulous. “Do you want to give me six standards? Don’t pretend, Tuf. I won’t buy it. You know who Moses is.”

“Indeed I do, in a sense,” Tuf replied. “Moses is a myth-figure associated with the various orthodox Christian religions, a figure alleged to have lived on Old Earth in the vast distant past. I believe he is somehow associated with or related to Noah, whom my *Ark* is named after, in a fashion. Moses and Noah were brothers, perhaps. The details escape me. In any event, both of them were among the earliest practitioners of ecological warfare, a field with which I am quite familiar. So, in a sense, I do know who Moses is. However, that Moses has been dead for a period sufficiently long to make it unlikely that he had destroyed your career, and even more unlikely that he would care a whit about any information you cared to convey to me. So I must judge that you are speaking of some other Moses, one I do not know. And that, sir, was the thrust of my question, the very point.”

“All right,” Kreen said. “If you insist on feigning ignorance, I’ll play your silly game. A Charitan is a citizen of Charity, as you know perfectly well. Moses, as he styles himself, is a religious demagogue who heads the Holy Altruistic Restoration. With your aid he has conducted a devastating campaign of ecological warfare against the City of Hope, our single great arcology, the center of Charitan life.”

“Twelve standards,” said Tuf. “Explain further.”

Kreen sighed and shifted in his chair. “The Holy Altruists were the original settlers of Charity, centuries ago. They left their original planet because their religious sensibilities were offended by its advanced technology. The Holy Altruistic Church teaches that salvation is obtained by living a simple life close to nature, by suffering and by self-sacrifice. So the Altruists came to a raw planet and suffered and sacrificed and died quite happily for a hundred years or so. Then, unfortunately for them, there was a second wave of settlers. The newcomers built the arcology we call the City of Hope, farmed the land with advanced robotic machinery, opened a star port, and generally sinned against God. Worse, after a few years, children of the Altruists began to desert to the City in droves, to enjoy life a little. In two generations, nothing was left of Altruists except a few old folks. Then Moses appeared, leading this movement they call the Restoration. He marched into the City of Hope, confronted the council of administrators, and demanded that we let his people go. The administrators explained that none of his people *wanted* to go. Moses was unmoved. He said that unless we let his people go, closed the star port, and dismantled the City of Hope to live close to God, he would bring down plagues on us.”

“Interesting,” said Haviland Tuf. “Continue.”

“It’s your money,” said Jaime Kreen. “Well, the administrators threw Moses out on his hairy ass, and everybody had a good laugh. But we also did some checking, just to be safe. We had all heard ancient horror stories about biological warfare, of course, but we presumed those secrets were long lost. Our computers confirmed as much. Techniques of cloning and genetic manipulation such as were employed by the Earth Imperials survived on only a handful of planets, those much scattered, and the nearest some seven years from us even by FTL drive.”

“I see,” said Haviland Tuf. “Yet no doubt you also learned of the seedships of the Federal Empire’s vanished Ecological Engineering Corps.”

“We did,” said Kreen, smiling sourly. “All gone, destroyed or lost or crippled centuries ago, of no concern to us. Until we learned otherwise from the captain of one trading vessel that put down at Port Faith. Rumors travel, Tuf, even from star to star. Your fame precedes you and condemns you. He told us all about you, you and this *Ark* you stumbled on, and used to line your pockets with standards and your gut with layers of fat. Other crews from other worlds confirmed your existence, and that you controlled a still-functioning EEC seedship. But we had no idea that you were in league with Moses until the plagues began.”

A single thin furrow appeared on Haviland Tuf’s massive bone-white brow, and then was gone again. “I begin to grasp your complaint,” he said. He rose, a slow ponderous movement that was almost tidal, and stood towering above Jaime Kreen. “I will credit you with fifteen standards.”

Kreen made a rude noise. “Only three standards, for all that. Tuf, you—”

“Twenty standards, then, if only to quiet you and restore some tranquility to the *Ark*. I have a beneficent nature. Your debt is now three hundred eighty standards. I shall ask you one further question, and give you an opportunity to reduce it to three hundred seventy-seven.”

“Ask.”

“What are the coordinates for your world, Charity?”

Charity was not so terribly far from K’theddion, as interstellar distances go, and the voyage between took but three standard weeks. For Jaime Kreen, they were busy weeks. While the *Ark* silently ate up the light years, Kreen worked. Centuries of dust had accumulated in some of the most desolate corridors. Haviland Tuf gave Kreen a broom and told him to clean it out.

Kreen begged off, citing his broken arms as a more-than-ample excuse. Haviland Tuf then sedated him, and confined him within the *Ark*’s chronowarp tank, where the same great energies that warped the fabric of space could be used to do strange things to time. It was the last and greatest secret of the Earth Imperials, Tuf claimed, and had been lost virtually everywhere else. He used it to bring his clones to full maturity in a matter of days, and now he used it to age Jaime Kreen, and incidentally heal his broken arms in hours.

With his newly mended arms, Kreen set to sweeping at the rate of five standards an hour.

He swept kilometers of corridors, more rooms than he could count, all manner of empty cages where more than dust had accumulated. He swept until his arms ached, and when he did not have broom in hand, Haviland Tuf found other things for him to do. At mealtime Kreen played the butler, fetching Tuf pewter mugs of brown ale and platters heaped high with steamed vegetables. Tuf accepted them impassively in the overstuffed armchair where it was his custom to take his leisure and read. Kreen was forced to feed Dax, too, sometimes three or four times over, since the big tomcat was a fussy eater and Tuf insisted that his preferences be indulged. Only when Dax was satiated was Jaime Kreen allowed to see to his own meal.

Once Kreen was asked to make a minor repair that the *Ark*'s machinery had not attended to, for some reason, but he bungled the job so badly that Haviland Tuf promptly relieved him of all future assignments of that kind. "The blame lies entirely with me, sir," Tuf said when it happened. "I failed to remember that you are by training a bureaucrat, and thus good for virtually nothing."

Despite all his labors, Jaime Kreen's debt dwindled with excruciating slowness, and sometimes it did not dwindle at all. Kreen very quickly discovered that Haviland Tuf gave absolutely nothing away. For mending his broken arms, Tuf tacked a hundred-standard "medical services" charge onto Kreen's obligation. He also charged a standard a day for air, a tenth-standard for each liter of water, a half-standard for a mug of ale. Meals were fairly cheap; only two standards each if Kreen ate basic fare. But basic fare was an unpalatable fortified mash, so as often as not Kreen paid higher prices for the tasty vegetable stews that Tuf himself favored. He would have been willing to pay even more for meat, but Tuf refused to provide it. On the one occasion that he asked Tuf to clone a steak for him, the trader simply stared and said, "We do not eat animal flesh here," then went on his way as unperturbed as ever.

During his first day on the *Ark*, Jaime Kreen asked Haviland Tuf where the toilet could be found. Tuf charged him three standards for the answer, and an additional tenth-standard for the use of the facility.

From time to time, Kreen thought about murder. But even in his most homicidal moments, when he was drunk as a dog, the idea never seemed quite feasible. Dax was always about when Tuf was, prowling down the corridors by the giant's side or riding serenely in his arms, and Kreen was certain that his host had other allies as well. He had glimpsed them on his travels around the ship—dark winged shapes that wheeled above his head in the more cavernous chambers, furtive shadows that scrambled away between the machines when surprised. He never saw them clearly, any of them, but he was somehow certain that he would see them all too well indeed were he to assault Haviland Tuf.

Instead, hoping to reduce his debt a bit faster, he gambled.

That was not perhaps the wisest course of action, but Jaime Kreen had a bit of a weakness for gambling. So each night they consumed hours playing a ridiculous game that Tuf enjoyed, shaking dice and moving counters around an imaginary star cluster, buying and selling and trading planets, building cities and arcologies and charging other star travelers all manner of landing fees and taxes. Unfortunately for Kreen, Tuf was much better at the game than he was, and usually ended up winning back a fair portion of the wages he had paid Kreen during the day.

Away from the gaming table, Haviland Tuf seldom spoke to Kreen at all except to set him tasks and haggle about payments back and forth. Whatever intentions he had toward Charity, he certainly did not volunteer them, and Kreen did not intend to ask, since every question added three standards onto his debt. Nor did Tuf ask any questions that might have tipped his hand. He simply continued in his solitary habits, worked alone in the various cloning rooms and laboratories of the *Ark*, read dusty ancient books in languages that Kreen could not comprehend, and held long conversations with Dax. Thus life went on, until the day they entered orbit around Charity, and Haviland Tuf summoned Kreen to the communications room.

The communications room was long and narrow, its walls lined with dark telescreens and softly shining consoles. Haviland Tuf was seated before one of the blackened screens when Kreen entered, with Dax on his knee. He swiveled at the sound of the door panel sliding shut. "I have attempted to open channels of communication with the City of Hope," he said. "Observe." He touched a playback button on his console.

As Jaime Kreen slid into an empty seat, light flared on the viewscreen in front of Tuf, and coalesced into the face of Moses, a man in late middle age, with features that were regular and almost handsome, thinning gray-brown hair, and deceptively gentle hazel eyes. "Move off, starship," the recorded voice of the Altruistic leader said. His tones were deep and mellow, even if his words were harsh. "Port Faith is closed, and Charity is under new government. The people of this world wish no traffic with sinners, and have no need of the luxuries you bring. Leave us in peace." He raised his hand in a gesture that might have meant "Blessings" and might have meant "Halt," and then the screen went blank.

“So he has won,” Jaime Kreen said in a tired voice.

“This would appear to be the case,” said Haviland Tuf. He scratched Dax behind the ear and began to stroke him. “Your debt to me presently stands at two-hundred and eighty-four standards, sir.”

“Yes,” Kreen said suspiciously. “What of it?”

“I wish you to undertake a mission for me. You will descend to the surface of Charity in secrecy, locate the former leaders of your council of administrators, and bring them here for a consultation. In return, I will credit you with fifty standards toward your outstanding debt.”

Jaime Kreen laughed. “Don’t be ridiculous, Tuf. The sum is absurdly small for such a perilous mission. And I wouldn’t do it even if you were to make me a fair offer, which I’m sure that you would not. Something like canceling out my entire debt, and paying me some two hundred standards besides.”

Haviland Tuf stroked Dax. “This man Jaime Kreen takes us for absolute fools,” he said to the cat. “Next I suspect he will also ask for the *Ark* itself, and perhaps title to a small planet or two. He has no sense of proportion.” Dax gave a small purr that might or might not have meant something. Tuf looked up again at Jaime Kreen. “I am in an uncommonly generous mood, and I may allow you to take advantage of me in this single instance. One hundred standards, sir. It is twice what this small task is worth.”

“Bah,” Kreen replied. “Dax is telling you what I think of your offer, I’m sure. This scheme of yours is nonsense! I have no idea whether the council members are alive or dead, to be found in the City of Hope or elsewhere, free or imprisoned. I can hardly expect them to cooperate with me, either—not when I come bearing a summons from you, who we know to be an ally of Moses. And if Moses captures me, I will spend the rest of my life grubbing for turnips. Likely as not, I *will* be captured. Where do you intend me to land? Moses may have a recording set up to answer approaching starships, but he will certainly have posted guards around Port Faith to keep it closed. Think of the risks, Tuf! I couldn’t possibly attempt this for anything less than the cancellation of my entire debt! All of it! Not a single standard less, you hear!” He crossed his arms stubbornly against his chest. “Tell him, Dax. You knew how adamant I am.”

Haviland Tuf’s bone-white features remained impassive, but a small sigh escaped his lips. “You are truly a cruel man, sir. You make me rue the day when I carelessly told you that Dax was more than an ordinary feline. You deprive an old man of his one useful bargaining tool, and swindle him mercilessly with this inflexible stubborn attitude. Yet I have no choice but to give in. Two hundred eighty-four standards, then. It is established.”

Jaime Kreen grinned. “At last you’re being sensible. Good. I’ll take the *Griffin*.”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf. “You will not. You will take the trading ship you noticed on the shuttle deck, the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, the ship wherein I began my own career many years ago.”

“That! Absolutely not, Tuf. That ship is in obvious disrepair. I am going to have to make a difficult landing in some wilderness area, and I insist on a craft capable of surviving a bit of rough treatment. The *Griffin*, or one of the other shuttles.”

“Dax,” said Haviland Tuf to the quiet tomcat, “I fear for us. We are shut up in this small place with a congenital idiot, a man with neither ethics nor courtesy nor comprehension. I must explain every obvious ramification of a task that was childishly simple to begin with.”

“What?”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf. “The *Griffin* is a shuttle. It is unique in its design, and it has no stardrive. Should you be caught landing in such a craft, even a person with less intellectual equipment than yourself might deduce that a

larger ship such as the *Ark* remained above, since shuttles frequently need something to shuttle from, and seldom materialize from the vacuum of deep space. The *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices*, in contrast, is a common model Avalon-made starship, complete with drive, albeit dysfunctional in this case. Do you understand the point, sir? Do you grasp the essential differences between the two craft?"

"Yes, Tuf. But since I don't intend to be captured, the distinction is academic. Still, I'll humor you. For an additional fifty standards above and beyond my debt, I will consent to use your *Cornucopia*."

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

Jaime Kreen fidgeted. "Dax is telling you that I'm going to give in if you wait, isn't he? Well, I'm not. You can't trick me that way anymore, do you understand." He crossed his arms more tightly than ever. "I am a rock. I am steel. I am adamantine in my resolve on this matter."

Haviland Tuf stroked Dax, and said nothing.

"Wait all you like, Tuf," said Kreen. "Just this once, I'm going to fool you. I can wait, too. We'll wait together. And I'll never give in. Never. Never. NEVER."

When the *Cornucopia of Excellent Goods at Low Prices* returned from the surface of Charity a week and a half later, Jaime Kreen had three others with him, all former top administrators of the City of Hope. Rej Laithor was an elderly hatchet-faced woman with iron-gray hair who had formerly chaired the council. Since Moses had taken over, she had been undergoing retraining as a spinning-wheel operator. She was accompanied by a younger woman and a large man who looked as if he had once been very fat, although now his skin hung from his face in loose yellow folds.

Haviland Tuf received them in a conference room. He was seated at the head of the table when Kreen ushered the Charitans in, his hands folded neatly in front of him, and Dax curled up lazily on the polished metal.

"I am pleased that you could come," he said as the administrators took seats. "You appear hostile, however, and I regret this. Let me begin by assuring you that I played no role whatsoever in your vicissitudes."

Rej Laithor snorted. "I interrogated Kreen when he found me, Tuf, and he told me of your protestations of innocence. I believe them no more than he did. Our city and our way of life were destroyed by ecological warfare, by the plagues that this Moses let loose on us. Our computers tell us that only you and this ship are capable of waging such warfare."

"Indeed," said Haviland Tuf. "I might suggest that you consider reprogramming your computers, if they frequently make such errors."

"We have no computers now," the formerly fat man said dolefully. "I was chief of programming, however, and I resent the inference that I was less than capable."

"You *are* less than capable, Rikken, or you never would have let those lice infest the system," Rej Laithor said. "That makes Tuf not one whit less guilty, however. They were his lice."

"I do not have a monopoly on lice," Haviland Tuf said simply. Then he raised a hand. "We should desist from this squabbling. It takes us nowhere. Let us, instead, discuss the sad history and plight of the City of Hope, and of Moses and the plagues. Perhaps you are familiar with the original Moses, the Old Earth Moses whom your own antagonist patterns himself after. This elder Moses had no seedship, no formal tools for biowar. He did, however, have a god, who proved to be equally effective. His people were being held in captivity. To free them, he sent ten plagues against his enemies. Did your Moses follow this selfsame pattern?"



“Don’t answer him for free,” Jaime Kreen said, from where he lounged against the door.

Rej Laithor glanced at him as if he were insane. “We looked up the original Moses story,” she said when she turned back to Tuf. “Once the plagues started coming, we wanted to know what to expect. Moses used the same plagues as the original, but he varied the order a bit. And we only got six of them, at which point the council gave in to the Altruistic demands, closed Port Faith, and evacuated the City of Hope.” She held up her hands. “Look at them—look at those blisters, look at that callus. He has us all scattered through these rotting Altruistic villages, living like primitives. Hungry, too. He’s mad.”

“First Moses turned the waters of the river into blood,” said Haviland Tuf.

“It was disgusting,” the younger woman said. “All the water in the arcology, the fountains, the swimming pools, the taps. You turned on the faucet or stepped into the shower and suddenly you were covered with blood. Even the toilets were full of blood.”

“It wasn’t real blood,” Jaime Kreen added. “We analyzed it. Some organic poison had been added to the city water supply. But whatever it was made the water thick and red and undrinkable. How did you do it, Tuf?”

Haviland Tuf ignored the question. “The second plague was a plague of frogs.”

“In our yeast tanks, and our whole hydroponics section,” said Kreen. “I was the supervising administrator. It ruined me. The frogs gummed up all the machinery with their bodies, and they died and rotted and spoiled the food. Laithor gave me a summary discharge when I couldn’t contain them—as if it was my fault!” He grimaced at his former superior. “Well, at least I didn’t wind up slaving for Moses. I left for K’theddion when it was still possible to leave.”

“Third,” said Haviland Tuf, “was the plague of lice.”

“Everywhere,” muttered the former fat man. “Everywhere. They couldn’t live inside the system, of course, so they died there, but that was bad enough. The system went down. The lice just moved on. Everybody had them. You couldn’t stay clean enough to avoid it.”

“Fourth was the plague of flies.”

The Charitans all looked glum. No one said anything.

“Fifth,” continued Haviland Tuf, “Moses set loose a murrain that killed all the cattle of his enemies.”

“He skipped the murrain,” said Rej Laithor. “We had our herds out on the prairies, but we put guards around them, and down in the cellars around the meatbeasts, too. We were expecting him. Nothing happened. He skipped the boils, too, thank goodness, and the hail. I would have liked to have seen him make it hail inside the arcology. He went straight to the locusts.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “The eighth plague. Did these locusts eat your fields clean?”

“The locusts didn’t touch our fields. They were inside the city, in the sealed grain storage compartments. Three years’ worth of surplus was gone overnight.”

“The ninth plague,” said Haviland Tuf, “was darkness itself.”

“I’m glad I missed that one,” volunteered Jaime Kreen.

“Every light in the city died,” said Rej Laithor. “Our repair crews had to fight through piles of dead flies and live locusts, scratching at their lice all the while. It was hopeless, and the people were already leaving by the thousands. I ordered the city abandoned once it became clear that even the secondary power stations were full of bugs. After that, everything went very fast. A week later I was living in an unheated cabin in the Hills of Honest Labor, and learning how to operate a spinning wheel.” Her tone was savage.

“Your fate is a sad one,” Haviland Tuf agreed in a placid voice. “Yet you should not despair. When I heard of your plight from Jaime Kreen, I resolved at once to help you. And here I am.”

Rej Laithor looked suspicious. “Help us?” she said.

“I will win back your City of Hope for you,” said Haviland Tuf. “I will smite Moses and his Holy Altruistic Restoration. I will free you from your spinning wheel and give you back your vocoder.”

The young woman and the former fat man were beaming. Rej Laithor continued to frown. “Why?”

“Rej Laithor asks me why,” Haviland Tuf said to Dax, stroking the cat softly. “My motives are always imputed. People have no trust in this hard modern age, Dax.” He looked at the top administrator. “I will help you because the situation on Charity moves me, because your people are obviously in pain. Moses is no true altruist, as we both know, but this does not mean the impulse to self-sacrifice and benevolence is dead in humanity. I deplore Moses and his tactics, his use of innocent insects and animals in an unnatural manner to impose his will on his fellow human beings. Are these motives sufficient for you, Rej Laithor? If not, say as much, and I will take my *Ark* and depart.”

“No,” she said. “No, don’t do that. We accept. I accept, on behalf of the City of Hope. If you succeed, we will build a statue to you, and set it atop the city to be seen for kilometers.”

“Passing birds would relieve themselves upon such a statue,” said Haviland Tuf. “The wind would abrade and erode it, and it would be placed too high for any to see its features clearly. Such a statue might tickle my vanity—I am a small man, for all my size, easily pleased by such things—but I would want it set in your largest public square, safe from all harm.”

“Of course,” Laithor said quickly. “Anything.”

“Anything,” said Haviland Tuf. It was not a question. “In addition to the statue, I will also require fifty thousand standards.”

Her face went pale and then red. “You said,” she began in a sort of a choked whisper. “You... benevolence... altruism... our need... the spinning wheel...”

“I must meet my expenses,” said Haviland Tuf. “Certainly I am willing to donate my own time to this matter, but the resources of the *Ark* are too valuable to squander. I must eat. Surely the coffers of the City of Hope are sufficient to meet this small sum.”

Rej Laithor made a sputtering noise.

“I’ll handle this,” Jaime Kreen interjected. He turned to Tuf. “Ten thousand standards. No more. Nothing. Ten thousand.”

“Impossible,” said Haviland Tuf. “My costs will surely exceed forty thousand standards. Perhaps I can diet for a time, take only that sum, and content myself with a small loss. Your people do suffer.”

“Fifteen thousand,” Kreen said.

Haviland Tuf said nothing.

“Oh, hell,” said Jaime Kreen. “Forty thousand then, and I hope that damned cat dies of gout.”

It was the habit of the man called Moses to walk each evening along the rugged footpaths of the Hills of Honest Labor, to watch the beauty of the sunset and contemplate in solitude the problems of the day. He would stride along briskly at a pace few younger men could match, his long crooked staff in hand and a peaceful look on his face, his eyes fixed on far horizons. Often he would cover a dozen kilometers before turning back toward home and bed.

The pillar of fire first appeared to him on such a walk.

He had just topped a rise and there it was—a twisting, writhing funnel of orange flame, shot through with flickers of blue and yellow, tracing a path through the rocks and the dust straight toward him. It was easily thirty meters high, crowned by a small gray cloud that somehow paced it.

Moses rested on the crest of the hill, leaning on his staff, and watched it come.

The pillar of fire stopped five meters from him, on slightly lower ground. “Moses,” it said in a booming thunderous voice from above, “I am the Lord God, and you have sinned against me. *Give my people back!*”

Moses chuckled. “Very good,” he said in his rich tones. “Really, very good.”

The pillar of fire trembled and spun. “Release the people of the City of Hope from your cruel bondage,” it demanded, “lest in my wrath I bring down plagues upon you.”

Moses scowled and pointed his staff at the pillar of fire. “I am the one who brings down plagues around here, I would thank you to remember.” There was a hint of irony in his voice.

“False plagues from a false prophet, as both you and I know full well,” boomed the pillar of fire. “All of your feeble tricks and travesties are known to me, the Lord God whose name you have profaned. Give my people back, or you shall look upon the terrible face of genuine pestilence!”

“Nonsense,” said Moses. He began walking downhill, toward the pillar of fire. “Who are you?”

“I am who I am,” the pillar of fire said, retreating hastily as Moses advanced. “I am the Lord God.”

“You are a holographic projection,” Moses said, “emanating from that silly cloud above us. I am a holy man, not a stupid one. Go now.”

The pillar of fire stood its ground and rumbled threateningly. Moses walked right through it, and continued smartly down the hill. The pillar remained, writhing and spinning, until long after Moses had vanished. “Indeed,” it boomed in its vast thunderous voice to the empty night. Then it shuddered and winked out.

The small grey cloud scuttled across the hills and caught up to Moses a kilometer down the road. The pillar of fire snaked down again, crackling with ominous energy. Moses walked around it. The pillar of fire began to follow him.

“You city-dwellers begin to try my patience,” Moses said as he walked. “You seduce my people with your sinful, slothful ways, and now you interrupt my evening reflections. I have had a hard day of holy toil. Be warned that

you are near to provoking me. I have forbidden all this traffic with science. Take your aircar and your hologram and be gone with you, before I bring down a plague of boils upon your people.”

“Empty words, sir,” said the pillar of fire, trailing close on his heels. “Boils are well beyond your limited abilities. Do you think to deceive one such as I as easily as you deceived that pack of small-visioned bureaucrats?”

Moses hesitated, and cast a thoughtful look over his shoulder. “You doubt the powers of my God? I would think that my demonstrations had been ample enough.”

“Indeed,” said the pillar of fire. “Yet the things demonstrated were your own limitations, and those of your opponents. It is clear that you planned long ahead, and well, but your only powers were in that.”

“No doubt you believe the plagues that swept the City of Hope were coincidence, bad fortune?”

“You mistake me, sir. I know full well what they were, and there was nothing supernatural in any of them. For generations the young and the disaffected among the Altruists had been emigrating to the City. How simple and obvious to plant among their numbers your own spies, saboteurs, and agents. How cunning to wait a year or two or five until each among those had been fully accepted into the City of Hope, and given positions of responsibility. Frogs and insects can be bred, sir, and easily, whether in a cabin in the Hills of Honest Labor or in an apartment complex within the City itself. Release such creatures in the wild, and they will dissipate and die. The elements will slay them, natural enemies will hunt them down, they will perish for want of food; the complex merciless mechanism of the ecology will set them in their natural place. But how different within an arcology, the veritable architectural ecology that is truly no ecology at all, for it has a niche for no animal but humanity alone. The weather within is always fair and gentle, no competing species or predatory enemies exist, and it is an easy enough thing to find a proper source of food. Under such conditions, the result is inevitably a plague. Yet a false plague, looming large only within the confines of the City. Outside, your little plagues of frogs and lice and flies would be as nothing to the wind and the rain and the wild.”

“I turned their water into blood,” Moses insisted.

“Indeed, your agents placed organic chemicals in the City’s water supply.”

“I brought down a plague of darkness,” Moses said. His tone had grown quite defensive.

“Sir,” said the pillar of fire, “you insult my intelligence with the obvious. You turned out a light.”

Moses swung about to face the pillar, glaring up at it defiantly, his face red by reflected light. “I deny this. I deny all of it. I am a true prophet.”

“The true Moses brought down a grievous murrain upon his enemies,” the pillar of fire boomed in an even voice, as much as thunder can be even. “You brought none. The true Moses set upon his enemies a festering sweat of boils, so that none could stand before him. You did not. Your omissions give you away, sir. True pestilence is beyond your powers. The true Moses devastated the lands of his enemies with hail that rained down day and night. That plague too defeated your own limited capacities. Yet your enemies, beset by your tricks, surrendered the City of Hope before the tenth plague, the death of the first-born, and that was to your great good fortune, for by that time you were of a certainty plagued out.”

Moses smote the pillar of fire with his staff. There was no apparent effect on either staff or pillar. “Move off,” he shouted. “Whoever you are, you are no God of mine. I defy you. Do your worst! You have said it yourself: in nature, plagues are less simple things than inside an arcology. We are secure in the simple life we live in the Hills of Honest Labor, close to our God. We are full of grace. You cannot harm us.”

“Indeed,” boomed the pillar of fire. “You are wrong, Moses. *Give my people back!*”

Moses was not listening. He walked through the fire again and, furious, began to race back toward the village.

“When will you start?” Jaime Kreen asked eagerly after Haviland Tuf had returned to the *Ark*. He had remained aboard after taking the other Charitans back to the surface, since—as he had pointed out—the City of Hope was uninhabitable and there was no place for him in the villages and work camps of the Altruists. “Why aren’t you working? When will—”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf. He was sitting in his favorite chair, eating a bowl of creamed mushrooms and lemon-peas. A mug of ale sat on the table by his side. “Do not presume to give me orders, unless you chance to prefer the hospitality of Moses to my own.” He sipped at his ale. “Such work as needs be done has been done. My hands, unlike your own, were not entirely idle during our voyage from K’theddion.”

“But that was before...”

“Details,” said Haviland Tuf. “Most of the basic cloning is done. The clones too have kept themselves occupied. The breeding tanks are full.” He blinked at Kreen. “Leave me to my dinner.”

“The plagues,” said Kreen. “When will they begin?”

“The first,” said Haviland Tuf, “began some hours ago.”

Down through the Hills of Honest Labor, past the six villages and the rocky fields of the Holy Altruists and the sprawling barren work camps where the refugees were quartered, ran the wide slow-flowing river that Altruists called God’s Grace and other Charitans the River of Sweat. When dawn broke on the distant horizon, those who had gone down to the riverside to fish or fill their jugs or wash their clothing returned to the villages and work camps with cries of horror.

“Blood,” they shouted. “The river is blood, as the waters of the City were.”

Moses was sent for, and he went to the river reluctantly, wrinkling his nose at the smell of dead and dying fish, and the stink of blood itself.

“A trick of the sinners of the City of Hope,” he said, when he looked down on the sluggish scarlet stream. “The Lord God renews the natural world. I will pray, and in a day the river will be clean and fresh again.” He stood in the mud, at his feet a bloody shallow pool full of dead fish, stretched out his staff over the diseased waters, and began to pray. He prayed for a day and a night, but the waters did not clear.

When dawn came again, Moses retired to his cabin, and gave orders, and Rej Laithor and five other top administrators were taken from their families and questioned most intensely. The questioners learned nothing. Patrols of armed Altruists went upstream, searching for the conspirators who were dumping chemical pollutants into the river. They found nothing. They traveled for three days and three nights, as far as the great waterfall in the High Country, and even there the tumbling waters were blood, blood, blood.

Moses prayed without surcease, both day and night, until he finally collapsed from exhaustion, and his lieutenants took him back to his simple cabin. The river remained red and murky.

“He is beaten,” Jaime Kreen said after a week, when Haviland Tuf had returned from scouting out the situation below in his airbarge. “Why does he wait?”

“He waits for the river to cleanse itself,” said Haviland Tuf. “It is one thing to contaminate the water supply of a closed system like your arcology, where only a finite amount of contaminant will be sufficient for the task. A river

is an undertaking of a higher magnitude. Inject any amount of chemical you please into its waters, and sooner or later it will all flow past and the river will be clean again. Moses no doubt believes we shall soon run out of chemicals.”

“Then how are you doing it?”

“Microorganisms, unlike chemical substances, multiply and renew themselves,” said Haviland Tuf. “Even the waters of Old Earth were subject to such red tides, the ancient records of the EEC tell us. There is a world called Scarne where the corresponding lifeform is so virulent that even the oceans themselves are perpetually stained, and all other creatures must adapt or die. Those who built the *Ark* visited Scarne and took cloning material.”

That night the pillar of fire appeared outside of Moses’ cabin, and frightened away the guards. “*Give my people back!*” it roared.

Moses staggered to the door and threw it wide. “You are a delusion of Satan,” he screamed, “but I will not be tricked. Be gone. We will drink no more from the river, trickster. There are deep wells we can take our water from, and we can dig others.”

The pillar of fire writhed and crackled. “No doubt,” it commented, “yet you only delay the inevitable. Release the people from the City of Hope, or I will set the plagues of frogs upon you.”

“I will eat your frogs,” Moses yelled. “They will be fine and delicious.”

“These frogs will come from the river,” said the pillar of fire, “and they shall be more terrible than you can imagine.”

“Nothing lives in that poisoned gutter,” Moses said. “You have seen to that.” Then he slammed the door, and would listen no more to the pillar of fire.

The guards that Moses sent to the river at dawn came back bloody and hysterical with fear.

“There are *things* there,” one of them testified, “moving around in the pools of blood. Little crimson wrigglers, ‘bout as big as your finger, but their legs was twice as long. Looked like red frogs, except when we got closer we saw that they had teeth, and they was ripping up the dead fish. Hardly any fish was left at all, and them that were had these frog things crawling all over them. Then Danel tried to pick up one of these frogs, and it snapped at him, right into his hand, and he screamed and all of a sudden the air was full of the damn things, jumping around like they was flying, biting people, tearing at you when they got hold. It was terrible. How are you going to fight a frog? Stab it? Shoot it? How?” He was shaking.

Moses sent another party down to the river, armed with sacks and poison and torches. They came back in total disarray, carrying two of their number. One man died that morning, his throat torn out by a frog. Another went a few hours later, from the fever that many of those bitten had developed.

By dusk, all the fish were gone. The frogs began to move up from the river, into the villages. The Altruists dug trenches and filled them with water and flame. The frogs leaped over the trenches. The Altruists fought with knives and clubs and fire, some even with the modern weapons they had taken from the city folk. Six more people were dead by dawn. Moses and his followers retreated behind closed doors.

“Our people are out in the open,” Jaime Kreen said fearfully. “The frogs will come into the camps and kill them.”

“No,” said Haviland Tuf. “If your Rej Laithor can keep her charges calm and quiet, they have nothing to fear. Scarnish bloodfrogs are carrion eaters chiefly. They attack living creatures larger than themselves only when attacked or frightened.”

Kreen looked incredulous, then slowly smiled. “And Moses hides in fear! That’s rich, Tuf.”

“Rich,” said Haviland Tuf. There was nothing in his tone to indicate either agreement or mockery. But Dax was in his arms, and Kreen noticed suddenly that the cat was still and stiff, his fur slowly bristling.

That night the pillar of fire came not to the man called Moses, but to the refugees from the City of Hope, huddled in fear in their ramshackle camp, watching the frogs prowl beyond the fences that kept them apart from the Altruists.

“Rej Laithor,” the pillar of fire said, “your enemies have imprisoned themselves behind barred doors. You are free—Go. Take your people in hand and lead them back to your arcology. Walk slowly, watch where you set your feet, make no sudden moves. Do these things without fail, and the frogs will leave you unharmed. Clean and repair your City of Hope, and ready my forty thousand standards.”

Rej Laithor, surrounded by her junior administrators, stared up at the writhing flames. “Moses will attack us again as soon as you depart, Tuf,” she shouted. “Finish him. Unleash your other plagues.”

The pillar of fire said nothing. It turned and crackled for long minutes, and then it was gone entirely.

Wearily, the people of the City of Hope began to file out of camp, being very careful where they set their feet.

“The generators are working again,” Jaime Kreen reported two weeks later. “The City will soon function as before. But that is only half our bargain, Tuf. Moses and his followers still sulk in their villages. The bloodfrogs are nearly all dead now, for want of any carrion to eat except each other. And the river shows signs of clearing. When are you going to unleash the lice on them? And the flies? They deserve to scratch, Tuf.”

“Take the *Griffin*,” Haviland Tuf ordered. “Bring Moses to me, willing or no. Do this and one hundred standards of your City’s funds will be yours.”

Jaime Kreen looked astonished. “Moses? *Why*? Moses is our enemy. If you think you can turn around and make a deal with him now, sell us back into slavery for a better price...”

“Contain your suspicions,” Tuf replied. He stroked Dax. “Always people think the worst of us, Dax. Perhaps it is our sad fate to be ever suspect.” He addressed Kreen again. “I wish only a conference with Moses. Do as I have told you.”

“I am not in your debt any more, Tuf,” Kreen said sharply. “I assist you only as a patriotic Charitan. Tell me your motives, and I may do your bidding. Otherwise, do it yourself. I refuse.” He crossed his arms.

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “are you aware of how many meals and mugs of ale you have taken aboard the *Ark* since our balance was adjudged even? Are you aware of the quantity of my air you have breathed, and how many times you have used my sanitary facilities? I am abundantly aware of all of these things. Are you further aware that the usual charge for a voyage from K’theddion to Charity is some three hundred seventy-nine standards? All of these amounts could easily be added to your account. I have foregone this, to my great financial disadvantage, only because you have afforded me certain minor conveniences. I can see now that my forbearance was an error. I will rectify the mistakes in my bookkeeping.”

“Don’t bluff me, Tuf,” Kreen said stubbornly. “We’re even, and we’re a long way from Kytheddene Prison, and any claims you have to me under their absurd laws are null and void on Charity.”

“The laws of K’theddon and Charity are alike to me, except when they serve my purposes,” Haviland Tuf said very quietly. “I am my own law, Jaime Kreen. And if I should determine to make you my slave until the last days of your life, neither Rej Laithor nor Moses nor your own bravado could help you in the least.” Tuf delivered the words as always, evenly, calmly, in his bass voice, with hardly a hint of emotion in his flat inflection.

But Jaime Kreen suddenly felt very cold. And he did as he was bid.

Moses was a tall, strong man, but Tuf had told Jaime Kreen of his nightly reflections, and it was an easy enough thing to wait one evening in the hills beyond the village, in the brush with three others, and overcome Moses as he passed. One of Kreen’s assistants suggested killing the Altruistic leader then and there, but Kreen forbade it. They carried the unconscious Moses back to the waiting *Griffin*, where Kreen dismissed the others.

Shortly after, Kreen delivered Moses to Haviland Tuf, and turned to take his leave.

“Stay,” Tuf said. They were in a room that Kreen had never seen before, a vast echoing chamber where the walls and ceiling were of the purest white. Tuf was seated in the center of the chamber, at a horseshoe-shaped instrument panel. Dax sat atop the console, looking quite alert.

Moses was still groggy. “Where am I?” he demanded.

“You are aboard the seedship *Ark*, the last functioning biowar ship of the Ecological Engineering Corps. I am Haviland Tuf.”

“Your voice,” Moses said.

“I am the Lord God,” Haviland Tuf said.

“Yes,” Moses said. He stood up suddenly. Jaime Kreen, standing behind him, grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him roughly back into his seat. Moses protested, but did not try to rise again. “You were the one who brought the plagues, the voice from the pillar of fire, the devil who impersonated God.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. “Yet you misunderstand. You are the impersonator in this company, Moses. You sought to impersonate a prophet, to pretend to vast supernatural powers you do not have. You employed tricks, and waged a primitive form of ecological warfare. I, in contrast, am no pretender. I am the Lord God.”

Moses spat. “You are a man with a starship, and a host of machines. You played the plague game well. But two plagues do not make a man a god.”

“Two,” said Haviland Tuf. “Do you doubt the other eight?” His large hands moved over the instruments before him, the room darkened, the dome ran with light, and it seemed they were out in space, looking down on Charity. Then Haviland Tuf did something else to his instruments. The holograms shifted and they were moving, sinking, soaring, until the blurs resolved themselves. They floated above the settlements of the Holy Altruists, in the Hills of Honest Labor. “Watch,” commanded Haviland Tuf. “This is a computer simulation. These things were not, yet could have been. I am confident that you will find this enlightening.”

In the domed room, all about them, they saw the villages, and shadow-faced people moving among them, shoveling the carcasses of dead frogs into pits for burning. They saw within the cabins, too, where weaker people burned with fevers. “It is after the second plague,” Haviland Tuf announced, “even as now. The bloodfrogs have spent themselves.” His hands moved. “Lice,” he said.



The lice came. The dust itself seemed to burst with them, and suddenly they were everywhere. All the shadow-folk were scratching, and Jaime Kreen (who had scratched a good bit himself before departing for K'theddion) chuckled. Then he stopped chuckling. The lice seemed more than lice. The people broke out in a scarlet rash, and many of them took to bed, screaming of the itches, the horrible itches. Some scratched themselves so badly that they drew blood, scratched deep gouges in their skin, and tore their fingernails loose in their fury.

“Flies,” said Haviland Tuf. And the flies swarmed, flies of all kinds—the swollen stinging flies of Dam Tullian, the flies of Old Earth with their ancient diseases, the black and grey fleshflies of Gulliver, the sluggish flies of Nightmare who plant their eggs in living tissue. They settled on the villages and the Hills of Honest Labor in immense clouds, and covered them as if they were but a particularly large dung heap, and left them black and thick and stinking.

“The murrain,” said Haviland Tuf. They watched the herds die by the thousands. The gross immobile meatbeasts in the cellar of the City of Hope turned to rot and corruption. Burning could not check the pestilence. Soon, no meat was left, and those people who still lived grew gaunt and bitter-looking.

Haviland Tuf said other words—anthrax, Ryerson’s Disease, roserot, calierosy.

“Boils,” said Haviland Tuf, and again disease raged, but this time among the people and not their animals. They sweated and screamed as the boils covered their faces and hands and chests, each swelling until it burst, so the blood and the pus ran free. Then new boils grew as fast as the old ones vanished. Men and women staggered through the streets of the simple villages, blind and pockmarked, bodies crusted and covered with open sores, the perspiration running like oil over their skin. When they fell in the dirt, among the dead flies and lice and cattle, they rotted there, with none to bury them.

“Hail,” said Haviland Tuf, and it came, a great thundering pounding hail, the stones fists of ice, for a day and a night and a day and a night and a day and a night, and on and on, and fire mingled with the hail. Those who went outside died, the hailstones smashing them to the ground. And many of those who stayed within died, too. When the hail had stopped at last, there was hardly a cabin left standing.

“Locusts,” said Haviland Tuf. They covered the earth and the sky, clouds of them, worse than the flies. They landed everywhere, crawled over the living and the dead both, and ate what little food was left, until there was nothing at all.

“Darkness,” said Haviland Tuf. Darkness moved. It was a gas, a thick black gas, drifting with the wind. It was a liquid, flowing, moving like a sensuous stream of jet, gleaming, shining. It was silence. It was night. It was alive. Where it moved, no life remained behind it; the weeds and grasses were dry and dead, and the soil itself looked raw and ravaged and bruised. It was a cloud larger than the villages, or the Hills of Honest Labor, or the locusts. It settled over all of them, and nothing moved for a day or a night, and then the living darkness rolled on, and behind it was only dust, and dry decay.

Haviland Tuf touched his instruments, and the visions were gone from them. The lights came on again. The walls were very white.

“The tenth plague,” Moses said slowly, in a voice that no longer seemed rich or large. “The death of the firstborn.”

“I admit to my own failures,” said Haviland Tuf. “I cannot make such fine distinctions. I would point out, however, that all of the firstborn *are* dead, in these scenes that never were, even as the lastborn. I am a gross and clumsy god in that; in my awkwardness, I must need kill all.”

Moses was pale and broken, but within him was still a strong and stubborn man. “You are only human,” he whispered.

“Human,” said Haviland Tuf, in his voice without emotion. His huge pale hand was stroking Dax. “I was born human, and lived as such for long years, Moses. Yet then I found the *Ark*, and I have ceased to be a man. The powers I may wield are vaster than those of many gods that humans have worshipped. There is not a man I meet but I could take his life. There is not a world I pause on that I could not waste utterly, or remake as I choose. I am the Lord God, or as much of one as either of you is ever likely to encounter.”

“It is a great fortune for you that I am kind and benevolent and merciful, and too frequently bored. You are counters to me, nothing more—pieces and players in a game with which I have whiled away a few weeks. It seemed an interesting game, this plague business, and so it was for a time. Yet it quickly grew dull. Even after two plagues, it was clear that I had no meaningful opposition, that you, Moses, were incapable of anything that might surprise me. My objectives were accomplished—I had taken back the people of the City of Hope, and the rest would be meaningless ritual. I have elected instead to end it.

“Go, Moses, and plague no more. I am through with you.

“And you, Jaime Kreen, see that your Charitans take no further vengeance. You shall have victories enough. In a generation, his culture and his religion and his way of life will all be dead.

“Remember who I am, and remember that Dax can look into your thoughts. If the *Ark* should pass this way again, and find that you have disobeyed me, it will be as I have shown you. The plagues will sweep your little world until nothing lives upon it.”

Jaime Kreen shuttled Moses back to his people in the *Griffin*, then—on Tuf’s instructions—collected forty thousand standards from Rej Laithor and took it back up to the *Ark*. Haviland Tuf met him on the shuttle deck, with Dax in his arms, and took his payment with only a stately blink.

Jaime Kreen was thoughtful. “You are bluffing, Tuf,” he said. “You’re no god. Those were only simulations you showed us. You could never have actually done all that. But you can program a computer to show anything.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“*Indeed*,” said Jaime Kreen, warming now. “You frightened Moses out of his head, but you didn’t deceive me for a minute with your picture show. The hail gave you away. Bacteria, disease, pests—all that is within the sphere of ecological warfare. Maybe even that darkness creature, although I think you made that up. But *hail* is a meteorological phenomenon, it has nothing to do with biology or ecology. You slipped up, Tuf. But it was a nice try, and it should keep Moses humble.”

“Humble,” agreed Haviland Tuf. “I should have hesitated and planned more thoroughly before attempting to mislead a man of your perception and insight, no doubt. At every turn you frustrate my small schemes.”

Jaime Kreen chuckled. “I have a hundred standards due me,” he said, “for bringing Moses up and back.”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I would never forget such a debt. It is not necessary to chivvy me.” He opened the box that Kreen had brought up from Charity, and paid out one hundred standards. “You will find a convenient personal airlock in section nine, just beyond the doors marked Climate Control.”

Jaime Kreen frowned. “Airlock? What do you mean?”

“Sir,” said Haviland Tuf, “I would think it obvious. I mean airlock, a device by which you may depart the *Ark* without my valuable atmosphere departing with you. Since you have no spacecraft, it would be foolish to use the large airlock here. A smaller personal lock, as I said, may be found in section nine.”

Kreen looked aghast. "Are you going to jettison me?"

"Not the best choice of words," said Haviland Tuf. "They sound so harsh. Yet I can hardly keep you aboard the *Ark*, and were you to depart in one of my shuttles, there would be no one to bring it back to me. I can hardly afford to sacrifice a valuable piece of equipment simply for your personal convenience."

Kreen frowned. "The solution to your dilemma is simple. We will both board the *Griffin*. You will take me down to Port Faith. Then you will return to your ship."

Haviland Tuf stroked Dax. "Interesting," he said. "Yet I do believe it might work. You must understand, of course, that such a trip would constitute a distinct annoyance for me. Surely I should receive something for my troubles."

Jaime Kreen stared into the still white face of Haviland Tuf for a minute, then sighed, and handed back the hundred standards.

# Tuf Voyaging: Manna From Heaven

The S'uthlamese armada was sweeping the outskirts of the solar system, moving through the velvet darkness of space with all the stately silent grace of a tiger on the prowl, on an interception course with the *Ark*.

Haviland Tuf sat before his master console, scanning the banks of telescreens and computer monitors with small, careful turns of his head. The fleet angling to meet him appeared more formidable with every passing moment. His instruments reported some fourteen capital ships and swarms of smaller fighters. Nine bulbous silver-white globes, bristling with unfamiliar weaponry, comprised the wings of the formation. Four long black dreadnaughts served as outriders on the flanks of the wedge, their dark hulls crackling with energy. The flagship in the center was a colossal saucer-shaped fort with a diameter Tuf's sensors measured as six kilometers from rim to rim. It was the largest spaceship that Haviland Tuf had seen since the day, more than ten years past, when he had first sighted the derelict *Ark*. Fighters swarmed around the saucer like angry stinging insects.

Tuf's long, pale, hairless face was still and unreadable, but in his lap, Dax made a small sound of disquiet as Tuf pressed his fingertips together.

A flashing light indicated an incoming communication.

Haviland Tuf blinked, reached out with calm deliberation, and took the call.

He had expected a face to materialize on the telescreen in front of him. He was disappointed. The caller's features were hidden by a faceplate of black plasteel, inset into the helmet of a mirror-finish warsuit. A stylized representation of the globe of S'uthlam ornamented the flanged crest upon his forehead. Behind the faceplate, wide-spectra sensors glowed red like two burning eyes. It reminded Haviland Tuf of an unpleasant man he had once known.

"It was unnecessary to dress formally on my account," Tuf said flatly. "Moreover, while the size of the honor guard you have sent to meet me tickles my vanity somewhat, a much smaller and less prepossessing squadron would have been more than sufficient. The present formation is so large and formidable as to give one pause. A man of a less trusting nature than myself might be tempted to misconstrue its purpose and suspect some intent to intimidate."

"This is Wald Ober, commander of the Planetary Defense Flotilla of S'uthlam, Wing Seven," the grim visage on the telescreen announced in a deep, distorted voice.

"Wing Seven," Tuf repeated. "Indeed. This suggests the possibility of at least six other similarly fearsome squadrons. It would seem that S'uthlamese planetary defenses have been augmented somewhat since my last call."

Wald Ober wasn't interested. "Surrender at once, or be destroyed," he said bluntly.

Tuf blinked. "I fear some grievous misunderstanding."

"A state of war exists between the Cybernetic Republic of S'uthlam and the so-called alliance of Vandeen, Jazbo, Henry's World, Skrymir, Roggandor, and the Azure Triune. You have entered a restricted zone. Surrender or be destroyed."

"You misapprehend me, sir," Tuf said. "I am a neutral in this unfortunate confrontation, of which I was unaware until this moment. I am part of no faction, cabal, or alliance, and represent only myself, an ecological engineer

with the most benign of motives. Please do not take alarm at the size of my ship. Surely in the small space of five standard years the esteemed spinnerets and cybertechs of the Port of S'uthlam cannot entirely have forgotten my previous visits to your most interesting world. I am Haviland—”

“We know who you are, Tuf,” said Wald Ober. “We recognized the *Ark* as soon as you shifted out of drive. The alliance doesn't have any dreadnaughts thirty kilometers long, thank life. I have specific orders from the High Council to watch for your appearance.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Why do you think the wing is closing on you?” Ober said.

“As a gesture of affectionate welcome, I had hoped,” Tuf said. “As a friendly escort bearing kudos, salutations, and gift baskets of plump, fresh, spiced mushrooms. I see that this assumption was unfounded.”

“This is your third and final warning, Tuf. We'll be in range in less than four standard minutes. Surrender now or be destroyed.”

“Sir,” said Tuf, “before you make a grievous error, please consult with your superiors. I am certain there has been a lamentable communications error.”

“You have been tried in absentia and found guilty of being a criminal, a heretic, and an enemy of the people of S'uthlam.”

“I have been grossly misperceived,” Tuf protested.

“You escaped the flotilla ten years ago, Tuf. Don't think to do it again. S'uthlamese technology does not stand still. Our new weaponry will shred those obsolete defensive shields of yours, I promise you that. Our top historians have researched that ponderous EEC derelict of yours. I supervised the simulations myself. Your welcome is all prepared.”

“I have no wish to seem ungracious, but it was unnecessary to go to such lengths,” said Tuf. He glanced at the banks of telescreens that lined the consoles along both sides of the long, narrow room, and studied the phalanx of S'uthlamese warships rapidly closing upon the *Ark*. “If this unprovoked hostility has its root in my outstanding debt to the Port of S'uthlam, rest assured that I am prepared to render payment in full immediately.”

“Two minutes,” said Wald Ober.

“Furthermore, if S'uthlam is in need of additional ecological engineering, I find myself suddenly inclined to offer you my services at a much reduced price.”

“We've had enough of your solutions. One minute.”

“It would seem I am left with but a single viable option,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Then you surrender?” the commander said suspiciously.

“I think not,” said Haviland Tuf. He reached out, brushed long fingers across a series of holographic keys, and raised the *Ark*'s ancient defensive screens.

Wald Ober's face was hidden, but he managed to get a sneer into his voice. “Fourth generation imperial screens, triple redundancy, frequency overlapping, all shield phasing coordinated by your ship's computers. Duralloy plate armor on your hull. I told you we'd done our research.”

“Your hunger for knowledge is to be commended,” Tuf said.

“The next sarcasm you mouth may be your last, trader, so you had better take care to make it a good one. The point is, we know exactly what you’ve got, and we know to the fourteenth decimal how much damage an EEC seedship’s defenses can absorb. We’re prepared to give you more than you can handle.” He turned his head. “*Prepare to commence fire,*” he snapped at unseen subordinates. When the dark helmeted face swiveled back toward Tuf, Ober added, “We want the *Ark* and you can’t stop us from taking it. Thirty seconds.”

“I beg to differ,” said Tuf calmly.

“They’ll fire at my command,” Ober said. “If you insist, I’ll count down the final seconds of your life. Twenty. Nineteen. Eighteen...”

“Seldom have I heard such vigorous counting,” said Tuf. “Please do not lose track on account of my distressing news.”

“... Fourteen. Thirteen. Twelve.”

Tuf folded his hands atop his stomach.

“Eleven. Ten. Nine.” Ober looked uneasily to one side, then back at the screen.

“Nine,” announced Tuf. “A fine number. It is customarily followed by eight, thence seven.”

“Six,” Ober said. He hesitated. “Five.”

Tuf waited silently.

“Four. Three.” He stopped. “*What distressing news?*” he roared at the screen.

“Sir,” said Tuf, “if you must shout, you will only oblige me to adjust the volume on my communications equipment.” He raised a finger. “The distressing news is that the mere act of broaching the *Ark*’s defensive shields, as I have no doubt you can easily accomplish, will trigger a small thermonuclear device that I have previously secreted within the ship’s cell library, thereby instantaneously destroying the very cloning materials that make the *Ark* unique, invaluable, and widely coveted.”

There was a long silence. The glowing crimson sensors beneath the darkness of Wald Ober’s faceplate seemed to smoulder as they stared into the screen at Tuf’s blank features. “You’re bluffing,” the commander said at last.

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “You have found me out. How foolish to think I might hoodwink a man of your perspicacity with such a blatant and juvenile deception. And now I fear you will fire upon me, rend my poor obsolete defenses, and demonstrate my lie for good and all. Permit me only a moment to make my farewells to my cats.” He folded his hands neatly atop his great paunch, and waited for the commander to reply. The S’uthlamese flotilla, his instruments avowed, was now well within range.

“I’ll do just that, you damned abortion!” Wald Ober swore.

“I wait with sullen resignation,” said Tuf, unmoving.

“You have twenty seconds,” Ober said.

“I fear my news has confused you. The count previously stood at three. Nonetheless, I shall take shameless advantage of your error and savor each instant remaining to me.”

They stared at each other, face to face and screen to screen, for the longest time. Snug in Tuf’s lap, Dax began to purr. Haviland Tuf reached down to stroke the cat’s long black fur. Dax purred even more loudly and began kneading Tuf’s knee with his claws.

“Oh, abort it to hell and gone,” said Wald Ober. He pointed at the screen. “You may have us checked for the moment, but I warn you, Tuf, don’t even *think* about trying to get away. Dead or fled, your cell library would be equally lost to us. And given a choice I’d sooner you be dead.”

“I comprehend your position,” said Haviland Tuf, “though I, of course, would sooner be fled. Yet I do have a debt to pay to the Port of S’uthlam, and therefore could not honorably depart as you fear, so please accept my assurances that you will have every opportunity to ponder my visage, and I your fearsome mask, while we sit locked in this irksome impasse.”

Wald Ober never got the chance to reply. His battle mask vanished abruptly from the screen, and was replaced by a woman’s homely features—a broad crooked mouth, a nose that had been broken more than once, hard leathery skin with the deep blue-black cast that comes from lots of exposure to hard radiation and decades of anti-carcinoma pills, pale bright eyes in a nest of squint-folds, all of it surrounded by a lavish halo of coarse gray hair. “So much for getting tough,” she said. “You win, Tuf. Ober, you’re now an honor guard. Form up and escort him into the web, damn it.”

“How thoughtful,” said Haviland Tuf. “I am pleased to inform you that I am now prepared to tender the final payment due the Port of S’uthlam for the refitting of the *Ark*.”

“I hope you brought some catfood, too,” Tolly Mune said drily. “That so-called ‘five-year supply’ you left me ran out almost two years ago.” She signed. “I don’t suppose you’d care to retire and sell us the *Ark*.”

“Indeed not,” said Tuf.

“I didn’t think so. All right, Tuf, break out the beer, I’m coming to talk to you as soon as you reach the web.”

“While I mean no disrespect, I must confess that I am not at the moment in the best frame of mind for entertaining such a distinguished guest as yourself. Commander Ober has recently informed me that I have been adjudged a criminal and heretic, a curious conception, as I am neither a citizen of S’uthlam nor an adherent to its dominant religion, but no less disquieting for all that. I am agog with fear and worry.”

“Oh, that,” she said. “Just an empty formality.”

“Indeed,” Tuf said.

“Puling hell, Tuf, if we’re going to steal your ship we need a good legal excuse, don’t we? We’re a goddamned government. We’re *allowed* to steal the things we want as long as we put a shiny legal gloss over it.”

“Seldom in my voyaging have I encountered any political functionary as frank as yourself, it must be admitted. The experience is refreshing. Still, as invigorated as I am, what assurance do I have that you will not continue your efforts to seize the *Ark* once aboard?”

“Who, me?” said Tolly Mune. “Now how could I do a thing like that? Don’t worry, I’ll come alone.” She smiled. “Well, almost alone. You’d have no objections if I brought a cat, would you?”

“Certainly not,” said Tuf. “I am pleased to learn that the felines I left in your custody have thrived in my absence. I shall eagerly anticipate your arrival, Portmaster Mune.”

“That’s First Councillor Mune to you, Tuf,” she said, gruffly, before she wiped the screen.

No one had ever alleged that Haviland Tuf was overly rash; he took up a position twelve kilometers beyond the end of one of the great docking spurs of the orbital community known as the Port of S’uthlam, and he kept his shields up continuously as he waited. Tolly Mune rode out to meet him in the small starship Tuf had given her five years before, on the occasion of his previous visit to S’uthlam.

Tuf opened the shields to let her through, and cracked the great dome on the landing deck so she might set down. *Ark*’s instrumentation indicated her ship was full of lifeforms, only one of which was human; the rest displayed feline parameters. Tuf set out to meet her, driving a three-wheeled cart with balloon tires, and wearing a deep-green mock-velvet suit belted about his ample middle. On his head was a battered green duckbilled cap decorated with the golden theta of the Ecological Engineering Corps. Dax rode with him, an indolent sprawl of black fur draped across Tuf’s broad knees.

When the airlock opened, Tuf drove with all deliberate speed through the scrapyards of battered spacecraft that he had somehow accumulated over the years, directly to where Tolly Mune, former Portmaster of S’uthlam, was thumping down the ramp of her ship.

A cat walked at her side.

Dax was on his feet in an instant, his dark fur bristling as if his huge, flurry tail had just been plugged into an electric socket. His customary lethargy was suddenly gone; he leapt from Tuf’s lap to the hood of the cart, drew back his ears, and hissed.

“Why, Dax,” Tolly Mune said, “is that any way to greet a goddamned relative?” She grinned, and knelt to pet the huge animal by her side.

“I had expected either Ingratitude or Doubt,” said Haviland Tuf.

“Oh, they’re fine,” she said. “And so are all their goddamned offspring. Several generations’ worth. I should have figured it when you gave me a pair. A fertile male and female. I’ve got...” she frowned, and counted quickly on her fingers, once through and then again. “... let’s see, sixteen, I think. Yes. And two pregnant.” She jerked a thumb at the starship behind her. “My ship has turned into one big cat-house. Most of them don’t care anymore for gravity than I do. Born and raised in zero gee. I’ll never understand how they can be so graceful one moment and so hilariously clumsy the next.”

“The feline heritage is rife with contradiction,” said Tuf.

“This is Blackjack.” She picked him up in her arms and rose to her feet. “Damn, he’s *heavy*. You never realize that in zero gee.”

Dax stared at the other feline, and hissed.

Blackjack, cradled against the chest of Tolly Mune’s old, smelly skinthins, looked down at the huge black tom with disinterested haughtiness.

Haviland Tuf stood two-and-a-half meters tall, with bulk to match, and Dax was just as large, compared to other cats, as Tuf was, compared to other men.



Blackjack was larger.

His hair was long and silky, smoky gray on top, with a lighter silver undercoat. His eyes were silver-gray as well, vast deep pools, serene and somehow eerie. He was the most incredibly beautiful animal ever to dwell in the expanding universe, and he knew it. His manner was that of a princeling born to the royal purple.

Tolly Mune slid awkwardly into the seat beside Tuf. “He’s telepathic, too,” she said cheerfully, “just like yours.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf. Dax was stiff and angry in his lap. He hissed again.

“Jack here was the way I saved the other cats,” Tolly Mune said. Her homely face took on a look of reproach. “You said you were leaving me five years of catfood.”

“For two cats, madam,” said Tuf. “Obviously, sixteen animals consume more than Doubt and Ingratitude alone.” Dax edged closer, bared his teeth, bristled.

“I had problems when the stuff ran out. Given our food shortfalls, I had to justify wasting calories on vermin.”

“Perhaps you might have considered steps to limit your feline reproduction,” Tuf said. “Such a strategy would undoubtedly have yielded results. Thus your home could have served as an educational and sobering illustration of S’uthlamese problems, in microcosm as it were, and the solutions thereof.”

“Sterilization?” Tolly Mune said. “That’s anti-life, Tuf. Out. I had a better idea. I described Dax to certain friends—biotechs, cybertechns, you know—and they made me a familiar of my own, worked up from cells taken from Ingratitude.”

“How appropriate,” said Tuf.

She smiled. “Blackjack’s almost two years old. He’s been so useful I’ve been given a food allowance for the others. He’s helped my political career no end, too.”

“I have no doubt,” said Tuf. “I note that he does not appear discomfited by gravity.”

“Not Blackjack. These days they need me downstairs a hell of a lot more than I’d like, and Jack goes with me. Everywhere.”

Dax hissed again, and made a low nimbly threatening sound. He darted toward Blackjack, then drew back suddenly and spit disdain at the larger cat.

“You better call him off, Tuf,” Tolly Mune said.

“Felines sometimes demonstrate a biological compulsion to battle in order to establish deference rankings,” Tuf said. “This is particularly true of tomcats. Dax, undoubtedly aided and abetted by his enhanced psionic capabilities, long ago established his supremacy over Chaos and my other cats. Undoubtedly he now feels his position threatened. It is not a matter for serious concern, First Councillor Mune.”

“It is for Dax,” she said, as the black tom crept closer. Blackjack, in her lap, looked up at his rival with vast boredom.

“I fail to grasp your point,” said Tuf.

“Blackjack has those enhanced psionic capabilities, too,” said Tolly Mune. “Plus a few other, ah, advantages. Implanted duralloy claws, sharp as goddamned razors, concealed in special paw sheaths. A subcutaneous net of

nonallogenic plasteel mesh that makes him awfully tough to hurt. Reflexes that have been genetically accelerated to make him twice as quick and dextrous as a normal cat. A very high pain threshold. I don't want to be puling crass about it or anything, but if he gets jumped, Blackjack will slice Dax into little bloody hairballs."

Haviland Tuf blinked, and shoved the steering stick over toward Tolly Mune. "Perhaps it might be best if you drove." He reached out, picked up his angry black tomcat by the ruff of the neck, and deposited him, screeching and spitting, in his lap, where he held him very still indeed. "Proceed in that direction," he said, pointing with a long pale finger.

"It appears," said Haviland Tuf, steepling his fingers as he regarded her from the depths of a huge wingback armchair, "that circumstances have altered somewhat since I last came to call upon S'uthlam."

Tolly Mune studied him carefully. His paunch was larger than it had been, and his long face was just as miserly of expression, but without Dax in his lap, Haviland Tuf looked almost naked. Tuf had shut the big black tom up on a lower deck to keep him away from Blackjack. Since the ancient seedship was thirty kilometers long and several of Tuf's other cats roamed the deck in question, Dax would scarcely lack for space or for companionship, but must be baffled and distraught nonetheless. The psionic tomcat had been Tuf's constant and inseparable companion for years, had even ridden in Tuf's ample pockets as a kitten. Tolly Mune felt a little sad about it.

But not *too* sad. Dax had been Tuf's hole card, and she'd trumped him. She smiled and ran her fingers through Blackjack's thick smoke-and-silver fur, eliciting another thunderous purr. "The more things change the more they stay the same," she said in answer to Tuf's comment.

"This is one of those venerable sayings that collapses upon close logical examination," Tuf said, "being obviously self-contradictory on the face of it. If indeed things have changed upon S'uthlam, they obviously cannot have remained the same as well. To myself, coming as I have from a great distance, it is the changes that seem most notable. To wit, this war, and your own elevation to First Councillor, a considerable and unanticipated promotion."

"And a puling awful job," Tolly Mune said with a grimace. "I'd go back to being Portmaster in a blink, if I could."

"Your job satisfaction is not the subject under discussion," Tuf said. He continued. "It must also be noted that my welcome to S'uthlam was distinctly less cordial than on the occasion of my previous visit, much to my chagrin, and notwithstanding the fact that I have twice placed myself squarely between S'uthlam and mass famine, plague, cannibalism, pestilence, social collapse, and other unpleasant and inconvenient events. Moreover, even the most venomously rude races frequently observe a certain rudimentary etiquette toward those who are bringing them eleven million standards, which you recall is the amount of principal remaining on my debt to the Port of S'uthlam. Ergo, I had every reason to expect a welcome of a somewhat different nature."

"You were wrong," she said.

"Indeed," Tuf said. "Now that I have learned that you occupy the highest political office on S'uthlam, rather than a menial position upon a penal farm, I am frankly more mystified than ever as to why the Planetary Defense Flotilla felt it necessary to greet me with fierce bombastic threats, dour warnings, and exclamations of hostility."

Tolly Mune scratched at Blackjack's ear. "My orders, Tuf."

Tuf folded his hands atop his stomach. "I await your explanation."

"The more things change—" she began.

"Having already been pummeled with this cliché, I believe I grasp the small irony involved in it by now, so there is no need for you to repeat it over and over endlessly, First Councillor Mune. If you would proceed to the essence of the matter I would be deeply appreciative. "

She sighed. “You know our situation.”

“The broad outlines, certainly,” Tuf admitted. “S’uthlam suffers from an excess of humanity, and a paucity of food. Twice I have performed formidable feats of ecological engineering in order to enable the S’uthlamese to forestall the grim specter of famine. The details of your food crisis vary from year to year but I trust that the essence of the situation remains as I have outlined it.”

“The latest projection is the worst yet.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “My recollection is that S’uthlam stood some one hundred nine standard years from mass planetary famine and societal collapse, assuming that my recommendations and suggestions were dutifully implemented.”

“They tried, damn it. They did try. The meatbeasts, the pods, the ororos, neptune’s shawl—everything’s in place. But the changeover was only partial. Too many powerful people were unwilling to give up the luxury foodstuffs they preferred, so there are still large tracts of agri-land devoted to raising herds of food animals, entire farms planted with neograss and omni-grain and nanowheat—that sort of thing. Meanwhile, the population curve has continued to rise, faster than ever, and the puling Church of Life Evolving preaches the sanctity of life and the golden role of reproduction in humanity’s evolution to transcendence and godhood.”

“What is the current estimate?” Tuf asked bluntly.

“Twelve years,” said Tolly Mune.

Tuf raised a finger. “To dramatize your plight, perhaps you ought to assign Commander Wald Ober to count down the remaining time over the vidnets. Such a demonstration would have a certain grim urgency that might inspire the S’uthlamese to mend their ways.”

Tolly Mune winced. “Spare me your levity, Tuf. I’m First Councillor now, goddamn it, and I’m staring right into the pimpled ugly face of catastrophe. The war and the food shortages are only part of it. You can’t imagine the problems I’m facing.”

“Perhaps not the fine detail,” said Tuf, “yet the broad outlines are readily discerned. I make no claim to omniscience, but any reasonably intelligent person could observe certain facts and from them draw certain inferences. Perhaps these deductions thus arrived at are wrong. Without Dax, I cannot ascertain the truth of that. Yet somehow I think not.”

“What puling facts? What inferences?”

“Firstly,” said Tuf, “S’uthlam is at war with Vandeen and its allies. Ergo, I can infer that the technocratic faction that once dominated S’uthlamese politics has yielded up power to their rivals, the expansionists.”

“Not quite,” said Tolly Mune, “but you’ve got the right puling idea. The expansionists have gained seats in every election since you left, but we’ve kept them out of power with a series of coalition governments. The allies made it clear years ago that an expansionist government meant war. Hell of it is, we still don’t have an expansionist government, but we got the damned war anyway.” She shook her head. “In the last five years we’ve had nine First Councillors. I’m the latest, probably not the last.”

“The grimness of your current projections suggests that this war has not yet actually touched your populace,” Tuf said.

“Thank life, no,” said Tolly Mune. “We were ready when the allied war fleet came calling. New ships, new weapons systems, everything built in secret. When the allies saw what was waiting for them, they backed off without firing a blast. But they’ll be back, damn it. It’s only a matter of time. We’ve got reports that they’re preparing for a major strike.”

“I might also infer,” said Tuf, “from your general attitude and sense of desperation, that conditions upon S’uthlam itself are already deteriorating rapidly.”

“How the hell do you know that?”

“It is obvious,” said Tuf. “Your projection may indeed indicate mass famine and collapse to be some twelve standard years in the future, but this is hardly to say that S’uthlamese life will remain pleasant and tranquil until that moment, whereupon a bell will ring loudly and your world will fall to pieces. Such an idea is ludicrous. As you are now so close to the brink, it is only to be expected that many of the woes symptomatic of a disintegrating culture will already be upon you.”

“Things are—puling hell, where do I begin?”

“The beginning is frequently a good place,” said Tuf.

“They’re my people, Tuf. That’s my world turning down there. It’s a good world. But lately—if I didn’t know better, I’d think insanity was contagious. Crime is up some two hundred percent since your last call. Murder is up five hundred percent, suicide more than two thousand percent. Service breakdowns become more common daily—blackouts, systems failure, random strikes, vandalism. We’ve had reports of cannibalism deep in the undercities—not isolated instances, but entire puling cannibal gangs. Secret societies of all kinds, in fact. One group seized a food factory, held it for two weeks, and fought a pitched battle with world police.

“Another bunch of crazies have taken to kidnapping pregnant women and...” Tolly Mune scowled; Blackjack hissed. “This is hard to talk about. A woman with child has always been something special to the S’uthlamese, but these... I can hardly even call them people, Tuf. These *creatures* have cultivated a taste for—”

Haviland Tuf raised a hand, palm outward. “Say no more,” he said. “I have grasped the inference. Continue.”

“Lots of solitary maniacs, too,” she said. “Someone dumped highly toxic waste into a food factory holding tank eighteen months ago. More than twelve hundred fatalities. Mass culture—S’uthlam has always been tolerant, but lately there’s a hell of a lot more to be tolerant *of*, if you catch my float. There’s this growing obsession with disfigurement, death, violence. We’ve had massive resistance to our attempts to re-engineer the ecosystem according to your recommendations. Meatbeasts have been poisoned, blown up, and fields of pods set afire. Organized thrill gangs hunt the goddamned wind-riders with harpoons and high-altitude gliders. It makes no goddamned sense. The religious consensus—all kinds of weird cults have been emerging. And the war! Life only knows how many will die, but it’s as popular as—hell, I don’t know, it’s *more* popular than sex, I think.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “I am unsurprised. I take it the imminence of disaster remains a closely guarded secret of the S’uthlamese High Council, as in years past.”

“Unfortunately, no,” Tolly Mune said. “One of the minority councillors decided she couldn’t hold her bladder, so she called in the puling peeps and pissed the news out all over the vidnets. I think she wanted to win a few million more votes. The hell of it is, it worked. It also kicked off another goddamned scandal and forced yet another First Councillor out of office. By then there was no place to look for a new human sacrifice but upstairs. Guess who got grabbed? Our favorite vidshow heroine, controversial bureaucrat, and Ma Spider, that’s who.”

“You are obviously referring to yourself,” said Tuf.

“By then nobody hated me much anymore. I had a certain reputation for efficiency, the remnants of a popular romantic image, and I was minimally acceptable to most of the big council factions. That was three months ago. So far it’s been one hell of a term of office.” Her smile was grim. “The Vandeeni listen to our newsfeeds, too. Simultaneous with my goddamned promotion, they decided S’uthlam was, I quote, a threat to the peace and stability of the sector, end quote, and got together their goddamned allies to try and decide what to do about us. The bunch of them finally gave us an ultimatum: enforce immediate rationing and compulsory birth control, or the alliance would occupy S’uthlam and enforce it for us.”

“A viable solution, but not a tactful one,” Tuf commented. “Thus your present war. Yet all this fails to explain your attitude toward me. I have been able to offer your world succor twice before. Surely you did not feel I would be remiss in my professional duties on this third occasion.”

“I figured you’d do what you could.” She pointed a finger. “But on your own terms, Tuf. Hell, you’ve helped, yes, but always on your own terms, and all of your solutions have proved unfortunately impermanent.”

“I warned you repeatedly that my efforts were mere stopgaps,” Tuf replied.

“There are no calories in warnings, Tuf. I’m sorry, but we have no choice. This time we can’t allow you to clap a stick-on bandage over our hemorrhage and shunt off. The next time you came back to check on how we were faring, you wouldn’t find a puling world to come back to. We need the *Ark*, Tuf, and we need it permanently. We’re prepared to use it. Ten years ago you said that biotech and ecology were not our areas of expertise, and you were right. Then. But times change. We’re one of the most advanced worlds in human civilization, and for a decade we’ve been devoting most of our educational efforts to training ecologists and biotechs. My predecessors brought in top theorists from Avalon, Newholme, and a dozen other worlds. Brilliant people, geniuses. We even managed to lure some leading genetic wizards off Prometheus.” She stroked her cat and smiled. “They helped with Blackjack here. A lot.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf.

“We’re ready to use the *Ark*. No matter how capable you are, Tuf, you’re only one puling man. We want to keep your seedship permanently in S’uthlamese orbit, with a full-time staff of two hundred top scientists and genetic technicians, so we can deal with the food crisis *daily*. This ship and its cell library and all the lost data in its computers represents our last, best hope, you can see that. Believe me, Tuf, I didn’t give Ober orders to seize your ship without considering every other goddamned option I could think of. I knew you’d never sell, damn it. What choice did I have? We don’t want to cheat you. You would have been paid a fair price. I’d have insisted.”

“This assumes I remained alive after the seizure,” pointed out Tuf. “A doubtful proposition at best.”

“You’re alive now, and I’ll still buy the damned ship. You could stay aboard, work with our people. I’m prepared to offer you lifetime employment—name your own salary, anything you want. You want to keep that eleven million standards? It’s yours. You want us to rename the puling planet in your honor? Say the word, and we’ll do it.”

“Planet S’uthlam or Planet Tuf by any name would be as overcrowded,” Haviland Tuf replied. “Should I agree to this proposed purchase, undoubtedly it is your intent to use the *Ark* only in these efforts to increase your caloric productivity and thus feed your starving people.”

“Of course,” said Tolly Mune.

Tuf’s face was blank and serene. “I am pleased to learn that it has never occurred to you or to any of your associates on the High Council that the *Ark* might be employed in its original capacity as an instrument of biological warfare. Sadly, I have lost this refreshing innocence, and find myself prey to uncharitable and cynical visions of the *Ark* being used to wreak ecological havoc upon Vandeen, Skrymir, Jazbo, and the other allied

homeworlds, even to the point of genocide, thereby preparing those planets for mass colonization, which I seem to recall is the population policy advocated by your troublesome expansionist faction.”

“That’s quite a goddamned implication,” snapped Tolly Mune. “Life is sacred to the S’uthlamese, Tuf.”

“Indeed. Yet, poisonous cynic that I am, I cannot help but suspect that ultimately the S’uthlamese may decide that some lives are more sacred than others.”

“You know me, Tuf,” she said, her tone crisp and chilly. “I would never allow anything like that.”

“And if any such plan was enacted over your objections, I have no doubt that your letter of resignation would be quite sternly worded,” Tuf said flatly. “I find this insufficiently reassuring, and have a hunch, yes, a hunch, that the allies might share my sentiments on this point.”

Tolly Mune chucked Blackjack under the chin. The cat began to growl deep in his throat. Both of them stared at Tuf. “Tuf,” she said, “millions of lives are at stake, maybe *billions*. There are things I could show you that would curl your hair. If you had any puling hair, that is.”

“As I do not, this is obvious hyperbole,” said Tuf.

“If you’d consent to shuttle in to Spiderhome, we could take the elevators downstairs to the surface of S’uthlam—”

“I think not. It would seem to me to be conspicuously unwise to leave the *Ark* empty and undefended, as it were, in the light of the climate of belligerence and distrust that presently festers upon S’uthlam. Moreover, though you may think me arbitrary and overfastidious, with the passage of years I find I have lost whatever small degree of tolerance I once had for swarming crowds, cacophony, rude stares, unwelcome hands, watery beer, and minuscule portions of tasteless food. As I recall, these are the principal delights to be found upon the surface of S’uthlam.”

“I don’t want to threaten you, Tuf—”

“Nonetheless, you are about to.”

“You will not be allowed to depart the system, I’m afraid. Don’t try to hoodwink me like you did Ober. That business with the bomb is a goddamned fabrication and we both know it.”

“You have found me out,” Tuf said expressionlessly. Blackjack hissed at him.

Tolly Mune looked down at the big cat, startled. “It’s not?” she said in horror. “Oh, damn it to hell.” Tuf engaged the silver-gray feline in a silent staring contest. Neither of them blinked. “It doesn’t matter,” Tolly Mune said. “You’re here to stay, Tuf. Resign yourself to it. Our new ships *can* destroy you, and they will if you try to pull out.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “And for my part, I will destroy the cell library if you attempt to board the *Ark*. It appears we have arrived at a stalemate. Fortunately, it need not be of long duration. S’uthlam has never been far from my thoughts as I voyaged hither and yon across starry space, and during the periods when I was not professionally engaged, I have engaged myself in methodical research in order to devise a true, just, and permanent solution to your difficulties.”

Blackjack sat down and began to purr. “You have?” Tolly Mune said dubiously.

“Twice the S’uthlamese have looked to me for a miraculous salvation from the consequences of their own reproductive folly and the rigidity of their religious beliefs,” Tuf said. “Twice I have been called upon to multiply

the loaves and fishes. Yet it occurred to me recently, while engrossed in a study of that book which is the chief repository of the ancient myths from which that anecdote is drawn, that I was being asked to perform the wrong miracle. Mere multiplication is an inadequate reply to an ongoing geometric progression, and loaves and fishes, however plentiful and tasty, must in the final analysis be found insufficient to your needs.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” Tolly Mune demanded.

“This time,” Tuf said, “I offer you a lasting answer.”

“What?”

“Manna,” said Tuf.

“Manna,” said Tolly Mune.

“A truly miraculous foodstuff,” said Haviland Tuf. “The details need not concern you. I will reveal all at the proper time.”

The First Councillor and her cat looked at him suspiciously. “The proper time? And when will it be the proper puling time?”

“When my conditions have been met,” Tuf said.

“What conditions?”

“First,” said Tuf, “as the prospect of living out the rest of my life in orbit about S’uthlam is one I find unappealing, it must be agreed that I am free to go after my labors here are completed.”

“I can’t agree to that,” Tolly Mune said, “and if I did, the High Council would vote me out of office in a puling second.”

“Secondly,” Tuf continued, “this war must be terminated. I fear I will be unable to concentrate properly on my work when there is every likelihood of a major space battle breaking out around me at any moment. I am easily distracted by exploding starships, webs of laser fire, and the screams of dying men. Moreover, I see little point in exerting great efforts to make the S’uthlamese ecology balanced and functional once more when the allied fleets threaten to deposit plasma bombs all over my handiwork, and thereby undo my small achievements.”

“I’d end this war if I could,” Tolly Mune said. “It isn’t that damned easy, Tuf. I’m afraid what you ask is impossible.”

“If not a permanent peace, then perhaps at least a small cessation in hostilities,” Tuf said. “You might send an embassy to the allied forces and petition for a short armistice.”

“That might be possible,” Tolly Mune said tentatively. “But why?” Blackjack gave an uneasy meow. “You’re plotting something, damn it.”

“Your salvation,” Tuf admitted. “Pardon me if I deign to interfere with your diligent joint efforts to encourage mutation through radioactivity.”

“We’re defending ourselves! We didn’t want this war!”

“Excellent. In that case, a short delay will not unduly inconvenience you.”

“The allies will never buy it. Neither will the High Council.”

“Regrettable,” said Tuf. “Perhaps we ought to give S’uthlam some time to consider. In twelve years, the surviving S’uthlamese might have more flexible attitudes.”

Tolly Mune reached out and scratched Blackjack behind the ears. Blackjack stared at Tuf, and after a minute uttered a small, strange, peeping sound. When the First Councillor stood abruptly, the huge silver-gray cat leapt nimbly from her lap. “You win, Tuf,” she said. “Lead me to a comm set and I’ll set the damned thing up. You’re prepared to wait forever and I’m not. People are dying every moment we delay.” Her voice was hard, but inside, for the first time in months, Tolly Mune felt hope mingled with her unease. Maybe he *could* end the war and solve the crisis. Maybe there was really a chance. But she let no hint of that creep into her tone. She pointed. “But don’t think you’re going to get away with anything funny.”

“Alas,” said Haviland Tuf, “humor has never been my forte.”

“I’ve got Blackjack, remember. Dax is too freaked out and intimidated to do you any good, and Jack will let me know the instant you start thinking about treachery.”

“Always my best intentions are met with suspicion.”

“Blackjack and me, we’re your puling shadows, Tuf. I’m not leaving this ship until things are settled, and I’m going to look hard at everything you do.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf.

“Just keep a few damned things in mind,” Tolly Mune said. “I’m First Councillor now. Not Josen Rael. Not Gregor Blaxon. Me. Back when I was Portmaster, they liked to call me the Steel Widow. You might pass an hour or two pondering how and why I got that puling name.”

“I shall indeed,” said Tuf, rising. “Is there anything else you would like me to recall, madam?”

“Just one thing,” she said. “A scene from that *Tuf and Mune* vidshow.”

“I have striven diligently to put that unfortunate fiction out of my memory,” Tuf said. “Which particular of it would you force me to recall?”

“The scene where the cat rips the security man to shreds,” Tolly Mune said, with a small, sweet smile.

Blackjack rubbed up against her knee, turned his smoky gaze up at Tuf, and rumbled deep in his massive body.

It took almost ten days to arrange the armistice, and another three for the allied ambassadors to make their way to S’uthlam. Tolly Mune spent the time haunting the *Ark*, two steps and a hasty thought behind Tuf, questioning everything he did, peering over his shoulder when he labored at his console, riding by his side when he made the rounds of his cloning vats, helping him feed his cats (and keep a hostile Dax away from Blackjack). He attempted nothing overtly suspicious.

Dozens of calls came through for her daily. She set up an office in the communications room, so she would never be far from Tuf, and handled the problems that could not wait.

Hundreds of calls came through daily for Haviland Tuf. He instructed his computer to refuse all of them.



When the day came, the envoys emerged from their long, luxurious diplomatic shuttle and stood gazing about at the *Ark*'s cavernous landing deck and fleet of derelict starships. They were a colorful and diverse lot. The woman from Jazbo had waist long blue-black hair that shone with scented iridescent oils; her cheeks were covered with the intricate scars of rank. Skrymir sent a stocky man with a square red face and hair the color of mountain ice. His eyes were a crystalline blue that matched the color of his scaled metal shirt. The envoy from the Azure Triune moved within a haze of holographic projections, a dim, fractured, shifting shape that spoke in an echoey whisper. Roggandor's cyborg ambassador was as broad as he was tall, made in equal parts of stainless duralloy, dark plasteel, and mottled red-black flesh. A slight, delicate-looking woman in transparent pastel silks represented Henry's World; she had a boyish adolescent body and ageless scarlet eyes. The allied party was led by a large, plump, opulently dressed man from Vandeen. His skin, wrinkled by age, was the color of copper; his long hair fell past his shoulders in thin, delicate braids.

Haviland Tuf, driving a segmented vehicle that glided across the deck like a snake on wheels, stopped directly in front of the ambassadors

The Vandeeni stepped forward beaming, reached up and pinched his own full cheek very vigorously, and bowed. "I would offer my hand, but I recall your opinion of that custom," he said. "Do you remember me, fly?"

Haviland Tuf blinked. "I have some vague recollection of encountering you upon the train to the surface of S'uthlam some ten years ago," he said.

"Ratch Norren," the man said. "I'm not what you call a regular diplomat, but the Board of Coordinators figured they'd send somebody who'd met you, and knew the Suthies, too."

"That's an offensive term, Norren," Tolly Mune said bluntly.

"You're an offensive bunch," Ratch Norren replied.

"And dangerous," whispered the envoy from the Azure Triune, from the center of his holographic fog.

"You're the puling aggressors," Tolly Mune started.

"Defensive aggression," boomed the cyborg from Roggandor.

"We recall the last war," said the Jazbot. "This time we decline to wait until your damnable evolutionists burst forth and try to colonize our worlds again."

"We have no such plans," Tolly Mune said.

"*You* don't, spinneret," Ratch Norren said. "But look me in the optics here and tell me your expansionists don't have wet dreams about breeding all over Vandeen."

"And Skrymir."

"Roggandor wants no part of your cast-off human detritus."

"You will never take the Azure Triune."

"Who the hell would *want* the puling Azure Triune?" snapped Tolly Mune. Blackjack purred approval.

"This glimpse into the inner working of high interstellar diplomacy has been most elucidating," Haviland Tuf announced. "Nonetheless, I sense that more pressing business awaits. If the envoys would be so cooperative as to board my vehicle, we might proceed onward to our conference."

Still muttering among themselves, the allied ambassadors did as Tuf bid them. Fully loaded, the vehicle set out across the landing deck, weaving a path between the myriad abandoned starships. An airlock, round and dark as the mouth of a tunnel or the jaws of some insatiable beast, opened at their approach and swallowed them. They entered and stopped; the lock closed behind them, engulfing the party in darkness. Tuf ignored the whispered complaints. Around them came a screeching metallic noise; the floor began to descend. When they had dropped at least two decks, another door opened in front of them.

Tuf turned on his headlamps and they drove out into a pitch-black corridor.

They drove through a maze of dark, chilly corridors, past countless closed doors, following a dim indigo trace that flitted before them, a ghost embedded in the dusty floor. The only light was the beam from the train's headlamps, and the faint glow of the instrument panel in front of Tuf. At first the envoys bantered among themselves, but the black depths of the *Ark* were oppressive and claustrophobic, and one by one the members of the delegation fell silent. Blackjack began to knead Tolly Mune's knees rhythmically with his claws.

After a long time rolling through dust, darkness, and silence, the train approached a towering pair of double doors that hissed open ominously at their approach, and closed with a loud clang of finality behind them. Within, the air was moist and hot. Haviland Tuf stopped, and turned off the headlamps. Total darkness enveloped them.

"Where *are* we?" Tolly Mune demanded. Her voice rang off some distant ceiling, although the echo seemed strangely muffled. Though black as a pit, the room was obviously cavernous. Blackjack hissed uneasily, sniffed the air, and made a tiny, uncertain mewling sound.

She heard footsteps, and a small light flicked on two meters away. Tuf was bent over an instrument console, watching a monitor panel. He pressed one key in a luminescent keyboard, and turned. A padded wingback floater chair came whispering out of the warm darkness. Tuf climbed into it like a king ascending a throne, and touched a control on the arm. The chair lit up with a faint violet phosphorescence.

"Kindly follow," Tuf announced. The floater swiveled in the air and began to drift off.

"Puling hell," Tolly Mune muttered. She climbed out of her seat hastily, cradling Blackjack, and scrambled after Tuf's retreating throne. The allied ambassadors followed en masse, whining and complaining every step of the way. She could hear the cyborg's massive footsteps behind her. Tuf's floater was the only spot of light in an enveloping sea of darkness. As she rushed after him, she stepped on something.

The sudden feline yowl made her recoil, bumping into the cyborg's armored chest. Confused, Tolly Mune knelt and reached out a tentative hand, holding Blackjack awkwardly in the crook of her arm; her fingers brushed soft fur. The cat rubbed up against her furiously, purring loudly. She could barely make out its shape—a small shorthair, hardly more than a kitten. It rolled over so she could scratch its belly. The Jazbot almost stumbled over her as she knelt there. And then suddenly Blackjack had leaped free and was sniffing around the new cat. It returned the favor briefly, then whirled, and in a blink it had vanished into the darkness. Blackjack hesitated, then howled and bounded after it.

"Goddamn it," Tolly Mune shouted. "Goddamn it, Jack, get your puling ass back here!" Her voice echoed, but her cat did not return. The rest of the party was growing more distant. Tolly Mune swore and hurried to catch up.

An island of light appeared ahead of her. When she arrived, the others were settling into seats arrayed along one side of a long metal table. Haviland Tuf, in the thronelike floater, was on the other side of the table, his face expressionless, his white hands folded atop his stomach.

Dax was stalking back and forth across his shoulders, purring.

Tolly Mune stopped, glared, swore. “Damn you to hell,” she said to Tuf. She turned around. “*Blackjack!*” she screamed at the top of her lungs. The echoes seemed swaddled in thick cloth, curiously indistinct. “*Jack!*” Nothing.

“I hope we have not come all this way simply to listen to the First Councillor of S’uthlam practice animal calls,” the envoy from Skrymir said.

“Indeed not,” said Tuf. “First Councillor Mune, if you will kindly take your seat, we may proceed at once.”

She scowled, and sank down into the only vacant chair. “Where the hell is *Blackjack*?”

“I can hardly venture an opinion on that subject,” said Tuf flatly. “He is, after all, your cat.”

“He ran off after one of yours,” Tolly Mune snapped.

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “Interesting. At the moment it so happens that I have a young female who has recently gone into heat. Perhaps that explains his actions. I have no doubt that he remains quite safe, First Councillor.”

“I want him back for this puling conference!” she said.

“Alas,” said Tuf, “the *Ark* is a large ship and they might be sporting in any of a thousand places, and in any case, to interfere with their sexual congress would be unconscionably anti-life by S’uthlamese standards. I would hesitate to do such violence to your cultural mores. Moreover, you have stressed to me repeatedly that time is of the essence, as many human lives are at stake. Ergo, I think it best we proceed with all due haste.”

Tuf moved his hand slightly, touched a control. A section of the long table sank out of sight. A moment later, a plant rose from within, directly in front of Tolly Mune. “Behold,” said Tuf. “Manna.”

It grew from a low bedding pan, a tangle of pale green vines almost a meter high, a living gordian knot, tendrils weaving back and forth on themselves and edging over the lip of the container. All along the vines were thick clusters of leaves, as tiny as fingernails, their waxy green surface shot through with a delicate tracery of black veins. Tolly Mune reached out and touched the nearest leaf, and discovered that its underside was covered with a dusting of fine powder that came off on the tips of her fingers. Between the clusters of leaves, the branching vines were swollen with clusters of fat white carbuncles, larger and more pustulent-looking in toward the central tangle of growth. She saw one palp, half concealed under a canopy of leaves, that had grown as big as a man’s hand.

“Ugly looking weed,” opined Ratch Norren.

I fail to understand why it was necessary to declare an armistice and travel all this way to behold some festering hothouse monstrosity,” said the man from Skrymir.

“The Azure Triune grows impatient,” whispered their envoy.

“There’s some puling motive in this madness,” Tolly Mune said to Tuf. “Get on with it. Manna, you said. So what?”

“It will feed the S’uthlamese,” said Tuf. Dax was purring.

“For how many days?” asked the woman from Henry’s World, in a sweet voice that dripped sarcasm.

“First Councillor, if you would be so kind as to break off one of the larger paps, you will find the flesh delectably succulent and quite nutritious,” Tuf said.

Tolly Mune leaned forward, grimacing. She wrapped her fingers around the largest fruit. It felt soft and pulpy to her touch. She tugged, and it came off the vine easily. She broke it apart with her fingers. The flesh tore like fresh bread. Deep within its secret center was a sac of dark, viscous liquid that flowed with seductive slowness. A marvelous smell filled her nostrils, and she began to salivate. She hesitated for an instant, but it smelled too good. Quickly, she took a bite. She chewed, swallowed, took another bite, and another. In four bites it was all gone, and she was licking the stickiness off her fingers.

“Milkbread,” she said, “and honey. Rich, but tasty.”

“Nor will the taste pall,” Tuf announced. “The secretions in the heart of each palp are mildly narcotic. They are individual with each specimen of the manna plant, its distinct and subtle flavors a factor of the chemical composition of the soil in which the plant has taken root and the genetic heritage of the plant itself. The range of tastes is quite broad, and can be further expanded through cross-breeding.”

“Hold on,” Ratch Norren said loudly. He tugged at his cheek and frowned. “So this damned bread-and-honey fruit tastes just swell, sure, sure. So what? So the Suthies have something tasty to snack on after they make some more little Suthies. A nice treat to relieve the tedium of conquering Vandeen and breeding all over it. Pardon, folks, but Ratch don’t feel like applauding right now.”

Tolly Mune frowned. “He’s rude,” she said, “but he’s right. You’ve given us miracle plants before, Tuf. Omni-grain, remember? Neptune’s shawl. Jersee-pods. How’s manna going to be any different?”

“In several respects,” said Haviland Tuf. “Firstly, my previous efforts have been directed at making your ecology more efficient, to increasing the caloric output from the finite areas of S’uthlam given over to agriculture, to getting more from less, as it were. Unfortunately, I did not adequately account for the perversity of the human species. As you yourself have reported, the S’uthlamese food chain is still far from maximum efficiency. Though you have meatbeasts to provide protein, you persist in raising and feeding wasteful herd animals, simply because some of your wealthier carnivores prefer the taste of such flesh to a slice of a meatbeast. Similarly, you continue to grow omni-grain and nanowheat for reasons of flavor and culinary variety, where jersee-pods would yield you more calories per square meter. Succinctly put, the S’uthlamese still persist in choosing hedonism over rationality. So be it. Manna’s addictive properties and flavors are unique. Once the S’uthlamese have eaten of it, you will encounter no resistance on the grounds of taste.”

“Maybe,” Tolly Mune said doubtfully, “but still—”

“Secondmost,” Tuf continued, “manna grows swiftly. Extreme difficulties demand extreme solutions. Manna represents such a solution. It is an artificial hybrid, a genetic quilt sewn together with DNA strands from a dozen worlds, its natural ancestors including the bread-bush of Hafeer, insinuating nightweed from Noctos, Gulliverian sugarsacs, and a specially enhanced variety of kudzu, from Old Earth itself. You will find it hardy and fast-spreading, in need of scant care, and capable of transforming an ecosystem with astonishing swiftness.”

“How astonishing?” Tolly Mune demanded bluntly.

Tuf’s finger moved slightly, pressed down on a glowing key set within the arm of his floater. Dax purred. The lights came on. Tolly Mune blinked in the sudden glare.

They sat in the center of a huge circular room a good half-kilometer across, its domed ceiling curving a hundred meters above their heads. Behind Tuf a dozen towering plasteel ecospheres emerged from the walls, each open at the top and full of soil. There were a dozen different types of soil, representing a dozen different habitats—powdery white sand, rich black loam, thick red clay, blue crystalline gravel, gray-green swamp mud, tundra frozen hard as ice. From each ecosphere a manna plant grew.

And grew. And grew. And grew.

The central plants were five meters high; their questing vines had long since crawled over the tops of their habitats. The tendrils snaked halfway across the floor, to within a half-meter of Tuf, winding together, branching and rebranching. Manna vines covered the walls three-quarters of the way around the room. Manna vines clung precariously to the smooth white plasteel ceiling, half-eclipsing the light panels, so the illumination drifted down to the floor in shadow patterns of incredible intricacy. The filtered light seemed greenish. Everywhere the manna fruit bloomed, white pods the size of a man's head drooping from the vines overhead and pushing through the tangle of growth. As they watched, one pod fell to the floor with a soft liquid *plop*. Now she understood why the echoes had sounded so curiously muted.

"These particular specimens," Haviland Tuf announced in an expressionless voice, "were begun from spores some fourteen days ago, shortly before my first meeting with the estimable First Councillor. A single spore in each habitat was all that was required; I have neither watered nor fertilized in the interim. Had I done so, the plants would not be nearly so small and stunted as these poor examples you see before you."

Tolly Mune got to her feet. She had lived for years in zero gee, so it was a strain to stand under full gravity, but there was a tightness in her chest and a bad taste deep in the back of her mouth, and she felt she had to grasp for every psychological advantage, even one as small and obvious as standing when the rest of them were seated. Tuf had taken her breath away with his manna-from-the-hat trick, she was outnumbered, and Blackjack was life-knows-where while Dax sat by Tuf's ear, purring complacently and regarding her with large golden eyes that saw right through every puling artifice.

"Very impressive," she said.

"I am pleased you think so," Tuf said, stroking Dax. "Exactly what are you proposing?"

"My proposition is thus: we will immediately commence seeding S'uthlam with manna. Delivery may be effected through use of the *Ark*'s shuttlecraft. I have already taken the liberty of stocking the shuttle bays with explosive air-pods, each containing manna spores. Released into the atmosphere in a certain predetermined pattern that I have devised, the spores will ride upon the winds and distribute themselves about S'uthlam. Growth will commence immediately. No further effort will be required from the S'uthlamese but that they pick and eat." His long still face turned away from Tolly Mune, toward the envoys from the allied worlds. "Sirs," he said, "I suspect that you are presently wondering as to your own part in this."

Ratch Norren pinched his cheek and spoke for them all. "Right," he said. He looked around uneasily. "Comes back to what I said before. So this weed feeds all the Suthies. So what, that's nothing to us."

"I would think the consequences obvious," said Tuf. "S'uthlam is a threat to the allied worlds only because the S'uthlamese population is perpetually threatening to outstrip the S'uthlamese food supply. This renders S'uthlam, an otherwise peaceful and civilized world, inherently unstable. While the technocrats remained in power and kept the equation in an approximate balance, S'uthlam has been the most cooperative of neighbors, but this balancing, however virtuoso, must eventually fail, and with that failure inevitably the expansionists rise to power and the S'uthlamese become dangerous aggressors."

"I'm no puling expansionist!" Tolly Mune said hotly.

"Such was not my implication," said Tuf. "Neither are you First Councillor for life, despite your obvious qualifications. War is already at hand, albeit a defensive war. When you fall, should an expansionist replace you, the struggle will become a war of aggression. In circumstances such as those the S'uthlamese have created for themselves, war is as utterly certain as famine, and no single leader, however well-intentioned and competent, can possibly avoid it."

"Exactly," the boyish young woman from Henry's World said in a precise voice. Her eyes had a shrewdness in them that belied her adolescent body. "And if war is inevitable, we had just as well fight it out now, and solve the problem once and for all."

“The Azure Triune must agree,” came a whispered second.

“True,” said Tuf, “granting your premise that war must come inevitably.”

“You just told us the bloody expansionists would start a war inevitably, Tuffer,” Ratch Norren complained.

Tuf soothed the black tomcat with a large white hand. “Incorrect, sir. My statements as to the inevitability of war and famine were predicated upon the collapse of the unstable balance between the S’uthlamese population and S’uthlamese food supplies. Should this tenuous equation be brought back into alignment, S’uthlam is no threat whatsoever to the other worlds in this sector. Under these conditions, war is both unnecessary and morally unconscionable, I would think.”

“And you avow this pestilential pop-weed of yours will be the thing to do the job?” the woman from Jazbo said contemptuously.

“Indeed,” said Tuf.

The ambassador from Skrymir shook his head. “No. A valid effort, Tuf, and I respect your dedication, but I think not. I speak for all the allies when I say that we cannot put our faith in yet another breakthrough. S’uthlam has had its greenings and flowerings and blossomings and ecological revolutions before. In the end, nothing changes. We must conclude this matter once and for all.”

“Far be it from me to interfere with your suicidal folly,” said Tuf. He scratched Dax behind an ear.

“Suicidal folly?” Batch Norren said. “What’s that mean?”

Tolly Mune had been listening to it all. She turned to face the allies. “That means you lose, Norren,” she said.

The envoys laughed—a polite chuckle from the Henry, a guffaw from the Jazbot, a booming thunder from the cyborg. “The arrogance of the S’uthlamese never ceases to amaze me,” said the man from Skrymir. “Don’t be misled by this temporary stalemate, First Councillor. We are six worlds united as one. Even with your new flotilla, we outnumber you and outgun you. We defeated you once before, you might recall. We’ll do it again.”

“You will not,” said Haviland Tuf.

As one, the envoys looked at him.

“In recent days I have taken the liberty of doing some small research. Certain facts have become obvious. Firstly, the last local war was fought centuries ago. S’uthlam suffered an undeniable defeat, yet the allies are still recovering from their victory. S’uthlam, however, with its greater population base and more voracious technology, has long since left all effects of that struggle behind. Meanwhile, S’uthlamese science has advanced as swiftly as manna, if I may be permitted a colorful metaphor, while the allied worlds owe what small advances they claim to knowledge and techniques imported from S’uthlam. Undeniably, the combined allied fleets are significantly more numerous than the S’uthlamese Planetary Defense Flotilla, yet most of the allied armada is functionally obsolete in the face of the sophisticated weaponry and technology embodied in the new S’uthlamese ships. Moreover, it is grossly inaccurate to say the allies outnumber S’uthlam in any real sense. You comprise six worlds against one, correct, but the combined population of Vandeen, Henry’s World, Jazbo, Roggandor, Skrymir, and the Azure Triune totals scarcely four billion—less than one-tenth the population of S’uthlam alone.”

“One-tenth?” the Jazbot croaked. “That’s wrong. Isn’t it? It must be.”

“The Azure Triune has been given to understand that their numbers are barely six times our own.”

“Two-thirds of them are women and children,” the envoy from Skrymir was quick to point out.

“Our women fight,” Tolly Mune snapped.

“When they can find the time between litters,” commented Ratch Norren. “Tuf, they can’t have *ten times* our population. There are a lot of ‘em, agreed, sure, but our best estimates—”

“Sir,” said Tuf, “your best estimates are in error. Contain your chagrin. The secret is well kept, and when one is counting such multitudes, one can easily misplace a billion here or a billion there. Nonetheless, the facts are as I have stated them. At the moment, a delicate martial balance holds sway—the allied ships are more numerous, the S’uthlamese flotilla more advanced and better armed. This is obviously impermanent, as the S’uthlamese technology enables them to produce war fleets far more swiftly than any of the allies. I would venture to guess that just such an effort is currently underway.” Tuf looked at Tolly Mune.

“No,” she said.

But Dax was looking at her, too. “Yes,” Tuf announced to the envoys. He raised a single finger. “Therefore, I propose you take advantage of this present rough equality to capitalize on the opportunity I am offering you to solve the problem posed by S’uthlam without resort to nuclear bombardment and similar unpleasantries. Extend this armistice for one standard year, and allow me to seed S’uthlam with manna. At the end of that time, if you feel that S’uthlam still constitutes a threat to your homeworlds, feel free to resume hostilities.”

“Neg, trader,” the cyborg from Roggandor said heavily. “You are impossibly naive. Give them a year, you say, and let you do your tricks. How many new fleets will they build in a year?”

“We’ll agree to a moratorium on new arms-building if your worlds will do the same,” Tolly Mune said.

“So you say. I suppose we should trust you?” Ratch Norren sneered. “To hell with that. You Suthies proved how trustworthy you were when you rearmed secretly, in express violation of the treaty. Talk about bad faith!”

“Oh, sure, you’d have preferred it if we were helpless when you came to occupy us. Puling hell, what a damned hypocrite!” Tolly Mune responded in disgust.

“It’s too late for pacts,” declared the Jazbot.

“You said it yourself, Tuf,” the Skrymirian said. “The longer we delay, the worse our situation becomes. Therefore, we have no choice but an immediate all-out strike at S’uthlam itself. The odds will never get any better.”

Dax hissed at him.

Haviland Tuf blinked, and folded his hands neatly on his stomach. “Perhaps you would reconsider if I appealed to your love of peace, your horror of war and destruction, and your common humanity?”

Ratch Norren made a contemptuous noise. One by one, the other members of the delegation looked away, demurring.

“In that case,” said Tuf, “you leave me no choice.” He stood up.

The Vandeeni frowned. “Hey, where are you going?”

Tuf gave a ponderous shrug. “Most immediately to a sanitary facility,” he replied, “and afterwards to my control chamber. Please accept my assurances that no personal animosity of any sort is intended toward any of you. Nonetheless it appears, unfortunately, that I must now go forth and destroy your respective worlds. Perhaps you would like to draw straws, to determine where I might best start.”

The woman from Jazbo choked and sputtered.

Deep inside his haze of blurred holograms, the envoy from the Azure Triune cleared his throat, a sound as small and dry as an insect scuttling across a sheet of paper.

“You would not dare,” boomed the cyborg from Roggandor. The Skrymirian folded his arms in a chilly silence.

“Ah,” said Ratch Norren. “You. Ah. That is. You won’t. Yes, but surely. Ah.”

Tolly Mune laughed at them all. “Oh, he means it,” she said, though she was no less astonished than the rest of them. “And he can do it, too. Or the *Ark* can, rather. Commander Ober will be sure he gets an armed escort, too.”

“There is no need for haste,” the woman from Henry’s World said in precise, measured tones. “Perhaps we might reconsider.”

“Excellent,” said Haviland Tuf. He sat back down. “We will proceed with all deliberate haste,” he said. “A one year armistice will go into effect, as I have outlined, and I shall seed S’uthlam with manna immediately.”

“Not so fast,” Tolly Mune interjected. She felt giddy and triumphant. Somehow the war had just ended—Tuf had done it, S’uthlam was safe for at least a year. But relief did not make her entirely lightheaded. “All this sounds fine, but we’ll have to run some studies on this manna plant of yours before you start dropping spores all over S’uthlam. Our own biotechs and ecologists will want to examine the damn thing, and the High Council will want to run a few projections. A month ought to do. And of course, Tuf, what I said before still goes—you’re not just dumping your manna on us and leaving. You’ll stay this time, for the duration of the armistice, and maybe longer, until we have a good idea of how this latest miracle of yours is going to work.”

“Alas,” said Tuf, “I fear I have pressing engagements elsewhere in the galaxy. A sojourn of a standard year or more is inconvenient and unacceptable, as is a delay of a month before commencing my seeding program.”

“Wait just one puling second!” Tolly Mune began. “You can’t just—”

“I can indeed,” said Tuf. He looked from her to the envoys, significantly, and then back again. “First Councillor Mune, allow me to point out the obvious. A rough balance of military force now exists between S’uthlam and its adversaries. The *Ark* is a formidable instrument of destruction, capable of wasting worlds. Just as it is possible for me to throw in with your forces and destroy any of the allied planets, so the converse is also within the realm of possibility.”

Tolly Mune suddenly felt as though she’d been assaulted. Her mouth gaped open. “Are you... Tuf, are you threatening us? I don’t believe it. Are you threatening to use the *Ark* against S’uthlam?”

“I am merely bringing certain possibilities to your attention,” said Haviland Tuf, his voice as flat as ever.

Dax must have sensed her rage; he hissed. Tolly Mune stood helplessly, bewildered. Her hands balled into fists.

“I will charge no fee for my labors as mediator and ecological engineer,” Tuf announced. “Yet I will require certain safeguards and concessions from both parties to our agreement. The allied worlds will furnish me with a bodyguard, so to speak—a small fleet of warships, sufficient in number and weaponry to stave off any attacks upon the *Ark* from the Planetary Defense Flotilla of S’uthlam and to escort me safely out of the system when my



task here is done. The S'uthlamese, for their part, will agree to allow this allied fleet into their home system in order that my fears may be laid to rest. Should either side initiate hostilities during the period of the armistice, they will do so in full knowledge that this will surely provoke me to a most awful fit of wrath. I am not overly excitable, but when my anger is indeed aroused, I oftentimes frighten even myself. Once a standard year has passed, I shall be long departed and you may feel yourself free to resume your mutual slaughter, if you so choose. Yet it is my hope, and my prediction, that this time the steps I am initiating will prove so efficacious that none of you will feel compelled to resume hostilities." He stroked Dax's thick black fur, and the tomcat regarded each of them in turn with his huge golden eyes, seeing, weighing.

Tolly Mune felt cold all over. "You are imposing peace on us," she said.

"Albeit temporarily," said Tuf.

"And you are imposing this solution, whether we want it or not," she said.

Tuf looked at her, but did not reply.

"*Just who the goddamned puling hell do you think you are?*" she screamed at him, unleashing the fury that had been swelling inside her.

"I am Haviland Tuf," he said evenly, "and I have run out of patience with S'uthlam and the S'uthlamese, madam."

After the conference was over, Tuf drove the ambassadors back to their diplomatic shuttle, but Tolly Mune refused to go along.

For long hours, she roamed the *Ark* alone, cold, tired, yet relentless. She called out as she went. "Blackjack!" she shouted, from the top of the moving staircases. "Here, Blacky, here," she sang as she strode through the corridors. "Jack!" she cried when she heard a noise around a corner, but it was only a door opening or closing, the whirr of some machine repairing itself, or perhaps the scurrying of some stranger cat, some familiar of Tuf's. "Blaaaaackjaaaaaaaack!" she shouted at intersections where a dozen corridors crossed, and her voice boomed and rattled off his distant walls and echoed back at her.

But she did not find her cat.

Finally her wanderings took her up several decks, and she emerged in the dimly lit central shaft that cored the vast seedship—towering, echoing immensity thirty kilometers long, its ceiling lost in shadows, its wall lined by cloning vats large and small. She chose a direction at random and walked, and walked, and walked, calling out Blackjack's name.

From somewhere ahead she heard a small, uncertain meow. "Blackjack?" she called. "Where are you?" Again she heard it. Up there, ahead. She took two hurried steps forward, and began to run.

Haviland Tuf stepped out from beneath the shadow of a plasteel tank twenty meters high; Blackjack was cradled in his arms, purring.

Tolly Mune stopped dead.

"I have located your cat," said Tuf. "I can see that," she said coldly.

Tuf handed the huge gray tomcat to her gently, his hands brushing against her arms as he made the transfer. "You will find him none the worse for his wanderings," Tuf declared. "I took the liberty of giving him a full medi-

probe, to ascertain that he had suffered no misadventures, and determined that he is in the best of health. Imagine my surprise when I also chanced to discover that all the various bionic augmentations of which you informed me have somehow mysteriously and inexplicably vanished. I am at a loss to explain it.”

Tolly Mune hugged the cat to her chest. “So I lied,” she said. “He’s telepathic, like Dax. Maybe not as powerful. But that’s all. I couldn’t risk him fighting with Dax. Maybe he’d have won, maybe not. I didn’t want him cowed.” She grimaced. “So you got him laid instead. Where’s he been?”

“Having left the manna chamber by a secondary entrance in pursuit of the object of his affections, he subsequently discovered that the doors were programmed to deny him readmittance. Therefore, he has spent the intervening hours roaming through the *Ark* and making the acquaintance of various other feline members of my ship’s company.”

“How many cats do you have?” she asked.

“Fewer than you,” Tuf said, “yet this is not entirely unanticipated. You are S’uthlamese, after all.”

Blackjack was warm and reassuring in her arms, and all at once Tolly Mune was struck by the fact that Dax was no longer in evidence. She had the edge again. She scratched Jack behind an ear; he turned his limpid silver-gray eyes upon Tuf. “You don’t fool me,” she said.

“I thought it unlikely that I could,” Tuf admitted.

“The manna,” she said. “It’s some kind of a trap, isn’t it? You fed us a batch of lies, admit it.”

“Everything I have told you of the manna is the truth.”

Blackjack uttered a peep. “The truth,” said Tolly Mune, “oh, the puling truth. That means there are things you haven’t told us about the manna.”

“The universe abounds in knowledge. Ultimately, there are more facts to be known than humans to know them, an astonishing realization considering that populous S’uthlam is included in humanity’s tally. I could scarcely hope to tell you everything concerning any subject, however limited.”

She gave a snort. “What are you going to do to us, Tuf?”

“I am going to resolve your food crisis,” he said, his voice as flat and cold as still water, and as full of secret depths.

“Blackjack’s purring,” she said, “so you’re telling the truth. But how, Tuf, *how*?”

“The manna is my instrument.”

“Bladder bloat,” she said. “I don’t give a puling wart how tasty and addictive the manna fruit is, or how fast the damned things grow, no plant is going to solve our population crisis. You’ve tried all that. We’ve been around those coordinates with omni-grain and the pods and the wind-riders and the mushroom farms. You’re holding something back. Come on, piss it out.”

Haviland Tuf regarded her in silence for well over a minute. His eyes locked with hers, and it seemed briefly as though he were looking deep inside her, as if Tuf too were a mind reader.

Perhaps it was something else he read; finally, he answered. “Once the plant has been sown, it will never be entirely eradicated, regardless of how diligently you may attempt to do so. It will spread with inexorable rapidity,

within certain parameters of climate. Manna will not thrive everywhere; frost kills it, and cold is inimical to its growth, but it shall indeed spread to cover the tropical and subtropical regions of S'uthlam, and that will be enough."

"Enough for *what*?"

"The manna fruit is extremely nutritious. During the first few years, it will do much to relieve the pressures of your present caloric shortfalls and thereby improve conditions upon S'uthlam. Eventually, having exhausted the soil in its vigorous spread, the plants will expire and decay, and you will of necessity be forced to employ crop rotation for a few years before those particular plots are capable of sustaining manna once again. Yet, meanwhile, the manna shall have completed its real work, First Councillor Mune. The dust that collects upon the underside of each leaf is in actuality a symbiotic microorganism, vital to manna pollination, yet with certain other properties. Borne upon the wind, carried by vermin and human alike, it shall touch every cranny and nook upon the surface of your globe."

"The dust," she said. She had gotten it on her fingertips when she touched the manna plant... Blackjack's growl was so low she felt it more than heard it.

Haviland Tuf folded his hands. "One might consider manna dust as an organic prophylactic of sorts," he said. "Your biotechs will discover that it interferes powerfully, and permanently, with libido in the human male and fertility in the human female. The mechanisms need not concern you."

Tolly Mune stared at him, opened her mouth, closed it, blinked to hold back tears. Tears of despair, tears of rage? She could not say. Not tears of joy. She would not let them be tears of joy. "Deferred genocide," she said, forcing out the words. Her voice was hoarse and raw.

"Scarcely," Tuf said. "Some of your S'uthlamese will display a natural immunity to the effects of the dust. My projections indicate that somewhere between point oh-seven and point one-one percent of your base population will be unaffected. They will reproduce, of course, and thus the immunity will be passed on and grow more prevalent in successive generations. Yet a population implosion of considerable magnitude will commence upon S'uthlam this year, as the birth curve ceases its upward thrust and starts a precipitous descent."

"You have no right," said Tolly Mune slowly.

"The nature of the S'uthlamese problem is such so as to admit but one lasting and effectual solution," Tuf said, "as I have told you from the very beginning."

"Maybe," she said. "But so what? What about freedom, Tuf? What about individual choice? My people may be selfish and short-sighted fools, but they're still *people*, just like you. They have the right to decide if they're going to have children, and how many children. Who the hell gave you the authority to make that decision for them? Who the hell told you to go ahead and sterilize our world?" She was growing angrier with every word. "You're no better than we are. You're only human, Tuf. A puling peculiar human, I'll give you that, but only human—no more and no less. What gives you the goddamned *right* to play god with our world and our lives?"

"The *Ark*," Haviland Tuf said, simply.

Blackjack squirmed in her arms, suddenly restless, uneasy. Tolly Mune let him jump to the ground, never taking her eyes off Tuf's blank white face. Suddenly she wanted to strike him, hurt him, wound that mask of indifference and complacency, mark him. "I warned you, Tuf," she said. "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, remember?"

"My memory is unimpaired."

“Too bad I can’t say the same thing about your goddamned morality,” said Tolly Mune. Her tone was acid. Blackjack growled counterpoint at her feet. “Why the hell did I ever help you keep this goddamned ship? What a damned *fool* I was! You’ve been alone in a power fantasy too damn long, Tuf. Do you think somebody just appointed you god, is that it?”

“Bureaucrats are appointed,” said Tuf. “Gods, insofar as they exist at all, are chosen by other procedures. I make no claims to godhood in the mythological sense. Yet I submit that I do indeed wield the power of a god, a truth that I believe you recognized long ago, when you first turned to me for loaves and fishes.” When she began to reply, he raised a hand, palm outward. “No, kindly do not interrupt. I will endeavor to be brief. You and I are not so different, Tolly Mune—”

“We’re *nothing* alike, damn you!” she shrieked at him.

“We are not so different,” Tuf repeated calmly, firmly. “You once confessed that you were not a religious woman; nor am I one to worship myths. I began as a trader, yet having come upon this ship called *Ark*, I began to find myself dogged at every step by gods, prophets, and demons. Noah and the flood, Moses and his plagues, loaves and fishes, manna, pillars of fire, wives of salt—I must needs have become acquainted with all. You challenge me to declare myself a god. I make no such claim. And yet, it must be said, my first act upon this ship, so many years ago, was to raise the dead.” He pointed ponderously at a work station a few meters away. “There is the very spot at which I performed that first miracle, Tolly Mune. Moreover, I do indeed wield godlike powers and traffic in the life and death of worlds. Enjoying as I do these godlike abilities, can I rightfully decline the accompanying responsibility, the equally awesome burden of moral authority? I think not.”

She wanted to reply, but the words would not come. *He’s insane*, Tolly Mune thought to herself.

“Furthermore,” Tuf said, “the nature of the crisis on S’uthlam was such that it admitted to a solution only by godlike intervention. Let us suppose briefly that I consented to sell you the *Ark*, as you desired. Do you truly suppose that any staff of ecologists and biotechs, however expert and dedicated, could have devised a lasting answer? It is my belief that you are too intelligent to entertain such a fallacy. I have no doubt that, with all the resources of this seedship at their beck and call, these men and women—geniuses with intellects and training far superior to my own—could and would undoubtedly have devised numerous ingenious stopgaps to allow the S’uthlamese to continue breeding for another century, perhaps two, perhaps even three or four. Yet ultimately, their answers too would have proven insufficient, as did my own small attempts five years ago, and five years before that, and all the breakthroughs your technocrats engineered in centuries past. Tolly Mune, there is no rational, equitable, scientific, technological, or human answer to the dilemma of a population increasing in an insane geometric progression. It admits to answering only with miracles—loaves and fishes, manna from heaven, and the like. Twice I failed as ecological engineer. Now I propose to succeed as the god that S’uthlam requires. Should I approach the problem as human a third time, I would assuredly fail a third time, and then your difficulties would be resolved by gods crueller than myself, by the four mammal-riders of ancient legend who are known as pestilence, famine, war, and death. Therefore, I must set aside my humanity, and act as god.” He paused, looking at her, blinking.

“You set aside your damned humanity a hell of a long time ago,” she raged at him. “But you’re no god, Tuf. A demon, maybe. A puling megalomaniac, certainly. Maybe a monster—yes, a puling abortion. A *monster*, but no god.”

“A monster,” said Tuf. “Indeed.” He blinked. “I had hoped that one of your undoubted intellectual prowess and competence might display better understanding.” He blinked again. Twice, three times. His long white face was as still as ever, but there was something strange in Tuf’s voice that she had never heard before, something that frightened her, that bewildered her and disturbed her, something that sounded almost like emotion. “You slander me grievously, Tolly,” he protested.

Blackjack made a thin, plaintive meow.

“Your cat displays a keener grasp of the cold equations of the reality confronting us,” Tuf said. “Perhaps I ought to explain again from the beginning.”

“Monster,” she said.

Tuf blinked. “My efforts are eternally unappreciated and met only with undeserved calumny.”

“Monster,” she repeated. His right hand briefly curled into a fist, uncurled slowly and deliberately.

“It appears some cerebral tic has dramatically reduced your vocabulary, First Councillor.”

“No,” she said, “but that’s the only word that applies to you, damn it.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “In that case, being a monster, it behooves me to act monstrously. Consider that, if you will, as you grapple with your decision, First Councillor.”

Blackjack jerked his head up suddenly and stared at Tuf as if something unseen were flitting about that long white face. He began to hiss; his thick silver-gray fur rose up slowly as he backed off. Tolly Mune bent and picked him up. The cat trembled in her arms, and hissed again. “What?” she said in a distracted voice. “What decision? You’ve made all the damned decisions. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Permit me to point out that, as of this moment, not a single manna spore has been released into the atmosphere of S’uthlam,” Haviland Tuf said.

She snorted. “So? You’ve made your damned deal. I have no way of stopping you.”

“Indeed. Regrettable. Perhaps one will occur to you, however. Meanwhile, I suggest that we repair to my quarters. Dax is waiting for his evening meal. I have prepared an excellent cream-of-mushroom bisque for our own repast, and there is chilled great-beer from Moghoun, a beverage sufficiently heady to please either gods or monsters. And, of course, my communications equipment is at your disposal, should you find you have something to say to your government.”

Tolly Mune opened her mouth for a cutting reply, then closed it again in astonishment. “Do you mean what I think you mean?” she said.

“This is difficult to say,” Tuf replied. “You are the one holding a psionic cat, madam.” It was an endless silent walk and an eternal awkward meal.

They took their dinner in a corner of the long, narrow communications room, surrounded by consoles, telescreens, and cats. Tuf sat with Dax across his lap, and spooned up his dinner with methodical care. On the other side of the table, Tolly Mune ate without tasting the food. She had no appetite. She felt old and dizzy. And afraid.

Blackjack reflected her confusion; his serenity gone, he huddled in her lap, infrequently lifting his head above the table to growl a warning at Dax.

And finally the moment arrived, as she had known it would: a buzz and a flashing blue light signaled an incoming communication. Tolly Mune started at the sound, scraping her chair backwards against the deck and swinging around sharply in her seat. Blackjack leapt off in alarm. She started to rise, and froze in indecision.

“I have programmed in strict instructions that I am on no account to be disturbed while dining,” Tuf announced. “Ergo, that call is for you, by the process of elimination.”

The blue pinpoint flashed off, and on, and off, and on.

“You’re no puling god,” Tolly Mune said. “Neither am I, damn it. I don’t want this goddamned burden, Tuf.”

The light was flashing.

“Perhaps it is Commander Wald Ober,” Tuf suggested. “I suggest you take his call before he begins counting backwards.”

“No one has the right, Tuf,” she said. “Not you, not me.” He gave a ponderous shrug.

The light flashed. Blackjack yowled.

Tolly Mune took two steps toward the console, stopped, turned back toward Tuf. “Creation is part of godhood,” she said with suddenly certainty. “You can destroy, Tuf, but you cannot create. That’s what makes you a monster instead of a god.”

“The creation of life in the cloning tanks is an everyday and commonplace element of my profession,” Tuf said.

The light flashed on, went out, flashed on again.

“No,” she said, “you replicate life there, but you don’t *create* it. It has to have existed already, somewhere in time and space, and you have to have a cell sample, a fossil record—something—or you’re helpless. Puling hell, yes! Oh, you have the power of creation all right. The same goddamned power that I have, and that every man and woman down in the undercity has. Procreation, Tuf. There’s your awesome power, there’s the only miracle there is—the one thing humans have that makes us like gods, and the very thing *you* propose to take away from ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the people on S’uthlam. The hell! You’re no creator, you’re no god.”

“Indeed,” said Haviland Tuf, expressionlessly.

“So you don’t have the right to make godlike decisions,” she said. “And neither do I, damn it.” She moved to the console in three long, confident strides, touched a control. A telescreen ran with colors, resolving into a mirror-finish battle helmet emblazoned with a stylized globe insignia. Twin sensors burned crimson behind a dark plasteel faceplate. “Commander Ober,” she said.

“First Councillor Mune,” Wald Ober said. “I was concerned. The allied ambassadors are saying all kinds of wild things to the newsfeeds. A peace treaty, a new flowering. Can you confirm? What’s going on? Is there trouble there?”

“Yes,” she said. “Listen to me, Ober, and—”

“Tolly Mune,” Tuf said.

She whirled on him. “*What?*”

“If procreation is the mark of godhood,” Tuf said, “then cats are gods, too, it would seem to follow. They, too, reproduce themselves. Permit me to point out that, in a very short time, we have arrived at a situation whereby you have more cats than I do, though you started with but a single pair.”

She scowled. “What are you saying?” She punched off the sound, so Tuf’s words would not transmit. Wald Ober gestured in sudden silence.

Haviland Tuf pressed the tips of his fingers together. “I am merely pointing out that, as much as I relish the properties of the feline, I nonetheless take steps to control their breeding. I reached this decision after careful

consideration, and the weighing of all the alternatives. Ultimately, as you yourself will discover, there are but two fundamental options. You must either reconcile yourself to inhibiting the fertility of your cats, entirely without their consent, I might add, or, failing that, someday most assuredly you will find yourself about to cycle a bag full of newborn kittens out your airlock into the cold vacuum of space. Make no choice, and you have chosen. Failure to decide, because you lack the right, is itself a decision, First Councillor. In abstaining, you vote.”

“Tuf,” she said, her voice agonized, “*don’t!* I don’t *want* this damned power.”

Dax jumped up on the table, and turned his golden eyes upon her. “Godhood is a profession even more demanding than ecology,” Tuf said, “though it might be said that I knew the job to be hazardous when I accepted its burdens.”

“It’s not,” she started. “You can’t say,” she fumbled. “Kittens and babies aren’t,” she tried. “They’re people, they, they have the power of, that is, minds, minds and hearts as well as gonads. They’re rational, it’s their choice—theirs, not mine. I can’t possibly make it for them—the millions, the billions.”

“Indeed,” said Tuf. “I had forgotten about the good people of S’uthlam and their long history of rational choice. Undoubtedly they will look in the face of war, of famine, and of plague, and then in billions they will change their ways and deftly avert the shadow that threatens to engulf S’uthlam and its proud towers. How strange that I failed to see this.”

They stared at each other.

Dax began to purr. Then he looked away, and began to lap up cream-of-mushroom bisque from Tuf’s bowl. Blackjack rubbed up against her leg, keeping a wary eye on Dax as he stalked across the room.

Tolly Mune turned back to the console very slowly; it took her a day to make that turn—a week, a year, a lifetime. It took her forty billion lifetimes, but when she had completed that turn, it had only taken an instant, and those lives were gone as if they had never been.

She looked at the cold silent mask confronting her over the comm link, and in that dark shiny plastic she saw reflected all the faceless horror of war, and behind it burned the grim, fevered eyes of starvation and disease. She turned the sound transmission back up.

“What’s going on there?” Wald Ober was demanding, over and over. “First Councillor, I can’t hear you. What are your orders, do you hear me? What’s going on there?”

“Commander Ober,” Tolly Mune said. She forced a broad smile.

“What’s wrong?”

She swallowed. “Wrong? Nothing. Nothing at all. Puling hell, everything is incredibly right. The war’s over and so’s the crisis, Commander.”

“Are you under coercion?” Wald Ober barked.

“No,” she said quickly. “Why do you say that?”

“Tears,” he replied. “I see tears, First Councillor.”

“Of joy, Commander. Tears of joy. Manna, Ober, that’s what he calls it. Manna from heaven.” She laughed lightly. “Food from the stars. Tuf’s a genius. Sometimes...” She bit her lip, hard. “Sometimes I even think he might be...”

“What?”

“... a god,” she said. She touched a button: the screen went dark.

Her name was Tolly Mune, but in the histories they call her all sorts of things.



# Starlady

This story has no hero in it. It's got Hairy Hal in it, and Golden Boy, and Janey Small and Mayliss, and some other people who lived on Thisrock. Plus Crawney and Stumblecat and the Marquis, who'll do well enough as villains. But it hasn't got a hero... well, unless you count Hairy Hal.

On the day it all began, he was out late, wandering far from the Plaza in the dock section near the Upend of the Concourse. It was night-cycle, the big overhead light-panels had faded to black, and here the wall-lights were few and dim. Elsewhere, just down the Concourse, the Silver Plaza was alive with music; multi-colored strobes were Hashing, and joy-smoke was belching from the air ducts. But Hal walked in darkness, through silent halls full of deserted loading trucks, past shadowed stacks of freight. Here, near the docks, Thisrock was much as the Imperials had known it. The corridors near the Plaza were all shops and disfigured plastic; the walls of the Concourse were covered with boasts and slogans and obscenities. But here, here, the only markings on the shining duralloy were the corridor numbers that the men of the Federal Empire had left. Hairy Hal knew the business was elsewhere. But he'd given up on business that night, and he was here.

Which was why he heard the whimper.

Why he followed it is something else again. The starslums were full of whimpers, plus screams and shouts and pleading. Hairy Hal was a child of the starslums, and he knew the rules. But that night he broke them.

In the black of a cross-corridor, up against some crates, he found Crawney and his men, with their victims. One victim was a youth. He stood in shadow, but Hal could make out a slender, graceful body, and his eyes. His eyes were immense. With him was a young woman, or maybe just a girl. She was backed up against the wall, under a yellow wall-light. Her face was pale, scared. And dark hair fell past her shoulders, so clearly she was off-world. Crawney confronted them, a short slim man with black and red skull stripes and a mouth full of teeth that stuck out too far. He dressed in soft plastic, and he worked for the Marquis. Hal knew him, of course.

Crawney was unarmed. But the pair with him, the silent giants with the heads painted black, each of them carried a dark baton, and they waved them gracefully in front of them. Stingsticks. They kept the victims cornered.

So Hairy Hal, unnoticed, knelt in darkness and watched it all. It was a bleak episode, but one he'd seen before. There were soft threats from Crawney, delivered in a mild slurring voice. There were pleadings from the woman. There was a lightning pass from a stingstick, and a scream from the boy. Then whimpers, as he lay crumpled on the floor. Then another stingstick pass, a touch to the head, and the whimpering stopped.

Finally there were two rapes; Crawney, amused, just watched. Afterwards they took everything, and left her there crying beside the boy.

Hairy Hal waited until they were long gone, until even the echoes of their passage had faded from the corridor. Then he rose and went to the woman. She was naked and vulnerable. When she saw him, she gave a small cry and struggled to get up.

So he smiled at her. That was another of Hal's trademarks; his smile. "Hey now, starlady," he said. "Easy. Hal won't hurt you. Your friend might need help."

Then, while she watched through wide eyes, he knelt down near the boy and rolled him under the wall-light with one hand. The youth was blacked out from pain, but otherwise unhurt. But Hal didn't notice that much. He was staring.

The youth was golden.

He was like no boy Hal had ever seen. His skin was soft cream gold; his hair was a shimmery silver-white. The ears were an elf's, pointed and delicate, the nose small and chiseled, the eyes huge. Human? Hal didn't know. But he knew it didn't matter. Beauty was all that mattered, beauty and glowing innocence. Hairy Hal had found his Golden Boy.

The woman had dressed, in what Crawney had left of her clothing. Now she stood. "What can you do?" she said. "I'm Janey Small, from Rhiannon. Our ship..."

Hal looked up at her. "No, starlady," he said. "No ship no more. Crawney got the name tabs, the Marquis'll sell. Some insider will be Janey Small, from Rhiannon. See? Happens, well, every day. Starlady should have stayed on the Concourse."

"But," the woman started. "We have to go to someone. I mean the man with the striped head, he said he'd show us the good stuff. He hired the other two for us, as bodyguards. Can you take us to the police?" Her voice was even, quiet, and the teartracks on her face were dry now. She recovered fast. Hal admired her.

"Starlady landed on Thisrock," he said. "No police here. Nothing. Should've hired a real bodyguard. Crew would give you a steer as usual. Crawney hit, instead. Starlady wasn't Promethean, wasn't insider, wasn't protected, probly four-class passage, right?" He paused, she nodded. "So, right. Crawney wanted tabs, starlady was stupid, easy hit." Hal glanced down at Golden Boy, then up at the woman again. "With you?" he asked.

"Yes. No." She shook her head. "Not precisely. He was on the ship. No one could understand him, and no one seemed to know him, or where he was from. He started following me around. I don't know much about him, but he's good, kind. What's going to happen to us now?"

Hal shrugged. "Help get Golden Boy over Hal's shoulder. Come with, to home."

\* \* \*

Hairy Hal's home; a four-room compartment on a cross-corridor near the Concourse, just off the Silver Plaza. It was good for trade. The door was heavy duralloy. Inside was a large square chamber, with a low couch along one wall and opposite a built-in kitchen. Above the couch were racks of books and tapes; for a starslummmmer, Hal was an intellectual. A big plastic table filled most of the room and closed doors led off to the bedrooms and the waste cube. A glowing globe sat in the center of the table, sending pink reflections scuttling across the walls as it pulsed.

Hairy Hal dumped Golden Boy, still out, on the couch, then sat down at the table. He pointed to a second chair, and Janey sat too. And then, before either of them could say anything, a bedroom door opened and Mayliss entered.

Mayliss was very tall, very regal; sleek legs and big breasts and a hard, hard face with small green eyes. She painted her head bright red to let people know what she was. What she was was one of Hal's girls. At the moment, she was his only girl.

She stopped in the door to her bedroom, studied Janey and Golden Boy, then looked at Hal.

"Spin," she said.

So Hairy Hal spun it. "Starlady got hit," he told her. "Crawney did a bodyguard grabtab, threw in rip an' rape." He shrugged.

Her face grew harder. "Hairy Hal scoped it all, right? Did nothing?" She sighed. "So?"

“Seal it, Mayliss,” Hal told her. He turned back to Janey Small, smiled his smile. “Starlady know what comes now?” he asked.

Janey wet her lip, hesitated. Finally she spoke. “If there really are no police, I guess we’re stuck here for a while.”

Hal shook his head. “For good. Better face that, or you’ll get hurt. Easy to get hurt on Thisrock, starlady, not like Rhiannon. Look.” With that, his left hand reached across his body, grabbed a corner of his heavy green cape, and flipped it back over his shoulder. Then he took his right arm by the wrist, and lifted it onto the table.

Janey Small did not gasp; she was a tough woman, Janey Small. She just looked. Hairy Hal’s right arm wasn’t really much of an arm. It bent and twisted in a half-dozen places where an arm ought not to bend, and it was matchstick-thin. The skin was a reddish black, the hand a shriveled claw. Hal clenched his fist as it lay there, and the arm trembled violently.

Finally, when she’d looked enough, he reached over again with his left hand, and took it off the table. Then he smiled at her. “Easy to get hurt,” he repeated.

She chewed her lip. “Can’t you get it replaced?”

He laughed. “Proibly, starlady, on Rhiannon. Proibly Prometheans could, too. But Hal’s here, and Thisrock forgot a lot during the Collapse. No. Not even if Hal was an insider, an’ Hal is no insider. Hairy Hal is a starslum pimp.”

Janey’s eyes widened. “I don’t care,” she said. “You’re better than those others. You helped us.”

Behind him Mayliss laughed. Hal ignored her. “Hey now, starlady,” he said smiling, “Listen and learn, an’ learn quick. Starslummers don’t help anyone, less they get a slice. Hal is no hero, he didn’t even try to stop that rip an’ rape, right? But Hal is offering you good, and straight, so listen to him spin. Starlady and Golden Boy can stay here till day-cycle. When the lights come on, they got to pick. One, go out and take their chances, and good luck. Two—” he cocked his head questioningly —“they stay and work for Hal.”

He lifted his right arm then, struggling and trembling, without using his left. It hit the table with a thump. Mayliss was laughing again. “Hairy Hal was good with a no-knife,” he said, patting his arm with his good hand. “Still, this. Pick.”

Well, I told you he wasn’t a hero.

Janey’s face went baffled at first, as she listened to Hal’s words. Then, despite herself, she began to cry. Mayliss kept on laughing, but Hal’s smile faded then. He shrugged, and shook his head, and went to bed.

The tears stopped in time and Janey sat alone, watching pink shadows race across the room. After a long time, her gaze wandered to Golden Boy asleep on the couch, and she went to him and curled up on the floor so her face was close to his. She stroked his silvery hair, and smiled at him, and thought.

But, of course, she had no choice. When day-cycle came Janey told Hal what she must.

He gave her a smile. He did not get one back.

“You’ll work the Silver Plaza,” he told her, as he stood across the table and buckled a plastic belt. “Starlady’s fresh, an’ young, an’ she smells of stars, an’ that’s all good for trade. Mayliss’ll take the Concourse. Hal will take you round today, an’ spin out all the rules. Listen.”

She looked at the couch. “What about the boy?”

“*Mayliss!*” Hal bellowed. When she came, glaring, he gestured. “Stay an’ feed the Golden Boy, spin him soft when he blinks, an’ don’t let him fly. Hal’s got plans for Golden Boy.” He went back into his bedroom.

Mayliss watched his door shut with a sullen expression, then turned on Janey. “Why don’t you run, ship girl?” she said. “Run back to your ship. You don’t click here, and Hairy Hal don’t click so good himself. Scope him smart before you root, he isn’t all that much. You and Golden Boy will get shoved up an air duct if you believe his wobbly spin.”

Hal emerged from the bedroom, dressed in a black swoopshirt and his cape. “Seal it, redhead,” he told Mayliss. Then, to Janey: “First lesson, listen flow.” He reached across his body, beneath his cape, and his hand came out holding a finger-sized rod of black metal.

“No-knife,” he said. He did something with his thumb, and suddenly there was a humming, and a foot-long blue haze that stuck out from his fist. “They make them, well, not here. They come on ships. The force-blade’ll cut anything, cept durloy, an’ it’s clean an’ quick. Hal was good once, now not so good, but still he’s better than most. This is your protection, starlady. This is why you don’t get hit no more. Today Hal’s parading you round the Plaza, an’ the word gets out. Tomorrow no one touches you.”

“Cept Marquis,” Mayliss said. Her tone was cutting. “Cept Marquis and Crawney and Stumblecat, and any other blackskull who wants you. They get you free, starlady, and they do anything they want with you, and Hal don’t do a thing. Right, Hairy Hal? Spin that at her.”

Hairy Hal made a palming motion, the ghost blade blinked out and the black rod vanished beneath his cape. “Dress, starlady,” he told Janey. “Take something from Mayliss, anything you like, an’ cut it to size.”

“Hey now,” Mayliss started, but Hal raised his voice and bulled right over her.

“You pick, you get, starlady,” he said. “Keep your hair, so they know you work for Hal. But tie something red round your head, so they know you work.”

Afterwards, they left Mayliss and Golden Boy alone, and went out into the corridor down to the Concourse, out towards the Plaza. Janey Small wore a red headband and a gossamer yellow dinger and a cool, pale face. She did not talk. Hal did all the talking, Hal in black and green, who smiled and kept his arm around her.

The Concourse, already, was jammed. Hal pulled Janey to a food stall, nodded to the man behind the counter, and they both ate crusty brown breadsticks and cubes of cheese. Janey put her elbows up on the counter. Hal put his arm around her, rubbed her shoulder, and pointed at people with his eyes.

That one’s a thief, he told her, and that one pushes dreams, and the other with the wide eyes and the drools, well, he’s that buys them. And there’s another pimp, but his girls are old and baggy, and there’s Bad Tanks who owns a stall out near the plaza. Don’t ever eat there, though, cause he laces his sticks with dust to bring in more new dreamers. French is a joy-smoke merchant, he’s quick but you can trust him, but Gallis don’t sell nothing but a spin.

They started down the Concourse together, past the grimy plastic walls and the countless shops, past fat, half-naked women with shaved red skulls who glared at them resentfully, past swaggering youths with stingsticks who gave Hal a wide berth. All the time Janey Small walked in silence while Hal kept on his lessons.

The place with the blue curtains is Augusty’s, he told her, he rents you bodyguards that you can trust. But never, never get a guard from Lorreg, worse than Crawney, only half the brains. That fat man with the green stars on his head? He’s a pimp, a straight one if someone gets to me, you go to him. Dark Edward pimps too, yes, but don’t go near him, he used to be much bigger than he is. Over there you’ve got yourself religion, if you’re the kind who

likes to mumble in the dark. The guy in the silver swoopsuit, he don't have long to live, he talks too loud and he's going to get a stingstick up his ass.

They reached the Silver Plaza: a huge open place at the end of the Concourse, a ceiling far above that spilled down silver lights, tiers of balconies and shops, welling music all around them, a troupe of dancers whirling in the street. Hal pushed his way toward them; Janey followed. He watched, smiling. One of the women, a blur in scarlet veils, spun up against him, stopped, and grinned. He reached under his cape and pressed something into her palm. She grinned again, and danced away.

"What did you give her?" Janey asked, curious despite herself, after they'd elbowed free.

"A coin," Hal said, shrugging. "The dancing clicks for Hal, starlady. Probly that's another lesson for you. You won't get hit cause you're with Hal, right? But you don't hit no one, see? Hal spins straight, the ship men give steers to pimps who serve up girls without the stingsticks."

Suddenly his arm tightened on her shoulder. "An' there," he said, pointing with his chin. "There's two more lessons for starlady, walking right together."

She looked in the direction he'd indicated. A man and a woman were making their way across the Plaza slowly. The man was broad-shouldered and blond, dressed in a dark floor-length cloak with heavy gold embroidering. The woman was brown-skinned, with kinky black hair and a pale green uniform.

Janey was still looking when she heard the voice from behind her. "The man is one of the leading citizens of Thisrock," the voice said, in a mellow, purring tone. "We call his kind insiders. The woman is an officer from a Promethean starship, of course; I expect that you knew that, dear. And your lesson, I'd guess, was to be that both insiders and Prometheans are to be treated with deference. They are powerful people."

They turned. The speaker was wearing a Promethean uniform, too; but unlike the woman's his was thin and patched. He had nothing else in common with the starship officer, or with anyone else in the crowd. Instead of being hairless, his face and hands were both completely covered by a soft gray fur. His ears were pointed, his nose was black, his eyes feline. He was, in fact, a man-cat.

"Hello, Hal," he said, in the oddly gentle voice that mocked the stingstick swinging from his belt. Then he smiled at Janey. "Right now you're full of questions," he said. "I know them all. First, I don't talk like the others because I'm not from Thisrock, and I have an education. I don't look like the others because I was genetically altered. A game they play with the lowborn on Prometheus, you know. My alterations were not satisfactory, though, so I wound up here. Some of them work, however. I heard Hal's last comment from quite a distance. Now, yes, that should cover it." He smiled. His teeth were very sharp.

Hal did not smile back. "Janey Small," he said, pointing. "Stumblecat."

Stumblecat nodded. Janey stood frozen.

"You're clearly a star-born," Stumblecat said in his cultured tones. "How ever did you wind up with Hal?"

"Starlady was passing through," Hairy Hal said sharply. "She hired the wrong bodyguard. Listened to Crawney spin, an' wound up raped and ripped. Now she's with Hal."

"You always were one to take advantage of a ripe situation, Hal," Stumblecat said. He laughed. "Well, I'll keep the starlady in mind the next time I'm looking. She might be an interesting change."

Hairy Hal was not amused, but he kept from showing it. He shrugged. "Yours anytime, Stumblecat," he said slowly.

“For a spin and a smile, Hal?”

Hal’s face was dark. “For a spin and a smile, Stumblecat,” he said slowly.

Stumblecat laughed, stroked Janey with a soft furred hand, then turned and left.

And Janey, hot eyes glaring, turned on Hairy Hal. “I agreed to work for you because you gave me no choice. I don’t like it, but I recognize the situation I’m in. There was nothing said about you giving me to your friends.”

Hal frowned hard. “An’ nothing done, either. Listen to the biggest rule, starlady. Insiders, Prometheans, you scope them good, an’ give them room, an’ let them be customers. Nobody gets you free, cept black skulls. *Yes*, starlady. Like the ones who raped you up, don’t look so white. For them, you do anything, be nice, charge nothing less they offer to pay. An’ also for the black skull bosses. Like the Marquis, who Hal will tell about. Like Crawney, who hit you. An’ Stumblecat.

“Hey now, starlady, you look shocked. Why? Mayliss spun you straight, you knew it. Probly you thought Stumblecat was a good guy, right? Cause he talks like you, only better. Well, starlady just did another stupid. First she hums to Crawney, now to Stumblecat. Next thing you’ll be cuddling the Marquis himself; you already got both his leetenants.”

His good hand was pinching her shoulder painfully as he spoke, and people in the crowd were throwing quick looks their way. Janey, furious, spun free.

“What about all that *protection*?” she shouted. “If I don’t even get *that* much, why should I wear *this*?” She tore off her headband, thrust it at him.

Hairy Hal stood there, looking down at it. When he spoke, his voice was low. “Maybe you shouldn’t,” he said, shrugging. “Up to you, starlady. Hal doesn’t force no one.” He smiled. “But he’s better than them.”

Janey stared at him, saying nothing, holding the red rag out in her hand. Hal looked at the ground and scratched his head. And, in the awkward silence, a third man approached.

He was short, heavy, off-world; his clothes were rich. And his eyes moved constantly in a nervous scramble to see if anyone he knew was around. “Excuse me,” he said. Quickly, quickly. “I—that is—the man on my ship told me to look for a man with a green cape and, well, ah, hair.” He waited expectantly.

Hairy Hal looked at him, then at Janey. He said nothing.

Her hand fell. She stared at Hal’s face, then at the ground, then—finally—at the off-worlder.

“Come on,” she said at last.

\* \* \*

Somewhere along the line, her name got lost. Janey Small of Rhiannon was gone, flown away on a ship hardly remembered. She was Starlady, and she did a thriving trade.

It wasn’t the off-worlders so much; after the first, they came to her no more than any other. It was the starslammers who gave her business, the kids with the hand-me-down stingsticks and the whooping swoopsuits who caught the scent of the stars. They’d grown up with shaved-skull hardeyed redheads, and they wanted hair and dreams and maybe innocence. They hummed to Starlady.

They came to Starlady.

And she learned, yes yes, she learned.

There was a night-cycle near the docks, when a corridor club got a hold of her. The queen of the club was a blue-skulled dreamer, and the man she hummed to had gone to Starlady. So she stared and smiled and drooled while her three underboys stripped their catch and started to play with their stingsticks. Ah, but then Hairy Hal was there! Starlady had friends all along the Concourse, and the friends had seen the grab, and they got to Hal, and he knew the dock section where the club called home. Such a short fight. An underboy swung his stingstick, Hal lifted his humming blue ghost blade, the baton sheared neatly in two, and the club ran.

And she learned, yes yes, she learned.

There was an afternoon at Hal's in the third bedroom, the special one with the canceller that wiped out Thisrock's gravity grid. But the customer wanted more than free-fall fun; he had a nervelash, which is like a stingstick, only worse. She screamed, and Hal was there, kicking off and floating fast and graceful, bringing his no-knife up and around. Afterwards they had to turn off the canceller, to ground all the droplets of blood.

And she learned, yes yes, she learned.

There was a conference at Hal's one night, and she met Dark Edward with his hot red eyes and his double stingstick and his plans for being emperor again, plus Fat Mollie who ran a stable of boys. They wanted Hairy Hal to join them. "It's a straight spin, Hal," Dark Edward said in a ponderous voice. "We can hit him good, and I'll make you my leutenant." He talked and talked and talked, but Hal just shook his head and threw them out. Afterwards he and Mayliss fought for hours.

But there came a silver morning two weeks later, when Crawney and Stumblecat dragged Dark Edward screaming to the center of the Plaza. At first Janey just watched Stumblecat, in all his soft-furred clumsiness, and noted the lack of feline grace that Hal had told her of, the curious lack that made him a reject from Prometheus and gave him his curious name. Then she saw the Marquis, and she knew what was going to happen.

The Marquis had all of Stumblecat's stolen grace. He wore black boots, and the robes of an insider, but he was very silent. His skull was silver; it shone in the Plaza light. Around it, covering his eyes, was a solid ring of tinted blueblack plastic.

While Janey watched, while hundreds watched, he took Dark Edward's double stingstick and turned it on. Crawney and Stumblecat held the victim. The Marquis played for hours.

And she never saw Fat Mollie after that day, either.

Oh yes, she learned, and soon she knew the rules. She was Starlady, and Hairy Hal was her protection and she was safer than most around her. The blackskulls never bothered her. She was beneath them.

"The Marquis is a stupid," Hal told her after Dark Edward's death, when she came home early from the Plaza. "Dark Edward, well, he was worse, but still. Listen, the dreamboss clicks, right? The dust comes in on ships an' his men get it quiet an' sell it quiet an' no one knows the dreamboss an' no one knows how to touch him. Lametta tried, got hit. *Hard!* Probly the dreamboss will buy himself inside someday, the way he clicks. See?"

"But Marquis, he doesn't click. Too *loud*. Everybody knows the Marquis, everybody chills to him, only he won't *never* buy his way down inside. The insiders don't want him marching round the Ivory Halls, less he's got an exotic for them and a quick exit-pass.

"He started with exotics, Starlady. Alters like Stumblecat, an' a couple Hrangans, green gushies, Fyndii mindmutes, that kind. Got all the exotics on Thisrock, right? The insiders, well, some of them hum sick, but they

want to hum bad, an' they want to hum quiet, an' they pay a lot. Prometheans come too. The Marquis hums sick himself, but different, he hums to pain, an' power probly, but mostly pain. Good with a stingstick, though, an' he got the exotics. After that he got a lot of other things, joy-smoke and grabtabs and ripping, all his now. Exotics are still a big slice, the Marquis has them all.

“Only, well, he’s so loud, an’ it’ll kill him. Someday he’ll try to hit the dreamboss, or squeeze an insider for quiet-money, or *something*. Maybe Stumblecat will take him. Stumblecat spins quieter, Starlady, an’ Hal knows he don’t like seconds. Hitting Dark Edward in the Plaza was just a *stupid*. The Marquis wants to chill everybody, cept it won’t click.”

He was sitting at his table eating as he spoke, his cape thrown back, his claw-like right hand clutching the plate as his left cut and speared with a kitchen knife. Janey sat across from him. In the corner of the room, regarding them both with immense blue eyes, Golden Boy sat on the couch. Golden Boy had an easier time of it than Janey. Hairy Hal had run boys before, he said, but he wasn’t running Golden Boy, not yet. He just kept saying that he had plans. The youth sat around the compartment all day, eating and staring at people, never saying a word. Somehow he seemed to know what was required of him, whenever something was. Mayliss, after mothering him for a week, had finally gotten tired of the way he shrank away in fear whenever she came near him. She clawed him badly with sharpened nails, then ignored him after Hairy Hal promised her a taste of no-knife if she did it again. “Golden Boy’s got to stay *pretty*,” he told her, with his ghost-blade in his good hand. She’d been backed up against her bedroom door, looking terrified but oddly ecstatic. That night she and Hal had slept together, the only time since Janey Small and Golden Boy had arrived.

Most times Hal slept alone. That first night, he’d tried to sleep with Janey, but she’d pulled away and glared at him. “I did it for you all day, and you’ve got the money,” she said. “I’m not going to do it *with* you too.”

And he’d let her go and shrugged. “Starlady, you’re a strange one,” he said. Then he went to his room by himself. Janey sat by Golden Boy on the couch, looking at his eyes and brushing back his silver hair. Finally they’d gone to sleep together in the free-fall chamber, arms wrapped around each other as they nestled in the sleep-web. Golden Boy simply held her and slept. He knew what was required of him.

It was that way every night. Hairy Hal tried once more, after he’d saved her from the corridor club. Back in the compartment, he’d sat by her on the couch and kept his arm around her until she stopped her trembling. Then he got up and went to his bedroom. He paused at the door, favoring her with a smile and one of his cock-the-head questioning looks. “Janey?”

“No,” she said. He shrugged, and gave up trying.

After all, he wanted Janey, and Janey was long gone. She was Starlady and she had her Golden Boy.

\* \* \*

Then one day, when Janey came back from the Silver Plaza, Golden Boy was gone. She looked around the compartment frantically; he’d never left before. But there was no one home but Mayliss and a paunchy off-worlder, afloat in the free-fall room. Mayliss glared at her as she stood in the doorframe, but the man just chuckled and said, “Well, well, c’mon in.”

When he’d left finally, Mayliss put on a sheath and came storming and spewing out at her. “I’ll chill you down good, Starlady, and if Hal don’t like it I’ll cut off his crottled arm. What’s the big spin?”

“Golden Boy is gone.”

“So? Hal’s out selling him, little girl. Grow up.”

Janey blinked. “*What?*”



Mayliss snorted in disgust, and put her hands on her hips. “I spun you straight. Why’d you think Hairy Hal let Golden Boy sit round here all day and powder his ass with dreamdust like he was an insider or something? Cause Hal clicks right, is that what you figured? So, wrong. Hal was waiting for a big sell. He spun it all out to me. With all those fun boys coming through here every day, sooner or later word’s probly going to get down inside, that’s where Hal wanted it, see? Lots of insiders like little boys, and he knew they’d pay big for a little *golden* boy with pointy ears and big eyes and silver hair. Only Hal couldn’t zactly parade round the Ivory Halls giving out handbills, right?”

“He won’t do it,” Janey said stubbornly. “Golden Boy won’t do it!”

Mayliss laughed. “You warm me, Starlady, you’re such a *stupid*. Listen good, cause I’m going to spin you right. Golden Boy will do zactly what Hal says. You think you learned a lot, but you don’t know *nothing*. Stead of a clear skull, you got a head full of hair and stars. I think you hum to Golden Boy, you know, and that’s so warm it’s *boiling*.”

“I love him,” Janey said, with storms flashing across her face. “He’s kind and gentle and he’s never done anyone any harm, and he’s a hell of a lot better than anyone else on Thisrock.”

But Mayliss only laughed again “You’ll learn, Starlady. Hal don’t click, but at least he clicks better’n Golden Boy. Listen, I used to hum to Hal once. I had to learn.”

“What? That he uses people? Well, I learned *that* fast enough,” Janey said. She turned and went to the couch and sat down.

Mayliss followed her. “No, Starlady, you got it spun up all wobbly and tangled. I thought Hairy Hal was a big hero. He was faster with his no-knife than *anybody*, and he looked good, and he spun big about how he was going to click. Yes, and little Mayliss believed it all. Cept one night, after Hal’d been doing too good, there was this knock on the door, right? Crawney. Back then, Hal had me and two other girls and a couple boys and some exotics plus he had some ’sticks working for him, and he was spinning about a slice of joy-smoke. Well, Crawney came to chill him down. The Marquis wanted joy-smoke, you see, and the Marquis didn’t like Hal having exotics.

“Well, Hairy Hal just laughed at Crawney, and I hummed to that. It was a long time ago, right, and the Marquis wasn’t so big and Hal wasn’t so small, and Lametta was even still round. Hal had plans.

“Cept Crawney didn’t like being laughed at. A couple cycles later, the blackskulls grabbed Hal and me and took us down by the docks. Crawney was there, and Stumblecat, and the Marquis. They made me watch, while the blackskulls broke his arm all up, again and again until he was screaming. Right? Then the Marquis just smiled and said, ‘Hey, Hal’s arm is broken, he needs a splint,’ and they splinted it with a *stingstick*, and just stood there and watched him on the floor.

“Afterward, all the nerves were crottled or something, and Hal wasn’t nothing with his noknife. Everybody left him; his ’sticks, his girls, everybody. The Marquis took his exotics. Hairy Hal had nothing cept *me*. Little stupid Mayliss, she still hummed to him, and I stayed. I helped him use his other hand, and I thought once he was good again, he’d take his no-knife and go *after* the Marquis, right?”

“Well, wrong. That’s where my spin went wobbly on me, and I learned. Hairy Hal was scared and he still is. He’s never dared to get big again cause the Marquis gives him big chills. Every once in a while one of the blackskulls’ll come by to have me, and they never pay, and Hal never does anything. They’ll do it to you, too, watch. You’ll learn, Starlady. You’re a *stupid* if you hum to *anyone*, or buy anybody’s spin, or do anything for anyone but *you!*”

Janey waited until the outburst had passed. Then, very quietly, she said, “If you gave up on Hal, then why are you still here?”

Before Mayliss could answer the door opened, and Hairy Hal and Golden Boy were back. Hal was smiling broadly. He reached under his cape, pulled out a packet, and tossed it on the table. Mayliss looked at it, grinned, and whistled.

“Golden Boy clicked *good* down in the Ivory Halls,” Hal said. Then, startled, he stopped and looked at Janey. She’d gone to Golden Boy and wrapped her arms around him and now she was fighting not to cry.

\* \* \*

So things began to click.

Down inside, in the Ivory Halls and the Velvet Corridors, in the great cool compartments around the Central Square, the word was loose. And the customers came; sleek blond men in woven robes, matrons in dragon dresses, adventurous girls in soft plastic. Others sent for Golden Boy, and Hairy Hal took him to them, walking the streets inside as if he were born to them. He handled things quiet and smooth, and he sold Golden Boy only for big money. No starstlum funboys got their hands on him; Hal had his wide-eyed gold mine reserved for men of taste.

And Golden Boy went, and did what was required of him. He never spoke, but he seemed to understand, sometimes even without Hal telling him. It was almost like he knew what he was doing. Sometimes the insiders would buy him for a night, and Janey would float in her sleep-web alone.

On one of those nights, Hal returned from inside by himself, carrying a heavy book under his good arm. He was sitting at the table, poring over the pages, when Janey and a customer returned from the Silver Plaza. He ignored them and kept poring.

When the man had gone, Janey came out and looked at him sullenly. “What’s that?” she asked. Hal glanced up, smiled. “Hey, Starlady. Come an’ look. Hal got it for Golden Boy tonight from an insider. It’s old, you know, pre-Collapse. Straight spin!”

Janey walked around behind him to peer over his shoulder. The pages were big, glossy, full of closely packed text and bright holostrations of strange creatures in colorful costumes.

“There’s something here, look here, about a race that might be Golden Boy’s. Look at that picture, Starlady, the same, only the hair is the wrong color. Still. They were a Hrangan slave-race before the war or the Collapse. So, probly Golden Boy is a little Bashii. Unless....” He riffled some more pages. “Here, this part about genetic alteration experiments an’ cloning an’ that stuff. The Earth Imperials were trying to clone their best pilots an’ such, duplicate them. An’ you had alters, like Stumblecat cept he’s a defect. See starlady, it has this bit about *esthetic* alters on Old Earth, pretty boys, being worked up. So. Maybe he’s one of those. From Old Earth, what a spin! Thisrock hasn’t heard from that far in, well, long time. It chills you, right Janey?”

His enthusiasm was a flood; Janey felt herself smiling at him. “I don’t think he’s from Old Earth,” she said. “If he were, he could talk to us. He’s probably a Bashii. But I really don’t care what he is. He’s just Golden Boy.”

“*Just!* Janey, you’re positively warm. Listen, he’s clicking for us, Starlady. They hum to him down there, they hum high an’ hot, an’ probly they’re going to want him down there more, right? But he won’t do it right less Hal wants it, *an’* Janey, of course. In a while, Starlady, we can buy down inside, all of us, cause Golden Boy is Golden Boy. An’ cause Hairy Hal is quiet, right?”

“Not quiet enough, Hal,” the voice said from the doorway. Stumblecat stood there, smiling, his hand on his stingstick. “Not quite quiet enough.”

He sauntered in with the clumsy ease that was uniquely his. Crawney followed, pushing Mayliss ahead of him. She stumbled up against the table, reeled, then pulled away towards the bedrooms.

“They want to see you,” she said, looking apprehensively at Crawney and Stumblecat. “They found me on the Concourse and took my keyplate.”

Hairy Hal closed his book and stood. “Spin it,” he said. His face was a guarded blank.

“You know it all already, Hal,” Stumblecat said. Such a soft voice he had, such a civilized purr. “You’ve known it all along. We told you long ago that we bear you no grudge. You can pimp all you like, girls, boys, anything. But exotics, well, you know. The Marquis has a sentimental attachment to exotics. He collects them, you might say.”

“You been spinning us wobbly,” Crawney put in, grinning at Hal and showing off all his teeth. “But you can straighten out. Just give us your exotic.”

“Golden Boy, I believe he’s called,” said Stumblecat.

“Yes,” Hal said. “Only Golden Boy isn’t an exotic. Would Hal spin you wobbly, eh? He’s just human, an alter, look at the book.” He tapped it, offering.

“I’m not interested in any books, Hal,” Stumblecat said. “An alter is exotic enough for the Marquis. And even if you were right, well, the sad fact is we’d still want him. That much inside business is too tempting.”

“You want to get your other arm crottled?” Crawney said. “Wrong? Then you’d better hum to us, Hal.”

Hal did not move. But Mayliss did. She came around the table, grabbed him, shoved him towards them. “*Hal!*” she shrieked. “Hey, this is your *chance!* Only two of them, and Crawney never carries nothing, and Stumblecat is a clumsy stupid with his stick. *Take* them!” She pushed him again from behind.

And he hesitated, then whirled and slapped her hard. “You want to spin me cold, redhead,” he said. “There might be more outside.”

Mayliss pulled back, said nothing. Stumblecat and Crawney just watched and smiled. Janey frowned. “Hal,” she said. “You can’t give Golden Boy to the Marquis. You can’t do that, Hal, she’s right.”

But Hal ignored her. “Golden Boy’s gone now,” he said, turning back to the two men. “He’ll be back, straight spin! You can have him.”

“We’ll wait,” Crawney said.

“Yes,” said Stumblecat “And Hal, you haven’t treated us very hospitably, you know.”

Hal’s lip trembled. “I—no, Hal will set you right. Drinks?”

“Later,” said Stumblecat. “That wasn’t what I had in mind.” He walked over to Janey, reached out and stroked her hair. She shivered.

Hal looked at her. “Janey?” he said. “My Starlady? Will you....” But she was already gone, with Stumblecat, to the bedroom.

Crawney, not to be left out, took Mayliss.

\* \* \*

They watched pink shadows run as the globe pulsed.

Two of them.

Alone together.

The insider had brought Golden Boy back at last, and the blackskulls who'd been outside had taken him. Mayliss had left too, packing all her things in silence. Now there was Hairy Hal and Starlady. She sat there, calm, cold, and watched him and the shadows. This time Hal was crying.

"I can't, Janey," he said, over and over, in a broken voice. "I *can't*. He chills me, Starlady, and I've seen him with his stick. The no-knife, yes, it's a better weapon, quicker, cleaner. But *him*, the Marquis, he's too *good*. Probly Hairy Hal could've taken him, he thought he could've, one on one, no-knife against stingstick. No chance, though. An' now, Hal's all crottled. Marquis'll never face him alone anyhow."

"You're Hairy Hal," Janey said evenly. "If he could take Marquis once, you can take him now. You can't leave Golden Boy with him. You *can't*. I love Golden Boy."

Hal looked up, wincing. "Hey, Starlady," he said. "I'm spinning you straight. You want Hal cold?"

"If you won't do anything," she said. "Yes."

He shrugged. "I hum to you, Janey," he said suddenly, staring at her with something that was almost fear.

"Wonderful. But you'll never see me again." She stood up. "Give me your no-knife, Hal. If you won't try, I will."

"They'll kill you, Starlady, or worse. Root down an' listen. You won't even find the Marquis."

"Yes I will. And he'll face me one on one, too. You told me how, Hal. The Marquis is loud, remember? Well, me too. I'll stand in the middle of the Silver Plaza and shout for him until he comes. He can hardly have his blackskulls gang up on me then. If he did, who'd ever get chilled again? Will you give me the no-knife?"

"No," he said, stubborn. "You're wobbly."

"All right," she replied, leaving.

\* \* \*

Night-cycle in the Plaza, and the silver-shining overheads were out. The wall-lights provided a different illumination, winking through their color-phases, alternately dyeing the faces of the revellers blue or red or green or violet. The dancers were out in force, music was everywhere, and the air was thick with the sweet gaiety of joy-smoke.

On the polished stairway that curved up towards the second tier of shops, Starlady took her stand and began to spin.

"Hey," she called to the throngs below her, to the people pushing by, "Hey, stop and listen to me spin. You won't soon have the chance. The Marquis is going to kill me."

Below, the off-worlders paused, curious, admiring. Whispers were exchanged. Prometheans shook their heads and grinned. And the swaggers in their swoopsuits, the redheads out to sell, the drooling dreamers and the men who doled out dreams, the pimps, the bodyguards, the dancers and the thieves—well, they knew what was going on. A show was coming. They stopped to watch.

And Starlady spun, Starlady with the shiny, dark hair, in a suit of milky nightwhite that took the colors of the lights, Starlady with a black rod in her hand.

“Marquis took my lover,” she shouted to the gathering crowd. “He chilled down Hal and stole the Golden Boy, but he hasn’t chilled down me.” And now the no-knife in her hand was alive, its ghost blade flickering strangely in the violet light. And Starlady was sheathed in purple, her face stained grim and somber.

“I’ll kill him if he comes,” she said, as they drew away around her, leaving her alone on the stairs. “Me, Starlady, and I’ve never used a no-knife in my life.” The Plaza was growing quiet, tension spread outward like ripples in a pool. Here the talking stopped, there the dancers ceased to whirl, over in the corner a joyman killed his smoke machine. “But he won’t come, not Marquis, and I’ll tell you why. He’s chilled.”

And now the light clicked over, and Starlady was a vision in green, the ghost blade a writhing bluish shadow. “You’ve seen him kill, starslummers,” she said, with a shake of emerald-dark hair. “And you’ve heard the wobbly spins, right? Marquis, who hums to pain. Marquis, Thisrock’s top ’stick.” She threw back her head and laughed. Over on the far side of the Plaza, they were muting their music and drifting her way. “Well, think now, have you ever seen him *fight*? Without his blackskulls? Without Crawney—” she pointed, and a man with a shiny striped skull straightened and glared and rushed towards the nearest corridor— “and Stumblecat—” she whirled the other way and picked him out lounging against a food stall, and Stumblecat smiled and lifted his stingstick and waved— “to hold the arms of his victim?”

The light clicked again, and she was bright blue and glowing, and the no-knife was suddenly invisible. Now the Plaza was dead, still, captive to the Starlady. “No,” she shouted, “you haven’t, no one has. Straight spin! Remember what you see tonight, watch when the blackskulls come and take me, watch how they hold my arms when Marquis kills me, and remember how he was too chilled to come alone!”

A murmur went through the throng, and eyes lifted. And Starlady turned and smiled. Two blackskulls were coming down the stairs behind her, their faces hard chalk-blue. “See?” she told the crowd. “I spun you straight!”

Only then someone bounded out of the audience below, a yellow-faced youth with sparkling circles on his head and a glittery gold-flake swoopsuit. He took the stairs three at a time, past her, and a stingstick was in his fist. He waved it at the blackskulls. “No, no,” he shouted, grinning. “No grabs, soursticks. I’m humming to a show.”

The blackskulls drew their own sticks and prepared to take him. But then another swagger joined him, all aglow in dazzlesilk. And then a third, and a fourth with a wicked white nervelash. And others came running down behind them, sticks drawn. Out in the plains of the Plaza, a dozen other blackskulls found themselves surrounded. The mob wanted Marquis.

And Starlady, shining crimson, stood and waited, and when she moved the red reflections flashed in her hair like liquid fire. Till another voice challenged hers.

“You spin a wobbly spin, Starlady,” Hairy Hal said from the foot of the stairs. They’d gone for him, of course. By now the news had rippled far beyond the Silver Plaza. “Probly little Janey Small of Rhiannon hasn’t seen the Marquis kill, but Hairy Hal has. He’s *good*, redhead, an’ Hal is going to watch while he teaches you how to scream.”

Heads turned, people murmured. Hairy Hal, well, wasn’t he her lover? No, the answers came, she never hummed to him, so maybe his hum’s gone sour.

“There’s Hairy Hal,” Starlady called from her perch. “Hairy Hal the quiet pimp, but you ought to call him Chilly Hal. Ask Mayliss, and she’ll tell you. Ask me, too, about Golden Boy and Hal.”

Stumblecat, his stingstick sheathed, pushed his way forward and stood next to Hal. "Hal's just smart, Janey," he said smiling. "You, sadly, are not. Though you *are* pretty. Maybe the Marquis will let you live, and rent you out to nerve lash freaks."

Hal laughed, coarsely. "Yes. Hal could hum to that."

Her eyes flashed at him, as the red light flicked to gold. Then Marquis came.

He walked easily, gracefully, swinging his stingstick and smiling. His eyes were lost behind their dark ring. Crawney scrambled beside him, trying to keep up.

As if on signal, Stumblecat drew his stick and gestured. People pulled back, leaving a clear circle at the base of the stairway. A wall formed to keep onlookers out; blackskulls and Starlady's swaggers, working together.

Starlady descended, golden.

The ring closed around her. Inside was only Crawney, Stumblecat, the Marquis, and Hairy Hal. Plus her, plus Starlady. Or was it Janey Small, from Rhiannon?

The light went violet again. The Marquis smiled darkly, and Janey Small suddenly looked small indeed. She shifted her no-knife nervously from one hand to another, then back again.

As they advanced, Stumblecat sidled up to Hairy Hal. He grinned, and lifted his stingstick, and jabbed Hal very lightly in the chest. Pain sparkwheeled out, and Hal winced.

"Your no-knife, Hal," Stumblecat said. "On the ground."

"Hey, sure, Hal's on your side," he said. His good hand reached under the cape, came out again, and dropped a dead knife to the floor. "Straight spin, Stumblecat! Starlady needs a stinging, she never learned the rules, right?"

Stumblecat just smiled. "Maybe," he said. "Maybe that's what you think." He eyed Hal speculatively. His stingstick wandered under the corner of the cape, began to lift it. Then, suddenly, he glanced over at the Marquis, laughed, and changed his mind. Stumblecat put the stick away.

"They all saw me disarm you, Hal," he said, nodding.

Meanwhile Janey circled, holding her no-knife out clumsily, trying to keep the Marquis at bay. He hadn't moved yet. He just grinned at her and waved his stick, like a snake preparing for the strike. When the light clicked from purple to green, she jumped, bringing the ghost blade down at his baton. One touch, cut it in half, and he was hers. She'd seen Hal do it oh, so often. But the Marquis just flicked his stick back, blinking-quick, and her no-knife severed air. Then it whirled forward again, to brush her wrist. Janey screamed and pulled back. The no-knife rang upon the floor.

She backed away. The Marquis followed. "Not over, silly ship girl," he said to her softly, as she clutched her wrist. "I'm going to chill you good, and hurt you, and teach you how things work. Come to me, Starlady."

And he darted at her, his stick brushing one cheek. She screamed again, as an angry flush appeared. The Marquis had his stick set on maximum.

He was cornering her, advancing towards her, herding her toward the ring of stingsticks that kept the crowd away. As he drifted in, oh so slowly, the watchers pushed and shoved for better position, while inside the ring, Crawney and Stumblecat and Hairy Hal followed behind him.

Janey took one step too far backwards, came up against a stick, yelped, jumped forward again. The Marquis stroked her lovingly, down her side, and heard another scream.

She rushed at him then, tried to grab the stick, screamed again as she finally caught it and had to let it go. He gave her another swat as she rushed past, past him and Hal and Stumblecat, towards the fallen no-knife.

Marquis swiveled and started to follow. But Hal stepped beside him, then, and the Marquis shoved up against his cape.

And cried a gurgling cry.

And fell.

It was quite an ordinary kitchen knife sticking through Hal's cape. Beneath, clutching it and trembling, a crottled blackened hand.

By then, Janey had recovered her no-knife. She finished the Marquis as he lay there bleeding.

There were loud noises from the crowd. Stumblecat snarled and gestured, and suddenly the ring broke, the blackskulls began swinging their sticks and people shouted and shrieked and scattered. A few swaggers fought briefly before running. And Crawney was still standing open-mouthed while Stumblecat picked up Hal's no-knife, moved in behind him, and neatly slit his throat. There was only room for one emperor at a time.

In the center of chaos, Hal stood smiling. Janey knelt by the Marquis. "Hey, Starlady," Hal said. "We did it. I did it. Now we can get back an' buy our way down, an'..."

"I still don't have Golden Boy," she said coldly.

Stumblecat walked over and smiled down at her. "Ah, but you do. He doesn't seem to understand us. I think he had some sort of empathic link with you, or Hal, or both. Join us, Starlady, and you'll have him every night."

"Hey!" Hal said, angrily.

"All right," said Janey.

He looked at her shocked. "*Janey*," he said. "You're spinning wobbly. I killed him for you, Starlady, my Starlady. Like you wanted."

"That's what Mayliss wanted, Hal," she said, standing. "I just wanted Golden Boy. And I'm going to have him. He's not like the rest of you. He's still clean, and kind, and I love him." She smiled.

"But," said Hal. "But, Starlady, Hal hums—I *love*, you. What about me?"

"What about you?" Starlady said.

And she went off with Stumblecat, to find her Golden Boy.

\* \* \*

In the end, some of them were dead. The rest survived.

# Nightflyers

## (Original)

When Jesus of Nazareth hung dying on his cross, the volcryn passed within a light-year of his agony, headed outward.

When the Fire Wars raged on Earth, the volcryn sailed near Old Poseidon, where the seas were still unnamed and unfished. By the time the stardrive had transformed the Federated Nations of Earth into the Federal Empire, the volcryn had moved into the fringes of Hrangan space. The Hrangans never knew it. Like us they were children of the small bright worlds that circled their scattered suns, with little interest and less knowledge of the things that moved in the gulfs between.

War flamed for a thousand years and the volcryn passed through it, unknowing and untouched, safe in a place where no fires could ever burn. Afterwards the Federal Empire was shattered and gone, and the Hrangans vanished in the dark of the Collapse, but it was no darker for the volcryn.

When Kleronomas took his survey ship out from Avalon, the volcryn came within ten light-years of him. Kleronomas found many things, but he did not find the volcryn. Not then did he and not on his return to Avalon a lifetime later.

When I was a child of three, Kleronomas was dust, as distant and dead as Jesus of Nazareth and the *volcryn* passed close to Daronne. That season all the Crey sensitives grew strange and sat staring at the stars with luminous, flickering eyes.

When I was grown, the *volcryn* had sailed beyond Tara, past the range of even the Crey, still heading outward.

And now I am old and the *volcryn* will soon pierce the Tempter's Veil where it hangs like a black mist between the stars. And we follow, we follow. Through the dark gulfs where no one goes, through the emptiness, through the silence that goes on and on, my *Nightflyer* and I give chase.

From the hour the *Nightflyer* slipped into stardrive, Royd Eris watched his passengers.

Nine riders had boarded at the orbital docks above Avalon; five women and four men, each an Academy scholar, their backgrounds as diverse as their fields of study. Yet, to Royd, they dressed alike, looked alike, even sounded alike. On Avalon, most cosmopolitan of worlds, they had become as one in their quest for knowledge.

The *Nightflyer* was a trader, not a passenger vessel. It offered one double cabin, one closet-sized single. The other academicians rigged sleepwebs in the four great cargo holds, some in close confinement with the instruments and computer systems they had packed on board. When restive, they could wander two short corridors, one leading from the driveroom and the main airlock up past the cabins to a well-appointed lounge-library-kitchen, the other looping down to the cargo holds.

Ultimately it did not matter where they wandered. Even in the sanitary stations, Royd had eyes and ears.

And always and everywhere, Royd watched.

Concepts like a right of privacy did not concern him, but he knew they might concern his passengers, if they knew of his activities. He made certain that they did not.

Royd's own quarters, three spacious chambers forward of the passenger lounge, were sealed and inviolate; he never left them. To his riders, he was a disembodied voice over the communicators that sometimes called them for long conversations, and a holographic spectre that joined them for meals in the lounge. His ghost was a lithe, pale-



eyed young man with white hair who dressed in filmy pastel clothing twenty years out of date, and it had the disconcerting habit of looking past the person Royd was addressing, or in the wrong direction altogether, but after a few days the academicians grew accustomed to it. The holograph walked only in the lounge, in any event.

But Royd, secretly, silently, lived everywhere, and ferreted out all of their little secrets.

The cyberneticist talked to her computers, and seemed to prefer their company to that of humans.

The xenobiologist was surly, argumentative, and a solitary drinker.

The two linguists, lovers in public, seldom had sex and snapped bitterly at each other in private.

The psipsych was a hypochondriac given to black depressions, which worsened in the close confines of the *Nightflyer*. Royd watched them work, eat, sleep, copulate; he listened untiringly to their talk. Within a week, the nine of them no longer seemed the same to him at all. Each of them was strange and unique, he had concluded.

By the time the *Nightflyer* had been under drive for two weeks, two of the passengers had come to engage even more of his attention. He neglected none of them, watched all, but now, specially, he focused on Karoly d'Branin and Melantha Jhirl.

"Most of all, I want to know the *why* of them," Karoly d'Branin told him one false night the second week out from Avalon. Royd's luminescent ghost sat close to d'Branin in the darkened lounge, watching him drink bittersweet chocolate. The others were all asleep. Night and day are meaningless on a starship, but the *Nightflyer* kept the usual cycles, and most of the passengers followed them. Only Karoly d'Branin, administrator and generalist, kept his own solitary time.

"The *if* of them is important as well, Karoly," Royd replied, his soft voice coming from the communicator panels in the walls. "Can you be truly certain if these aliens of yours exist?"

"I can be certain," Karoly d'Branin replied. "That is enough. If everyone else were certain as well, we would have a fleet of research ships instead of your little *Nightflyer*." He sipped at his chocolate, and gave a satisfied sigh. "Do you know the Nor T'alush, Royd?"

The name was strange to him, but it took Royd only a moment to consult his library computer. "An alien race on the other side of human space, past the Fyndii worlds and the Damoosh. Possibly legendary."

D'Branin chuckled. "Your library is out-of-date. You must supplement it the next time you are on Avalon. Not legends, no, real enough, though far away. We have little information about the Nor T'alush, but we are sure they exist, though you and I may never meet one. They were the start of it all.

"I was coding some information into the, computers, a packet newly arrived from Dam Tullian after twenty standard years in transit. Part of it was Nor T'alush folklore. I had no idea how long that had taken to get to Dam Tullian, or by what route it had come, but it was fascinating material. Did you know that my first degree was in xenomythology?"

"I did not," Royd said. "Please continue."

"The volcryn story was among the Nor T'alush myths. It awed me; a race of sentients moving out from some mysterious origin in the core of the galaxy, sailing towards the galactic edge and, it was alleged, eventually bound for intergalactic space itself, meanwhile keeping always to the interstellar depths, no planetfalls, seldom coming within a light-year of a star. And doing it all without a stardrive, in ships moving only a fraction of the speed of light! That was the detail that obsessed me! Think how old they must be, those ships!"

"Old," Royd agreed. "Karoly, you said ships. More than one?"

"Oh, yes, there are," d'Branin said. "According to the Nor T'alush, one or two appeared first, on the innermost edges of their trading sphere, but others followed. Hundreds of them, each solitary, moving by itself, bound outward, always the same. For fifteen thousand standard years they moved between the Nor T'alush stars, and

then they began to pass out from among them. The myth said that the last *volcryn* ship was gone three thousand years ago."

"Eighteen thousand years," Royd said, adding, "are your Nor T'alush that old?"

D'Branin smiled. "Not as star-travellers, no. According to their own histories, the Nor T'alush have only been civilized for about half that long. That stopped me for a while. It seemed to make the *volcryn* story clearly a legend. A wonderful legend, true, but nothing more.

"Ultimately, however, I could not let it alone. In my spare time, I investigated, cross-checking with other alien cosmologies to see whether this particular myth was shared by any races other than the Nor T'alush. I thought perhaps I would get a thesis out of it. It was a fruitful line of inquiry.

"I was startled by what I found. Nothing from the Hrangans, or the Hrangan slaveraces, but that made sense, you see. They were *out* from human space, the *volcryn* would not reach them until after they had passed through our own sphere. When I looked *in*, however, the *volcryn* story was everywhere. The Fyndii had it, the Damoosh appeared to accept it as literal truth—and the Damoosh, you know, are the oldest race we have ever encountered—and there was a remarkably similar story told among the gethsoids of Aath. I checked what little was known about the races said to flourish further in still, beyond even the Nor T'alush, and they had the *volcryn* story too."

"The legend of the legends," Royd suggested. The spectre's wide mouth turned up in a smile.

"Exactly, exactly," d'Branin agreed. "At that point, I called in the experts, specialists from the Institute for the Study of Nonhuman Intelligence. We researched for two years. It was all there, in the files and the libraries at the Academy. No one had ever looked before, or bothered to put it together.

"The *volcryn* have been moving through the manrealm for most of human history, since before the dawn of spaceflight. While we twist the fabric of space itself to cheat relativity, they have been sailing their great ships right through the heart of our alleged civilization, past our most populous worlds, at stately slow sublight speeds, bound for the Fringe and the dark between the galaxies. Marvelous, Royd, marvelous!"

"Marvelous," Royd agreed.

Karoly d'Branin set down his chocolate cup and leaned forward eagerly towards Royd's projection, but his hand passed through empty light when he tried to grasp his companion by the forearm. He seemed disconcerted for a moment, before he began to laugh at himself. "Ah, my *volcryn*. I grow overenthused, Royd. I am so close now. They have preyed on my mind for a dozen years, and within a month I will have them. Then, *then*, if only I can open communication, if only my people can reach them, then at last I will know the *why* of it!"

The ghost of Royd Eris, master of the *Nightfiyer*, smiled for him and looked on through calm unseeing eyes.

Passengers soon grow restless on a starship under drive, sooner on one as small and spare as the *Nightfiyer*. Late in the second week, the speculation began. Royd heard it all.

"Who is this Royd Eris, really?" the xenobiologist complained one night when four of them were playing cards.

"Why doesn't he come out? What's the purpose of keeping himself sealed off from the rest of us?"

"Ask him," the linguist suggested. No one did.

When he was not talking to Karoly d'Branin, Royd watched Melantha Jhirl. She was good to watch. Young, healthy, active, Melantha Jhirl had a vibrancy about her that the others could not touch. She was big in every way; a head taller than anyone else on board, large-framed, large-breasted, long-legged, strong, muscles moving fluidly beneath shiny coal-black skin. Her appetites were big as well. She ate twice as much as any of her colleagues, drank heavily without ever seeming drunk, exercised for hours every day on equipment she had brought with her and set up in one of the cargo holds. By the third week out she had sexed with all four of the

men on board and two of the other women. Even in bed she was always active, exhausting most of her partners. Royd watched her with consuming interest.

"I am an improved model," she told him once as she worked out on her parallel bars, sweat glistening on her bare skin, her long black hair confined in a net.

"Improved?" Royd said. He could not send his holographic ghost down to the holds, but Melantha had summoned him with the communicator to talk while she exercised, not knowing he would have been there anyway.

She paused in her routine, holding her body aloft with the strength of her arms. "Altered, Captain," she said. She had taken to calling him that. "Born on Prometheus among the elite, child of two genetic wizards. Improved, Captain. I require twice the energy you do, but I use it all. A more efficient metabolism, a stronger and more durable body, an expected lifespan half again the normal human's. My people have made some terrible mistakes when they try to radically redesign the lessers, but the small improvements they do well."

She resumed her exercises, moving quickly and easily, silent until she had finished. Then, breathing heavily, she crossed her arms and cocked her head and grinned. "Now you know my life story, Captain, unless you care to hear the part about my defection to Avalon, my extraordinary work in nonhuman anthropology, and my tumultuous and passionate lovelife. Do you?"

"Perhaps some other time," Royd said, politely.

"Good," Melantha Jhirl replied. She snatched up a towel and began to dry the sweat from her body. "I'd rather hear your *life* story, anyway. Among my modest attributes is an insatiable curiosity. Who are you, Captain? Really?"

"One as improved as you," Royd replied, "should certainly be able to guess."

Melantha laughed, and tossed her towel at the communicator grill.

By that time all of them were guessing, when they did not think Royd was listening. He enjoyed the rumors. "He talks to us, but he can't be seen," the cyberneticist said. "This ship is uncrewed, seemingly all automated except for him. Why not entirely automated, then? I'd wager Royd Eris is a fairly sophisticated computer system, perhaps an Artificial Intelligence. Even a modest program can carry on a blind conversation indistinguishable from a human's."

The telepath was a frail young thing, nervous, sensitive, with limp flaxen hair and watery blue eyes. He sought out Karoly d'Branin in his cabin, the cramped single, for a private conversation. "I feel it," he said excitedly. "Something is wrong, Karoly, something is very wrong. I'm beginning to get frightened." D'Branin was startled. "Frightened? I don't understand, my friend. What is there for you to fear?"

The young man shook his head. "I don't know, I don't know. Yet it's there, I feel it. Karoly, I'm picking up something. You know I'm good, I am, that's why you picked me. Class one, tested, and I tell you I'm afraid. I sense it. Something dangerous. Something volatile—and alien."

"My *volcryn*?" d'Branin said.

"No, no, impossible. We're in drive, they're light-years away." The telepath's laugh was desperate. "I'm not *that* good, Karoly. I've heard your Crey story, but I'm only a human. No, this is close. On the ship."

"One of us?"

"Maybe," the telepath said. "I can't sort it out."

D'Branin sighed and put a fatherly hand on the young man's shoulder. "I thank you for coming to me, but I cannot act unless you have something more definite. This feeling of yours—could it be that you are just tired? We have all of us been under strain. Inactivity can be taxing."

"This is real," the telepath insisted, but he left peacefully.

Afterward d'Branin went to the psipsych, who was lying in her sleepweb surrounded by medicines, complaining bitterly of aches. "Interesting," she said when d'Branin told her. "I've felt something too, a sense of threat, very vague, diffuse. I thought it was me, the confinement, the boredom, the way I feel. My moods betray me at times. Did he say anything more specific?"

"No."

"I'll make an effort to move around, read him, read the others, see what I can pick up. Although, if this is real, he should know it first. He's a one, I'm only a three."

D'Branin nodded, reassured. Later, when the rest had gone to sleep, he made some chocolate and talked to Royd through the false night. But he never mentioned the telepath once.

"Have you noticed the clothes on that holograph he sends us?" the xenobiologist said to the others. "A decade out of style, at least. I don't think he really looks like that. What if he's deformed, sick, ashamed to be seen the way he really looks? Perhaps he has some disease. The Slow Plague can waste a person terribly, but it takes decades to kill, and there are other contagions, manthrax and new leprosy and Langamen's Disease. Could it be that Royd's self-imposed quarantine is just that. A quarantine. Think about it."

In the fifth week out, Melantha Jhirl pushed her pawn to the sixth rank and Royd saw it was unstoppable and resigned. It was his eighth straight defeat at her hands in as many days. She was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the lounge, the chessmen spread out before her on a view-screen, its receiver dark. Laughing, she swept them away. "Don't feel bad, Royd," she told him. "I'm an improved model. Always three moves ahead."

"I should tie in my computer," he replied. "You'd never know." His holographic ghost materialized suddenly, standing in front of the viewscreen, and smiled at her.

"I'd know within three moves," Melantha Jhirl said. "Try it." She stood up and walked right through his projection on her way to the kitchen, where she found herself a bulb of beer. "When are you going to break down and let me behind your wall for a visit, Captain?" she asked, talking up to a communicator grill. She refused to treat his ghost as real. "Don't you get lonely there? Sexually frustrated? Claustrophobic?"

"I've flown the *Nightflyer* all my life, Melantha," Royd said. His projection ignored, winked out. "If I were subject to claustrophobia, sexual frustration, or loneliness, such a life would have been impossible. Surely that should be obvious to you, being as improved a model as you are?"

She took a squeeze of her beer and laughed her mellow, musical laugh at him. "I'll solve you yet, Captain," she warned.

"Fine," he said. "Meanwhile, tell me some more lies about your life."

"Have you ever heard of Jupiter?" the xenotech demanded of the others.

She was drunk, lolling in her sleep-web in the cargo hold.

"Something to do with Earth," one of the linguists said. "The same myth system originated both names, I believe."

"Jupiter," the xenotech announced loudly, "is a gas giant in the same solar system as Old Earth. Didn't know that, did you? They were on the verge of exploring it when the stardrive was discovered, oh, way back.

After that, nobody bothered with gas giants. Just slip into drive and find the habitable worlds, settle them, ignore the comets and the rocks and the gas giants—there's another star just a few light-years away, and it has more habitable planets. But there were people who thought those Jupiters might have life, you know. Do you see?"

The xenobiologist looked annoyed. "If there is intelligent life on the gas giants, it shows no interest in leaving them," he snapped. "All of the sentient species we have met up to now have originated on worlds similar to Earth, and most of them are oxygen breathers. Unless you suggest that the *volcryn* are from a gas giant?"

The xenotech pushed herself up to a sitting position and smiled conspiratorially. "Not the *volcryn*," she said. "Royd Eris. Crack that forward bulkhead in the lounge, and watch the methane and ammonia come smoking out." Her hand made a sensuous waving motion through the air, and she convulsed with giddy laughter.

"I dampened him," the psipsych reported to Karoly d'Branin during the sixth week. "Psionine-4. It will blunt his receptivity for several days, and I have more if he needs it."

D'Branin wore a stricken look. "We talked several times, he and I. I could see that he was becoming ever more fearful, but he could never tell me the why of it. Did you absolutely have to shut him off?"

The psipsych shrugged. "He was edging into the irrational. You should never have taken a class one telepath, d'Branin. Too unstable."

"We must communicate with an alien race. I remind you that is no easy task. The *volcryn* are perhaps more alien than any sentients we have yet encountered. Because of that we needed class one skills."

"Glib," she said, "but you might have no working skills at all, given the condition of your class one. Half the time he's catatonic and half the time crazy with fear. He insists that we're all in real physical danger, but he doesn't know why or from what. The worst of it is I can't tell if he's really sensing something or simply having an acute attack of paranoia. He certainly displays some classic paranoid symptoms. Among other things, he believes he's being watched. Perhaps his condition is completely unrelated to us, the *volcryn*, and his talent. I can't be sure at this point in time."

"What of your own talent?" d'Branin said. "You are an empath, are you not?"

"Don't tell me my job," she said sharply. "I sexed with him last week."

You don't get more proximity or better rapport for esping than that. Even under those conditions, I couldn't be sure of anything. His mind is a chaos, and his fear is so rank it stank up the sheets. I don't read anything from the others either, besides the ordinary tensions and frustrations. But I'm only a three, so that doesn't mean much. My abilities are limited. You know I haven't been feeling well, d'Branin. I can barely breathe on this ship. My head throbs. Ought to stay in bed."

"Yes, of course," d'Branin said hastily. "I did not mean to criticize. You have been doing all you can under difficult circumstances. Yet, I must ask, is it vital he be Dampened? Is there no other way? Royd will take us out of drive soon, and we will make contact with the *volcryn*. We will need him."

The psipsych rubbed her temple wearily. "My other option was an injection of esperon. It would have opened him up completely, tripled his psionic receptivity for a few hours. Then, hopefully, he could home in this danger he's feeling. Exorcise it if it's false, deal with it if it's real. But psionine-4 is a lot safer. The physical side effects of esperon are debilitating, and emotionally I don't think he's stable enough to deal with that kind of power. The psionine should tell us something. If his paranoia continues to persist, I'll know it has nothing to do with his telepathy."

"And if it does not persist?" Karoly d'Brania said. She smiled wickedly. "Then we'll know that he really was picking up some sort of threat, won't we?"

False night came, and Royd's wraith materialized while Karoly d'Branin sat brooding over his chocolate. "Karoly," the apparition said, "would it be possible to tie in the computer your team brought on board with my shipboard system? Those *volcryn* stories fascinate me, and I'd like to be able to study them at my leisure."

"Certainly," d'Branin replied in an offhand, distracted manner. "It is time we got our system up and running in any case. Soon, now, we will be dropping out of drive."

"Soon," Royd agreed. "Approximately seventy hours from now."

At dinner the following day, Royd's projection did not appear. The academicians ate uneasily, expecting their host to materialize at any moment, take his accustomed place, and join in the mealtime conversation. Their expectations were still unfulfilled when the afterdinner pots of chocolate and spiced tea and coffee were set on the table before them.

"Our captain seems to be occupied," Melantha Jhirl observed, leaning back in her chair and swirling a snifter of brandy.

"We will be shifting out of drive soon," Karoty d'Branin said. "There are preparations to make."

Some of the others looked at one another. All nine of them were present, although the young telepath seemed lost in his own head. The xenobiologist broke the silence. "He doesn't eat. He's a damned holograph. What does it matter if he misses a meal? Maybe it's just as well. Karoly, a lot of us have been getting uneasy about Royd. What do you know about this mystery man anyway?"

D'Branin looked at him with wide, puzzled eyes. "Know, my friend?" he said, leaning forward to refill his cup with the thick, bittersweet chocolate. "What is there to know?"

"Surely you've noticed that he never comes out to play with us," the female linguist said drily. "Before you engaged his ship, did anyone remark on this quirk of his?"

"I'd like to know the answer to that too," her partner said. "A lot of traffic comes and goes through Avalon. How did you come to choose Eris? What were you told about him?"

D'Branin hesitated. "Told about him? Very little, I must admit, I spoke to a few port officials and charter companies, but none of them were acquainted with Royd. He had not traded out of Avalon originally, you see."

"Where *is* he from?" the linguists demanded in unison. They looked at each other, and the woman continued. "We've listened to him. He has no discernible accent, no idiosyncrasies of speech to betray his origins. Tell us, where did this *Nightflyer* come from?"

"I—I don't know, actually," d'Branin admitted, hesitating. "I never thought to ask him about it."

The members of his research team glanced at each other incredulously. "You never thought to *ask*?" the xenotech said. "How did you select this ship, then?"

"It was available. The administrative council approved my project and assigned me personnel, but they could not spare an Academy ship. There were budgetary constraints as well." All eyes were on him.

"What d'Branin is saying," the psipsych interrupted, "is that the Academy was pleased with his studies in xenomyth, with the discovery of the *volcryn* legend, but less than enthusiastic about his plan to prove the *volcryn* real. So they gave him a small budget to keep him happy and productive, assuming that this little mission would be fruitless, and they assigned him workers who wouldn't be missed back on Avalon." She looked around at each person. "Except for d'Branin," she said, "not a one of us is a first-rate scholar."

"Well, you can speak for yourself," Melantha Jhirl said. "I volunteered for this mission."

"I won't argue the point," the psipsych said. "The crux is that the choice of the *Nightflyer* is no large enigma. You engaged the cheapest charter you could find, didn't you, d'Branin?"

"Some of the available ships would not even consider my proposition," d'Branin said. "The sound of it is odd, we must admit. And many ship masters seemed to have a superstitious fear of dropping out of drive in interstellar space, without a planet near. Of those who agreed to the conditions, Royd Eris offered the best terms, and he was able to leave at once."

"And we *had* to leave at once," said the female linguist. "Otherwise the *volcryn* might get away. They've only been passing through this region for ten thousand years, give or take a few thousand," she said sarcastically.

Someone laughed. D'Branin was nonplussed. "Friends, no doubt I could have postponed departure. I admit I was eager to meet my *volcryn*, to ask them the questions that have haunted me, to discover the why of them, but I must also admit that a delay would have been no great hardship. But why? Royd is a gracious host, a skilled pilot, he has treated us well."

"He has made himself a cipher," someone said.

"What is he hiding?" another voice demanded.

Melantha Jhirl laughed. When all eyes had moved to her, she grinned and shook her head. "Captain Royd is perfect, a strange man for a strange mission. Don't any of you love a mystery? Here we are flying light-years to intercept a hypothetical alien starship from the core of the galaxy that has been outward bound for longer than humanity has been having wars, and all of you are upset because you can't count the warts on Royd's nose." She leaned across the table to refill her brandy snifter. "My mother was right," she said lightly. "Normals are subnormal."

"Melantha is correct," Karoly d'Branin said quietly. "Royd's foibles and neuroses are his business, if he does not impose them on us."

"It makes me uncomfortable," someone complained weakly.

"For all we know, Karoly," said the xenotech, "we might be travelling with a criminal or an alien."

"*Jupiter*," someone muttered. The xenotech flushed red, and there was sniggering around the long table.

But the young, pale-haired telepath looked up suddenly and stared at them all with wild, nervous eyes. "An *alien*," he said.

The psipsych swore. "The drug is wearing off," she said quickly to d'Branin. "I'll have to go back to my room to get some more."

All of the others looked baffled; d'Branin had kept his telepath's condition a careful secret. "What drug?" the xenotech demanded. "What's going on here?"

"Danger," the telepath muttered. He turned to the cyberneticist sitting next to him, and grasped her forearm in a trembling hand. "We're in danger, I tell you, I'm reading it. Something *alien*. And it means us ill."

The psipsych rose. "He's not well," she announced to the others. "I've been dampening him with psionine, trying to hold his delusions in check. I'll get some more." She started towards the door.

"Wait," Melantha Jhirl said. "Not psionine. Try esperon." "Don't tell me my job, woman."

"Sorry," Melantha said. She gave a modest shrug. "I'm one step ahead of you, though. Esperon might exorcise his delusions, no?"

"Yes, but—"

"And it might let him focus on this threat he claims to detect, correct?"

"I know the characteristics of esperon," the psipsych said testily.

Melantha smiled over the rim of her brandy glass. "I'm sure you do," she said. "Now listen to me. All of you are anxious about Royd, it seems. You can't stand not knowing what he's concealing about himself. You suspect him of being a criminal. Fears like that won't help us work together as a team. Let's end them. Easy enough." She pointed. "Here sits a class one telepath. Boost his power with esperon and he'll be able to recite our captain's life history to us, until we're all suitably bored with it. Meanwhile he'll also be vanquishing his personal demons."

"He's watching us," the telepath said in a low, urgent voice.

"Karoly," the xenobiologist said, "this has gone too far. Several of us are nervous, and this boy is terrified. I think we all need an end to the mystery of Royd Eris. Melantha is right."

D'Branin was troubled. "We have no right—"

"We have the need," the cyberneticist said.

D'Branin's eyes met those of the psipsych, and he sighed. "Do it," he said. "Get him the esperon."

"He's going to kill me," the telepath screamed and leapt to his feet. When the cyberneticist tried to calm him with a hand on his arm, he seized a cup of coffee and threw it square in her face. It took three of them to hold him down. "Hurry," one commanded, as the youth struggled.

The psipsych shuddered and quickly left the lounge.

Royd was watching.

When the psipsych returned, they lifted the telepath to the table and forced him down, pulling aside his hair to bare the arteries in his neck.

Royd's ghost materialized in its empty chair at the foot of the long dinner table. "Stop that," it said calmly. "There is no need."

The psipsych froze in the act of slipping an ampule of esperon into her injection gun, and the xenotech startled visibly and released one of the telepath's arms. But the captive did not pull free. He lay on the table, breathing heavily, too frightened to move, his pale blue eyes fixed glassily on Royd's projection.

Melantha Jhirl lifted her brandy glass in salute. "Boo," she said. "You've missed dinner, Captain."

"Royd," said Karoly d'Branin, "I am sorry."

The ghost stared unseeing at the far wall. "Release him," said the voice from the communicators. "I will tell you my great secret, if my privacy intimidates you so."

"He has been watching us," the male linguist said.

"Tell, then," the xenotech said suspiciously. "What are you?"

"I liked your guess about the gas giants," Royd said. "Sadly, the truth is less dramatic. I am an ordinary Homo sapien in late middle-age.

Sixty-eight standard, if you require precision. The holograph you see before you was the real Royd Eris, although some years ago. I am older now.

"Oh?" The cyberneticist's face was red where the coffee had scalded her. "Then why the secrecy?"

"I will begin with my mother," Royd replied. "The *Nightflyer* was her ship originally, custom-built to her design in the Newholme spaceyards. My mother was a freetrader, a notably successful one. She made a fortune through a willingness to accept the unusual consignment, fly off the major trade routes, take her cargo a month or a year or two years beyond where it was customarily transferred. Such practices are riskier but more profitable than flying



the mail runs. My mother did not worry about how often she and her crews returned home. Her ships were her home. She seldom visited the same world twice if she could avoid it."

"Adventurous," Melantha said.

"No," said Royd. "Sociopathic. My mother did not like people, you see. Not at all. Her one great dream was to free herself from the necessity of crew. When she grew rich enough, she had it done. The *Nightflyer* was the result. After she boarded it at Newholme, she never touched a human being again, or walked a planet's surface. She did all her business from the compartments that are now mine. She was insane, but she did have an interesting life, even after that. The worlds she saw, Karoly! The things she might have told you! Your heart would break. She destroyed most of her records, however, for fear that other people might get some use or pleasure from her experience after her death. She was like that."

"And you?" the xenotech said.

"I should not call her my mother," Royd continued. "I am her cross-sex clone. After thirty years of flying this ship alone, she was bored. I was to be her companion and lover. She could shape me to be a perfect diversion.

She had no patience with children, however, and no desire to raise me herself. As an embryo, I was placed in a nurturant tank. The computer was my teacher. I was to be released when I had attained the age of puberty, at which time she guessed I would be fit company.

"Her death, a few months after the cloning, ruined the plan. She had programmed the ship for such an eventuality, however. It dropped out of drive and shut down, drifted in interstellar space for eleven years while the computer made a human being out of me. That was how I inherited the *Nightflyer*. When I was freed, it took me some years to puzzle out the operation of the ship and my own origins."

"Fascinating," said d'Branin.

"Yes," said the female linguist, "but it doesn't explain why you keep yourself in isolation."

"Ah, but it does," Melantha Jhiril said. "Captain, perhaps you should explain further for the less improved models?"

"My mother hated planets," Royd said. "She hated stinks and dirt and bacteria, the irregularity of the weather, the sight of other people. She engineered for us a flawless environment, as sterile as she could possibly make it. She disliked gravity as well. She was accustomed to weightlessness, and preferred it. These were the conditions under which I was born and raised.

"My body has no natural immunities to anything. Contact with any of you would probably kill me, and would certainly make me very sick. My muscles are feeble, atrophied. The gravity the *Nightflyer* is now generating is for your comfort, not mine. To me it is agony. At the moment I am seated in a floating chair that supports my weight. I still hurt, and my internal organs may be suffering damage. It is one reason why I do not often take on passengers."

"You share your mother's opinion of the run of humanity, then?" the psipsych said.

"I do not. I like people. I accept what I am, but I did not choose it. I experience human life in the only way I can, vicariously, through the infrequent passengers I dare to carry. At those times, I drink in as much of their lives as I can."

"If you kept your ship under weightlessness at all times, you could take on more riders, could you not?" suggested the xenobiologist.

"True," Royd said politely. "I have found, however, that most people choose not to travel with a captain who does not use his gravity grid. Prolonged free-fall makes them ill and uncomfortable. I could also mingle with my guests, I know, if I kept to my chair and wore a sealed environment suit. I have done so. I find it lessens my participation instead of increasing it. I become a freak, a maimed thing, one who must be treated differently and kept at a distance. I prefer isolation. As often as I dare, I study the aliens I take on as riders."

"Aliens?" the xenotech said, in a confused voice.

"You are all aliens to me," Royd answered.

Silence then filled the *Nightflyer's* lounge.

"I am sorry this had to happen, my friend," Karoly d'Branin said to the ghost.

"Sorry," the psipsych said. She frowned and pushed the ampule of esperon into the injection chamber. "Well, it's glib enough, but is it the truth? We still have no proof, just a new bedtime story. The holograph could have claimed it was a creature from Jupiter, a computer, or a diseased war criminal just as easily." She took two quick steps forward to where the young telepath still lay on the table. "He still needs treatment, and we still need confirmation. I don't care to live with all this anxiety, when we can end it all now." Her hand pushed the unresisting head to one side, she found the artery, and pressed the gun to it.

"No," the voice from the communicator said sternly. "Stop. I order it.

This is my ship. Stop."

The gun hissed loudly, and there was a red mark when she lifted it from the telepath's neck.

He raised himself to a half-sitting position, supported by his elbows, and the psipsych moved close to him.

"Now," she said in her best professional tones, "focus on Royd. You can do it, we all know how good you are. Wait just a moment, the esperon will open it all up for you."

His pale blue eyes were clouded. "Not close enough," he muttered. "One, I'm one, tested. Good, you know I'm good, but I got to be close." He trembled.

She put an arm around him, stroked him, coaxed him. "The esperon will give you range," she said. "Feel it, feel yourself grow stronger. Can you feel it? Everything's getting clear, isn't it?" Her voice was a reassuring drone. "Remember the danger now, remember, go find it. Look beyond the wall, tell us about it. Tell us about Royd. Was he telling the truth? Tell us. You're good, we all know that, you can tell us." The phrases were almost an incantation.

He shrugged off her support and sat upright by himself. "I can feel it," he said. His eyes were suddenly clearer. "Something—my head hurts—I'm afraid!"

"Don't be afraid," the psipsych said. "The esperon won't make your head hurt, it just makes you better. Nothing to fear." She stroked his brow. "Tell us what you see."

The telepath looked at Royd's ghost with terrified little-boy eyes, and his tongue flicked across his lower lip. "He's—"

Then his skull exploded.

It was three hours later when the survivors met again to talk.

In the hysteria and confusion of the aftermath, Melantha Jhirl had taken charge. She gave orders, pushing her brandy aside and snapping out commands with the ease of one born to it, and the others seemed to find a numbing solace in doing as they were told. Three of them fetched a sheet, and wrapped the headless body of the young telepath within, and shoved it through the driverroom airlock at the end of the ship. Two others, on Melantha's order, found water and cloth and began to clean up the lounge. They did not get far. Mopping the blood from the table-top, the cyberneticist suddenly began to retch violently. Karoly d'Branin, who had sat still and shocked since it happened, woke and took the blood-soaked rag from her hand and led her away, back to his cabin.

Melantha Jhirl was helping the psipsych, who had been standing very close to the telepath when he died. A sliver of bone had penetrated her cheek just below her right eye, she was covered with blood and pieces of flesh and bone and brain, and she had gone into shock. Melantha removed the bone splinter, led her below, cleaned her, and put her to sleep with a shot of one of her own drugs.

And, at length, she got the rest of them together in the largest of the cargo holds, where three of them slept.

Seven of the surviving eight attended. The psipsych was still asleep, but the cyberneticist seemed to have recovered. She sat cross-legged on the floor, her features pale and drawn, waiting for Melantha to begin.

It was Karoly d'Branin who spoke first, however, "I do not understand," he said. "I do not understand what has happened. What could ..."

"Royd killed him, is all," the xenotech said bitterly. "His secret was endangered, so he just—just blew him apart."

"I cannot believe that," Karoly d'Branin said, anguished. "I cannot. Royd and I, we have talked, talked many a night when the rest of you were sleeping. He is gentle, inquisitive, sensitive. A dreamer. He understands about the *volcryn*. He would not do such a thing."

"His holograph certainly winked out quick enough when it happened," the female linguist said. "And you'll notice he hasn't had much to say since."

"The rest of you haven't been usually talkative either," Melantha Jhirl said. "I don't know what to think, but my impulse is to side with Karoly. We have no proof that the captain was responsible for what happened." The xenotech made a loud rude noise. "Proof."

"In fact," Melantha continued unperturbed, "I'm not even sure anyone is responsible. Nothing happened until he was given the esperon. Could the drug be at fault?"

"Hell of a side effect," the female linguist muttered.

The xenobiologist frowned. "This is not my field, but I know esperon is an extremely potent drug, with severe physical effects as well as psionic. The instrument of death was probably his own talent, augmented by the drug. Besides boosting his principal power, his telepathic sensitivity, esperon would also tend to bring out other psi-talents that might have been latent in him."

"Such as?" someone demanded. "Biocontrol. Telekinesis."

Melantha Jhirl was way ahead of him. "Increase the pressure inside his skull sharply, by rushing all the blood in his body to his brain. Decrease the air pressure around his head simultaneously, using teke to induce a short-lived vacuum. Think about it."

They thought about it, and none of them liked it. "It could have been self-induced," Karoly d'Branin said.

"Or a stronger talent could have turned his power against him," the xenotech said stubbornly.

"No human telepath has talent on that order, to seize control of someone else, body and mind and soul, even for an instant."

"Exactly," the xenotech said. "No human telepath."

"Gas giant people?" The cyberneticist's tone was mocking.

The xenotech stared her down. "I could talk about Crey sensitives or githyanki soulsucks, name a half-dozen others off the top of my head, but I don't need to. I'll only name one. A Hrangan Mind."

That was a disquieting thought. All of them fell silent and moved uneasily, thinking of the vast, inimicable power of a Hrangan Mind hidden in the command chambers of the *Nightflyer*, until Melantha Jhirl broke the spell. "That is ridiculous," she said. "Think of what you're saying, if that isn't too much to ask. You're supposed to be xenologists, the lot of you, experts in alien languages, psychology, biology, technology. You don't act the part. We warred with Old Hranga for a thousand years, but we never communicated successfully with a Hrangan

Mind. If Royd Eris is a Hrangan, they've certainly improved their conversational skills in the centuries since the Collapse."

The xenotech flushed. "You're right," she mumbled. "I'm jumpy." "Friends," Karoly d'Branin said, "we must not panic or grow hysterical."

A terrible thing has happened. One of our colleagues is dead, and we do not know why. Until we do, we can only go on. This is no time for rash actions against the innocent. Perhaps, when we return to Avalon, an investigation will tell us what happened. The body is safe, is it not?"

"We cycled it through the airlock into the driverroom," said the male linguist. "Vacuum in there. It'll keep."  
"And it can be examined on our return," d'Branin said, satisfied.

"That return should be immediate," the xenotech said. "Tell Eris to turn this ship around."

D'Branin looked stricken. "But the *volcryn*! A week more, and we will know them, if my figures are correct. To return would take us six weeks. Surely it is worth one week additional to know that they exist?"

The xenotech was stubborn. "A man is dead. Before he died, he talked about aliens and danger. Maybe we're in danger too. Maybe these *volcryn* are the cause, maybe they're more potent than even a Hrangan Mind. Do you care to risk it? And for what? Your sources may be fictional or exaggerated or wrong, your interpretations and computations may be incorrect, or they may have changed course—the *volcryn* may not even be within light-years of where we'll drop out!"

"Ah," Melantha Jhirl said, "I understand. Then we shouldn't go on because they won't be there, and besides, they might be dangerous."

D'Branin smiled and the female linguist laughed. "Not funny," said the xenotech, but she argued no more.

"No," Melantha continued, "any danger we are in will not increase significantly in the time it will take us to drop out of drive and look about for *volcryn*. We would have to drop out anyway, to reprogram. Besides, we have come a long way for these *volcryn*, and I admit to being curious."

She looked at each of them in turn, but none of them disagreed. "We continue, then."

"And what do we do with Royd?" D'Branin asked.

"Treat the captain as before, if we can," Melantha said decisively. "Open lines to him and talk. He's probably as shocked and dismayed by what happened as we are, and possibly fearful that we might blame him, try to hurt him, something like that. So we reassure him. I'll do it, if no one else wants to talk to him." There were no volunteers. "All right. But the rest of you had better try to act normally."

"Also," said d'Branin, "we must continue with our preparations. Our sensory instruments must be ready for deployment as soon as we shift out of drive and reenter normal space, our computer must be functioning."

"It's up and running," the cyberneticist said quietly. "I finished this morning, as you requested." She had a thoughtful look in her eyes, but d'Branin did not notice. He turned to the linguists and began discussing some of the preliminaries he expected from them, and in a short time the talk had turned to the *volcryn*, and little by little the fear drained out of the group. Royd, listening, was glad.

She returned to the lounge alone.

Someone had turned out the lights. "Captain?" she said, and he appeared to her, pale, glowing softly, with eyes that did not really see. His clothes, filmy and out-of-date, were all shades of white and faded blue. "Did you hear, Captain?"

His voice over the communicator betrayed a faint hint of surprise. "Yes."

I hear and I see everything on my *Nightflyer*, Melantha. Not only in the lounge. Not only when the communicators and viewscreens are on. How long have you known?"

"Known?" She laughed. "Since you praised the gas giant solution to the Roydian mystery."

"I was under stress. I have never made a mistake before."

"I believe you, Captain," she said. "No matter. I'm the improved model, remember? I'd guessed weeks ago."

For a time Royd said nothing. Then: "When do you begin to reassure me?"

"I'm doing so right now. Don't you feel reassured yet?"

The apparition gave a ghostly shrug. "I am pleased that you and Karoly do not think I murdered that man."

She smiled. Her eyes were growing accustomed to the room. By the faint light of the holograph, she could see the table where it had happened, dark stains across its top. Blood. She heard a faint dripping, and shivered. "I don't like it in here."

"If you would like to leave, I can be with you wherever you go."

"No," she said! "I'll stay. Royd, if I asked you to, would you shut off your eyes and ears throughout the ship? Except for the lounge? It would make the others feel better, I'm sure."

"They don't know."

"They will. You made that remark about gas giants in everyone's hearing. Some of them have probably figured it out by now."

"If I told you I had cut myself off, you would have no way of knowing whether it was the truth."

"I could trust you," Melantha said.

Silence. The spectre looked thoughtful. "As you wish," Royd's voice said finally. "Everything off. Now I see and hear only in here."

"I believe you."

"Did you believe my story?" Royd asked.

"Ah," she said. "A strange and wondrous story, Captain. If it's a lie, I'll swap lies with you any time. You do it well. If it's true, then you are a strange and wondrous man."

"It's true," the ghost said quietly. "Melantha—" His voice hesitated. "Yes."

"I watched you copulating."

She smiled. "Ah," she said. "I'm good at it."

"I wouldn't know," Royd said. "You're good to watch."

Silence. She tried not to hear the dripping. "Yes," she said after a long hesitation.

"Yes? What?"

"Yes, Royd, I would probably sex with you if it were possible."

"*How did you know what I was thinking?*"

"I'm an improved model," she said. "And no, I'm not a telepath. It wasn't so difficult to figure out. I told you, I'm three moves ahead of you."

Royd considered that for a long time. "I believe I'm reassured," he said at last.

"Good," said Melantha Jhirl. "Now reassure me." "Of what?"

"What happened in here? Really?" Royd said nothing.

"I think you know something," Melantha said. "You gave up your secret to stop us from injecting him with esperon. Even after your secret was forfeit, you ordered us not to go ahead. Why?"

"Esperon is a dangerous drug," Royd said.

"More than that, Captain," Melantha said. "What killed him?" "I didn't."

"One of us? The *volcryn*?"

Royd said nothing.

"Is there an alien aboard your ship, Captain?" she asked. "Is that it?" Silence.

"Are we in danger? Am *I* in danger, Captain? I'm not afraid. Does that make me a fool?"

"I like people," Royd said at last. "When I can stand it, I like to have passengers. I watch them, yes. It's not so terrible. I like you and Karoly especially. You have nothing to fear. I won't let anything happen to you."

"What might happen?" she asked. Royd said nothing.

"And what about the others, Royd? Are you taking care of them, too? Or only Karoly and me?"

No reply.

"You're not very talkative tonight," Melantha observed.

"I'm under strain," his voice replied. "Go to bed, Melantha Jhirl. We've talked long enough."

"All right, Captain," she said. She smiled at his ghost and lifted her hand. His own rose to meet it. Warm dark flesh and pale radiance brushed, melded, were one. Melantha Jhirl turned to go. It was not until she was out in the corridor, safe in the light once more, that she began to tremble.

False midnight. The talks had broken up, the nightmares had faded, and the academicians were lost in sleep. Even Karoly d'Branin slept, his appetite for chocolate quelled by his memories of the lounge.

In the darkness of the largest cargo hold, three sleep-webs hung, sleepers snoring softly in two. The cyberneticist lay awake, thinking, in the third. Finally she rose, dropped lightly to the floor, pulled on her jumpsuit and boots, and shook the xenotech from her slumber. "Come," she whispered, beckoning. They stole off into the corridor, leaving Melantha Jhirl to her dreams.

"What the hell," the xenotech muttered when they were safely beyond the door. She was half-dressed, disarrayed, unhappy.

"There's a way to find out if Royd's story was true," the cyberneticist said carefully. "Melantha won't like it, though. Are you game to try?"

"What?" the other asked. Her face betrayed her interest. "Come," the cyberneticist said.

One of the three lesser cargo holds had been converted into a computer room. They entered quietly; all empty. The system was up, but dormant. Currents of light ran silkily down crystalline channels in the data grids, meeting, joining, splitting apart again; rivers of wan multihued radiance crisscrossing a black landscape. The chamber was dim, the only noise a low buzz at the edge of human hearing, until the cyberneticist moved through it, touching keys, tripping switches, directing the silent luminescent currents. Slowly the machine woke. "What are you *doing*?" the xenotech said.

"Karoly told me to tie in our system with the ship," the cyberneticist replied as she worked. "I was told Royd wanted to study the *volcryn* data. Fine, I did it. Do you understand what that means?"

Now the xenotech was eager. "The two systems are tied together!" "Exactly. So Royd can find out about the *volcryn*, and we can find out

about Royd." She frowned. "I wish I knew more about the *Nightflyer's* hardware, but I think I can feel my way through. This is a pretty sophisticated system d'Branin requisitioned."

"Can you take over?" the xenotech asked excitedly.

"Take over?" The cyberneticist sounded puzzled. "You been drinking again?"

"No, I'm serious. Use your system to break into the ship's control, overwhelm Eris, countermand his orders, make the *Nightflyer* respond to us, down here."

"Maybe," the cyberneticist said doubtfully, slowly. "I could try, but why do that?"

"Just in case. We don't have to use the capacity. Just so we have it, if an emergency arises."

The cyberneticist shrugged. "Emergencies and gas giants. I only want to put my mind at rest about Royd." She moved over to a readout panel, where a half-dozen meter-square viewscreens curved around a console, and brought one of them to life. Long fingers brushed across holographic keys that appeared and disappeared as she touched them, the keyboard changing shape even as she used it. Characters began to flow across the viewscreen, red flickerings encased in glassy black depths. The cyberneticist watched, and finally froze them. "Here," she said, "here's my answer about the hardware. You can dismiss your takeover idea, unless those gas giant people of yours are going to help. The *Nightflyer's* bigger and smarter than our little system here. Makes sense, when you stop to think about it. Ship's all automated, except for Royd." She whistled and coaxed her search program with soft words of encouragement. "It looks as though there *is* a Royd, though. Configurations are all wrong for a robot ship. Damn, I would have bet anything." The characters began to flow again, the cyberneticist watching the figures as they drifted by. "Here's life support specs, might tell us something." A finger jabbed, and the screen froze once more.

"Nothing unusual," the xenotech said in disappointment. "Standard waste disposal. Water recycling.

Food processor, with protein and vitamin supplements in stores." She began to whistle. "Tanks of

Renny's moss and neo-grass to eat up the CO2. Oxygen cycle, then. No methane or ammonia. Sorry

about that."

"Go sex with a computer."

The cyberneticist smiled. "Ever tried it?" Her fingers moved again. "What else should I look for? Give me some ideas."

"Check the specs for nurturant tanks, cloning equipment, that sort of thing. Find Royd's life history. His mother's. Get a readout on the business they've done, all this alleged trading." Her voice grew excited, and she took the cyberneticist by her shoulder. "A log, a ship's log! There's got to be a

log. Find it! You must!"

"All right." She whistled, happy, one with her systems, riding the data winds, in control, curious. The readout screen turned a bright red and began to blink at her, but she only smiled. "Security," she said, her fingers a blur. As suddenly as it had come, the blinking red field was gone. "Nothing like slipping past another system's security. Like slipping onto a man."

Down the corridor, an alarm sounded a whooping call. "Damn," the cyberneticist said, "that'll wake everyone." She glanced up when the xenotech's fingers dug painfully into her shoulder, squeezing, hurting.

A gray steel panel slid almost silently across the access to the corridor. "Wha—?" the cyberneticist said.

"That's an emergency airseal," the xenotech said in a dead voice. She knew starships. "It closes when they're about to load or unload cargo in vacuum."

Their eyes went to the huge curving outer airlock above their heads. The inner lock was almost completely open, and as they watched it clicked into place, and the seal on the outer door cracked, and now it was open half a meter, sliding, and beyond was twisted nothingness so bright it burned the eyes. "Oh," the cyberneticist said. She had stopped whistling.

Alarms were hooting everywhere. The passengers began to stir. Melantha Jhirl leapt from her sleepweb and darted into the corridor, nude, concerned, alert. Karoly d'Branin sat up drowsily. The psipsych muttered fitfully in her drug-induced sleep. The xenobiologist cried out in alarm.

Far away metal crunched and tore, and a violent shudder ran through the ship, throwing the linguists out of their sleepwebs, knocking Melantha from her feet.

In the command quarters of the *Nightflyer* was a spherical room with featureless white walls, a lesser sphere—control console—suspended in its center. The walls were always blank when the ship was in drive; the warped and glaring underside of spacetime was painful to behold.

But now darkness woke in the room, a holoscape coming to life, cold black and stars everywhere, points of icy unwinking brilliance, no up and no down and no direction, the floating control sphere the only feature in the simulated sea of night.

The *Nightflyer* had shifted out of drive.

Melantha Jhirl found her feet again and thumbed on a communicator.

The alarms were still hooting, and it was hard to hear. "Captain," she shouted, "what's happening?"

"I don't know," Royd's voice replied. "I'm trying to find out. Wait here. Gather the others to you."

She did as he had said and only when they were all together in the corridor did she slip back to her web to don some clothing. She found only six of them. The psipsych was still unconscious and could not be roused, and they had to carry her. And the xenotech and cyberneticist were missing. The rest looked uneasily at the seal that blocked cargo hold three.

The communicator came back to life as the alarms died. "We have returned to normal space," Royd's voice said, "but the ship is damaged. Hold three, your computer room, was breached while we were under drive. It was ripped apart by the flux. The computer automatically dropped us out of drive, or the drive forces might have torn my entire ship apart."

"Royd," d'Branin said, "two of my team are ..."

"It appears that your computer was in use when the hold was breached," Royd said carefully. "We can only assume that they are dead. I cannot be sure. At Melantha's request, I have deactivated most of my eyes and ears, retaining only the lounge inputs. I do not know what happened. But this is a small ship, Karoly, and if they are not with you, we must assume the worst." He paused briefly. "If it is any consolation, they died quickly and painlessly."

The two linguists exchanged a long, meaningful look. The xenobiologist's face was red and angry, and he started to say something. Melantha Jhirl slipped her hand over his mouth firmly. "Do we know how it happened, Captain?" she asked.

"Yes," he said, reluctantly.

The xenobiologist had taken the hint, and Melantha took away her hand to let him breathe. "Royd?" she prompted.

"It sounds insane, Melantha," his voice replied, "but it appears your colleagues opened the hold's loading lock. I doubt that they did so deliberately, of course. They were apparently using the system interface to gain entry to the *Nightflyer's* data storage and controls."

"I see," Melantha said. "A terrible tragedy."

"Yes," Royd agreed. "Perhaps more terrible than you think. I have yet to assess the damage to my ship."

"We should not keep you, Captain, if you have duties to perform," Melantha said. "All of us are shocked, and it is difficult to talk now. Investigate the condition of your ship, and we'll continue our discussion in the morning. All right?"

"Yes," Royd said.

Melantha thumbed the communicator plate. Now officially, the device was off. Royd could not hear them.

Karoly d'Branin shook his large, grizzled head. The linguists sat close to one another, hands touching. The psipsych slept. Only the xenobiologist met her gaze. "Do you believe him?" he snapped abruptly.

"I don't know," Melantha Jhirl said, "but I do know that the other three cargo holds can all be flushed just as hold three was. I'm moving my sleepweb into a cabin. I suggest those who are living in hold two do the same."



"Good idea," the female linguist said. "We can crowd in. It won't be comfortable, but I don't think I'd sleep the sleep of angels in the holds anymore."

"We should also take our suits out of storage in four and keep them close at hand," her partner suggested.

"If you wish," Melantha said. "It's possible that all the locks might pop open simultaneously. Royd can't fault us for taking precautions." She flashed a grim smile. "After today, we've earned the right to act irrationally."

"This is no time for your damned jokes, Melantha," the xenobiologist said, fury in his voice. "Three dead, a fourth maybe deranged or comatose, the rest of us endangered—"

"We still have no idea what is happening," she pointed out.

"*Royd Eris is killing us!*" he shouted, pounding his fist into an open palm to emphasize his point. "I don't know who or what he is and I don't know if that story he gave us is true, and I don't *care*. Maybe he's a Hrangan Mind or the avenging angel of the *volcryn* or the second coming of Jesus Christ. What the hell difference does it make? *He's killing us!*"

"You realize," Melantha said gently, "that we cannot actually know whether the good captain has turned off his inputs down here. He could be watching and listening to us right now. He isn't, of course. He told me he wouldn't and I believe him. But we have only his word on that. Now, *you* don't appear to trust Royd. If that's so, you can hardly put any faith in his promises. It follows that from your point of view it might not be wise to say the things that you're saying." She smiled slyly.

The xenobiologist was silent.

"The computer is gone, then," Karoly d'Branin said in a low voice before Melantha could resume. She nodded. "I'm afraid so."

He rose unsteadily to his feet. "I have a small unit in my cabin," he said. "A wrist model, perhaps it will suffice. I must get the figures from Royd, learn where we have dropped out. The *volcryn*—" He shuffled off down the corridor and disappeared into his cabin.

"Think how distraught he'd be if *all* of us were dead," the female linguist said bitterly. "Then he'd have no one to help him look for *volcryn*."

"Let him go," Melantha said. "He is as hurt as any of us, maybe more so.

He wears it differently. His obsessions are his defense." "What's *our* defense?"

"Ah," said Melantha. "Patience, maybe. All of the dead were trying to breach Royd's secret when they died. We haven't tried. Here we sit discussing their deaths."

"You don't find that suspicious?"

"Very," Melantha Jhirl said. "I even have a method of testing my suspicions. One of us can make yet another attempt to find out whether our captain told us the truth. If he or she dies, we'll know." She stood up abruptly.

"Forgive me, however, if I'm not the one who tries. But don't let me stop you if you have the urge. I'll note the results with interest. Until then, I'm going to move out of the cargo area and get some sleep."

"Arrogant bitch," the male linguist observed almost conversationally after Melantha had left.

"Do you think he can hear us?" the xenobiologist whispered quietly. "Every pithy word," the female linguist said,

rising. They all stood up.

"Let's move our things and put her" —she jerked a thumb at the psipsych—"back to bed." Her partner nodded.

"Aren't we going to *do* anything?" the xenobiologist said. "Make plans. Defenses."

The linguist gave him a withering look, and pulled her companion off in the other direction.

"Melantha? Karoly?"

She woke quickly, alert at the mere whisper of her name, and sat up in the narrow bunk. Next to her, Karoly d'Branin moaned softly and rolled over, yawning.

"Royd?" she asked. "Is it morning now?"

"Yes," replied the voice from the walls. "We are drifting in interstellar space three light-years from the nearest star, however. In such a context, does morning have meaning?"

Melantha laughed. "Debate it with Karoly, when he wakes up enough to listen. Royd, you said *drifting*? How bad...?"

"Serious," he said, "but not dangerous. Hold three is a complete ruin, hanging from my ship like a broken metal eggshell, but the damage was confined. The drives themselves are intact, and the *Nightflyer's* computers did not seem to suffer from your machine's destruction. I feared they might. Electronic death trauma."

D'Branin said, "Eh? Royd?"

Melantha patted him. "I'll tell you later, Karoly," she said. "Royd, you sound serious. Is there more?"

"I am worried about our return flight, Melantha," he said. "When I take the *Nightflyer* back into drive, the flux will be playing directly on portions of the ship that were never engineered to withstand it. The airseal across hold three is a particular concern. I've run some projections, and I don't know if it can take the stress. If it bursts, my whole ship will split apart in the middle. My engines will go shunting off by themselves, and the rest..."

"I see. Is there anything we can do?"

"Yes. The exposed areas would be easy enough to reinforce. The outer hull is armored to withstand the warping forces, of course. We could mount it in place, a crude shield, but it would suffice. Large portions of the hull were torn loose when the locks opened, but they are still out there, floating within a kilometer or two, and could be used."

At some point, Karoly d'Branin had come awake. "My team has four vacuum sleds. We can retrieve these pieces for you."

"Fine, Karoly, but that is not my primary concern. My ship is self-repairing within certain limits, but this exceeds those limits. I will have to do this myself."

"You?" d'Branin said. "Friend, you said—that is, your muscles, your weakness—cannot we help with this?"

"I am only a cripple in a gravity field, Karoly," Royd said. "Weightless, I am in my element, and I will be killing our gravity grid momentarily, to try to gather my own strength for the repair work. No, you misunderstand. I am capable of the work. I have the tools, and my own heavy-duty sled."

"I think I know what you are concerned about," Melantha said.

"I'm glad," Royd said. "Perhaps, then, you can answer my question. If I emerge from the safety of my chambers, can you keep your friends from killing me?"

Karoly d'Branin was shocked. "Royd, Royd, we are scholars, we are not soldiers or criminals, we do not—we are human, how can you think that we would threaten you?"

"Human," Royd repeated, "but alien to me, suspicious of me. Give me no false assurances, Karoly."

The administrator sputtered. Melantha took his hand and bid him quiet. "Royd," she said, "I won't lie to you. You'd be in some danger. But I'd hope that, by coming out, you'd make the rest of them joyously happy. They'd be able to see that you told the truth, wouldn't they?"

"They would," Royd said, "but would it be enough to offset their suspicions? They believe I killed your friends, do they not?"

"Some, perhaps. Half believe it, half fear it. They are frightened, Captain. *I* am frightened."

"No more than I."

"I would be less frightened if I knew what *did* happen. Do you know?" Silence.

"Royd, if ..."

"I tried to stop the esperon injection," he said. "I might have saved the other two, if I had seen them, heard them, known what they were about. But you made me turn off my monitors, Melantha. I cannot help what I cannot see." Hesitation. "I would feel safer if I could turn them back on. I am blind and deaf. It is frustrating. I cannot help if I am blind and deaf."

"Turn them on, then," Melantha said suddenly. "I was wrong. I did not understand. Now I do, though."  
"Understand what?" Karoly said.

"You do not understand," Royd said. "You do *not*. Don't pretend that you do, Melantha Jhirl. *Don't!*" The calm voice from the communicator was shrill with emotion.

"What?" Karoly said. "Melantha, I do not understand."

Her eyes were thoughtful. "Neither do I," she said. "Neither do I, Karoly." She kissed him lightly. "Royd," she resumed, "it seems to me you must make this repair, regardless of what promises we can give you. You won't risk your ship by slipping back into drive in your present condition. The only other option is to drift here until we all die. What choice do we have?"

"I have a choice," Royd said with deadly seriousness. "I could kill all of you, if that were the only way to save my ship."

"You could try," Melantha said.

"Let us have no more talk of death," d'Branin said.

"You are right, Karoly," Royd said. "I do not wish to kill any of you. But I must be protected."

"You will be," Melantha said. "Karoly can set the others to chasing your hull fragments. I'll never leave your side. I'll assist you; the work will be done three times as fast."

Royd was polite. "In my experience, most planet-bound are clumsy and easily tired in weightlessness. It would be more efficient if I worked alone."

"It would not," she replied. "I remind you that I'm the improved model, Captain. Good in free-fall as well as in bed. I'll help."

"As you will. In a few moments, I shall depower the gravity grid. Karoly, go and prepare your people. Unship your sled and suit up. I will exit *Nightflyer* in three hours after I have recovered from the pains of your gravity. I want all of you outside the ship when I leave."

It was as though some vast animal had taken a bite out of the universe.

Melantha Jhirl waited on her sled close by the *Nightflyer*, and looked at stars. It was not so very different out here, in the depths of interstellar space. The stars were cold, frozen points of light; unwinking, austere, more chill and uncaring somehow than the same suns made to dance and twinkle by an atmosphere. Only the absence of a landmark primary reminded her of where she was: in the places between, where men do not stop, where the *volcryn* sail ships impossibly ancient. She tried to pick out Avalon's sun, but she did not know where to search. The configurations were strange to her, and she had no idea of how she was oriented. Behind her, before her, above, all around, the starfields stretched endlessly. She glanced down, beneath her sled and the *Nightflyer*, expecting still more alien stars, and the bite hit her with an almost physical force.

Melantha fought off a wave of vertigo. She was suspended above a pit, a yawning chasm in the universe, black, starless, vast.

Empty.

She remembered then: the Tempter's Veil. Just a cloud of dark gas, nothing really, galactic pollution that obscured the light from the stars of the Fringe. But this close at hand, it looked immense, terrifying. She had to break her gaze when she began to feel as if she were falling. It was a gulf beneath her and the frail silver-white shell of the *Night flyer*, a gulf about to swallow them.

Melantha touched one of the controls on the sled's forked handle, swinging around so the Veil was to her side instead of beneath her. That seemed to help somehow. She concentrated on the *Nightflyer*. It was the largest object in her universe, brightly-lit, ungainly; three small eggs side-by-side, two larger spheres beneath and at right angles, lengths of tube connecting it all. One of the eggs was shattered now, giving the craft an unbalanced cast.

She could see the other sleds as they angled through the black, tracking the missing pieces of eggshell, grappling with them, bringing them back. The linguistic team worked together, as always, sharing a sled. The xenobiologist was alone. Karoly d'Branin had a silent passenger; the psipsych, freshly drugged, asleep in the suit they had dressed her in. Royd had insisted that the ship be cleared completely, and it would have taken time and care to rouse the psipsych to consciousness; this was the safer course.

While her colleagues labored, Melantha JhirI waited for Royd Eris, talking to the others occasionally over the comm link. The two linguists, unaccustomed to weightlessness, were complaining a lot. Karoly tried to soothe them. The xenobiologist worked in silence, argued out. He had been vehement earlier in his opposition to going outside, but Melantha and Karoly had finally worn him down and it seemed as if he had nothing more to say. Melantha now watched him flit across her field of vision, a stick figure in form-fitting black armor standing stiff and erect at the controls of his sled.

At last the circular airlock atop the foremost of the *Nightflyer's* major spheres dilated, and Royd Eris emerged. She watched him approach, wondering what he would look like. She had so many different pictures. His genteel, cultured, too-formal voice sometimes reminded her of the dark aristocrats of her native Prometheus, the wizards who toyed with human genes. At other times his naivete made her think of him as an inexperienced youth. His ghost was a tired looking thin young man, and he was supposed to be considerably older than that pale shadow, but Melantha found it difficult to hear an old man talking when he spoke.

Royd's sled was larger than theirs and of a different design; a long oval plate with eight jointed grappling arms bristling from its underside like the legs of a metal spider, and the snout of a heavy-duty cutting laser mounted above. His suit was odd too, more massive than the Academy worksuits, with a bulge between its shoulder blades that was probably a powerpack, and rakish radiant fins atop shoulders and helmet.

But when he was finally near enough for Melantha to see his face, it was just a face. White, very white, that was the predominant impression she got; white hair cropped very short, a white stubble around the sharply-chiseled lines of his jaw, almost invisible eyebrows beneath which blue eyes moved restlessly. His skin was pale and unlined, scarcely touched by time.

He looked wary, she thought. And perhaps a bit frightened.

He stopped his sled close to hers, amid the twisted ruin that had been cargo hold three, and surveyed the damage, the pieces of floating wreckage that once had been flesh and blood, glass, metal, plastic. Hard to distinguish now, all of them fused and burned and frozen together. "We have a good deal of work to do, Melantha," he said.

"First let's talk," she replied. She shifted her sled closer and reached out to him, but the distance was still too great, the width of the two vacuum sleds keeping them apart. Melantha backed off, and turned herself over completely, so that Royd hung upside down in her world and she upside down in his. Then she moved towards him again, positioning her sled directly over/under his. Their gloved hands met, brushed, parted.

Melantha adjusted her altitude. Their helmets touched. "I don't—" Royd began to say uncertainly.

"Turn off your comm," she commanded. "The sound will carry through the helmets."

He blinked and used his tongue controls and it was done. "Now we can talk," she said.

"I do not like this, Melantha," he said. "This is too obvious. This is dangerous."

"There's no other way," she said. "Royd, I *do* know."

"Yes," he said. "I knew you did. Three moves ahead, Melantha. I remember the way you play chess. You are safer if you feign ignorance, however."

"I understand that, Captain. Other things I'm less sure about. Can we talk about it?"

"No. Don't ask me to. Just do as I tell you. You are in danger, all of you, but I can protect you. The less you know, the better I can protect you." Through the transparent faceplates, his expression was grim.

She stared into his upside-down eyes. "Your ship is killing us, Captain.

That's my suspicion, anyway. Not you. It. Only that doesn't make sense. You command the *Nightflyer*. How can it act independently? And why? What motive? How was that psionic murder accomplished? It can't be the ship. Yet it can't be anything else. Help me, Captain."

He blinked; there was anguish behind his eyes. "I should never have accepted Karoly's charter. Not with a telepath among you. It was risky. But I wanted to see the *volcryn*.

"You understand too much already, Melantha," Royd continued. "I can't tell you more. The ship is malfunctioning, that is all you need know. It is not safe to push too hard. As long as I am at the controls, however, you and your colleagues are in small danger. Trust me."

"Trust is a two-way bond," Melantha said steadily.

Royd lifted his hand and pushed her away, then tongued his comm back to life. "Enough gossip," he briskly announced. "We have repairs to make. Come. I want to see just how improved you are."

In the solitude of her helmet, Melantha Jhirl swore softly.

The xenobiologist watched Royd Eris emerge on his oversized work sled, watched Melantha Jhirl move to him, watched as she turned over and pressed her faceplate to his. He could scarcely contain his rage. Somehow they were all in it together, Royd and Melantha and possibly old d'Branin as well, he thought sourly. She had protected him from the first, when they might have taken action together, stopped him, found out who or what he was. And now three were dead, killed by the cipher in the misshapen spacesuit, and Melantha hung upside down, her face pressed to his like lovers kissing.

He tongued off his comm and cursed. The others were out of sight, off chasing spinning wedges of half-slugged metal. Royd and Melantha were engrossed in each other, the ship abandoned and vulnerable. This was his chance. No wonder Eris had insisted that all of them precede him into the void; outside, isolated from the controls of the *Nightflyer*, he was only a man. A weak one at that.

Smiling a thin hard smile, the xenobiologist brought his sled around in a wide circle and vanished into the gaping maw of the driverroom. His lights flickered past the ring of nukes and sent long bright streaks along the sides of the closed cylinders of the stardrives, the huge engines that bent the stuff of spacetime, encased in webs of metal and crystal.

Everything was open to the vacuum. It was better that way; atmosphere corroded and destroyed.

He set the sled down, dismounted, moved to the airlock. This was the hardest part, he thought. The headless body of the young telepath was tethered loosely to a massive support strut, a grisly guardian by the door. The xenobiologist had to stare at it while he waited for the lock to cycle. Whenever he glanced away, somehow he would find his eyes creeping back to it. The body looked almost natural, as if it had never had a head. The xenobiologist tried to remember the young man's face, and failed, but then the lock door slid open and he gratefully pushed the thought away and entered.

He was alone in the *Nightflyer*.

A cautious man, he kept his suit on, though he collapsed the helmet and yanked loose the suddenly-limp metallic fabric so it fell behind his back like a hood. He could snap it in place quickly enough if the need arose. In cargo hold four, where they had stored their equipment, the xenobiologist found what he was looking for; a portable cutting laser, charged and ready. Low power, but it would do.

Slow and clumsy in weightlessness, he pulled himself through the corridor into the darkened lounge.

It was chilly inside, the air cold on his cheeks. He tried not to notice. He braced himself at the door and pushed off across the width of the room, sailing above the furniture, which was all safely bolted into place.

As he drifted toward his objective, something wet and cold touched his face. It startled him, but it was gone before he could make out what it was.

When it happened again, he snatched at it, caught it, and felt briefly sick. He had forgotten. No one had cleaned the lounge yet. The—*remains* were still there, floating now, blood and flesh and bits of bone and brain. All around him.

He reached the far wall, stopped himself with his arms, pulled himself down to where he wanted to go. The bulkhead. The wall. No doorway was visible, but the metal couldn't be very thick. Beyond was the control room, the computer access, safety, power. The xenobiologist did not think of himself as a vindictive man. He did not intend to harm Royd Eris, that judgment was not his to make. He would take control of the *Nightflyer*, warn Eris away, make certain the man stayed sealed in his suit. He would take them all back without any more mysteries, any more killings. The Academy arbiters could listen to the story, and probe Eris, and decide the right and wrong of it, guilt and innocence, what should be done.

The cutting laser emitted a thin pencil of scarlet light. The xenobiologist smiled and applied it to the bulkhead. It was slow work, but he had patience. They would not have missed him, quiet as he'd been, and if they did they would assume he was off sledding after some hunk of salvage. Eris' repairs would take hours, maybe days, to finish. The bright blade of the laser smoked where it touched the metal. He applied himself diligently.

Something moved on the periphery of his vision, just a little flicker, barely seen. A floating bit of brain, he thought. A sliver of bone. A bloody piece of flesh, hair still hanging from it. Horrible things, but nothing to worry about. He was a biologist, he was used to blood and brains and flesh. And worse, and worse; he had dissected many an alien in his day.

Again the motion caught his eye, teased at it. Not wanting to, he found himself drawn to look. He could not *not* look, somehow, just as he had been unable to ignore the headless telepath in the airlock. He looked. It was an eye. The xenobiologist trembled and the laser slipped sharply off to one side, so he had to wrestle with it to bring it back to the channel he was cutting. His heart raced. He tried to calm himself. Nothing to be frightened of. No one was home, and if Royd should return, well, he had the laser as a weapon and he had his suit on if an airlock blew.

He looked at the eye again, willing away his fear. It was just an eye, the eye of the young telepath, intact, bloody but intact, the same watery blue eye the boy had when alive, nothing supernatural. A piece of dead flesh, floating in the lounge amid other pieces of dead flesh. Someone should have cleaned up the lounge, he thought angrily. It was indecent to leave it like this, it was uncivilized.

The eye did not move. The other grisly bits were drifting on the air currents that flowed across the room, but the eye was still. Fixed on him. Staring.

He cursed himself and concentrated on the laser, on his cutting. He had burned an almost straight line up the bulkhead for about a meter. He began another at right angles.

The eye watched dispassionately. The xenobiologist suddenly found he could not stand it. One hand released its grip on the laser, reached out, caught the eye, flung it across the room. The action made him lose balance. He tumbled backward, the laser slipping from his grasp, his arms flapping like the wings on some absurd heavy bird. Finally he caught an edge of the table and stopped himself.

The laser hung in the center of the room, still firing, turning slowly where it floated. That did not make sense. It should have ceased fire when he released it. A malfunction, he thought. Smoke rose from where the thin line of the laser traced a path across the carpet.

With a shiver of fear, the xenobiologist realized that the laser was turning towards him.

He raised himself, put both hands flat against the table, pushed off out of the way.

The laser was turning more swiftly now.

He slammed into a wall, grunted in pain, bounced off the floor, kicked.

The laser was spinning quickly, chasing him. He soared, braced himself for a ricochet off the ceiling. The beam swung around, but not fast enough.

He'd get it while it was still firing off in the other direction. He moved close, reached, and saw the eye.

It hung just above the laser. Staring.

The xenobiologist made a small whimpering sound low in his throat, and his hand hesitated—not long, but long enough—and the scarlet beam came up and around. Its touch was a light, hot caress across his neck.

It was more than an hour later before they missed him. Karoly d'Branin noticed his absence first, called for him over the comm net, and got no answer. He discussed it with the others.

Royd Eris moved his sled back from the armor plate he had just mounted, and through his helmet Melantha Jhirl could see the lines around his mouth grow hard. His eyes were sharply alert.

It was just then that the screaming began.

A shrill bleat of pain and fear, followed by choked, anguished sobbing.

They all heard it. It came over the comm net and filled their helmets. "It's him," a woman's voice said. The linguist.

"He's hurt," her partner added. "He's crying for help. Can't you hear it?" "Where?" someone started.

"The ship," the female linguist said. "He must have returned to the ship."

Royd Eris said, "No. I warned—"

"We're going to go check," the linguist said. Her partner cut free the hull fragment they had been towing, and it spun away, tumbling. Their sled angled down towards the *Nightflyer*.

"Stop," Royd said. "I'll return to my chambers and check from there, if you wish. Stay outside until I give you clearance."

"Go to hell," the linguist snapped at him over the open circuit.

"Royd, my friend, what can you mean?" Karoly d'Branin said. His sled was in motion too, hastening after the linguists, but he had been further out and it was a long way back to the ship. "He is hurt, perhaps seriously. We must help."

"No," Royd said. "Karoly, *stop*. If your colleague went back to the ship alone, he is dead."

"How do you know that?" the male linguist demanded. "Did you arrange it? Set traps?"

"Listen to me," Royd continued. "You can't help him now. Only I could have helped him, and he did not listen to me. Trust me. Stop."

In the distance, d'Branin's sled slowed. The linguists did not. "We've already listened to you too damn much, I'd say," the woman said. She almost had to shout to be heard above the sobs and whimpers, the agonized sounds that filled their universe. "Melantha," she said, "keep Eris right where he is. We'll go carefully, find out what is happening inside, but I don't want him getting back to his controls. Understood?"

Melantha Jhirl hesitated. Sounds of terror and agony beat against her ears; it was hard to think.

Royd swung his sled around to face her, and she could feel the weight of his stare. "Stop them," he said.

"Melantha, Karoly, order it. They do not know what they are doing." His voice was edged with despair.

In his face, Melantha found decision. "Go back inside quickly, Royd; Do what you can, I'm going to try to intercept them."

He nodded to her across the gulf, but Melantha was already in motion. Her sled backed clear of the work area, congested with hull fragments and other debris, then accelerated briskly as she raced toward the rear of the *Nightflyer*.

But even as she approached, she knew it was too late. The linguists were too close, and already moving much faster than she was.

"Don't," she said, authority in her tone. "The ship isn't safe, damn it." "Bitch," was all the answer she got.

Karoly's sled pursued vainly. "Friends, you must stop, please, I beg it of you, let us talk this out together." The unending whimpers were his only reply.

"I am your superior," he said. "I order you to wait outside. Do you hear me? I order it, I invoke the authority of the Academy. Please, my friends, please listen to me."

Melantha watched as the linguists vanished down the long tunnel of the driverroom.

A moment later she halted her sled near the waiting black mouth, debating whether she should follow them into the *Nightflyer*. She might be able to catch them before the airlock opened.

Royd's voice, hoarse counterpoint to the crying, answered her unvoiced question. "Stay, Melantha. Proceed no further."

She looked behind her. Royd's sled was approaching.

"What are you doing?" she demanded. "Royd, use your own lock. You have to get back inside!"

"Melantha," he said calmly, "I cannot. The ship will not respond to me. The control lock will not dilate. I don't want you or Karoly inside the ship until I can return to my controls."

Melantha Jhirl looked down the shadowed barrel of the driverroom, where the linguists had vanished.

"What will—?"

"Beg them to come back, Melantha. Plead with them. Perhaps there is still time, if they will listen to you."

She tried. Karoly d'Branin tried too. The crying, the moaning, the twisted symphony went on and on. But they could not raise the two linguists at all.

"They've cut out their comm," Melantha said furiously. "They don't want to listen to us. Or that. . . that *sound*."

Royd's sled and Karoly d'Branin's reached her at the same time. "I do not understand," Karoly said. "What is happening?"

"It is simple, Karoly," Royd replied. "I am being kept outside until—until Mother is done with them."

The linguists left their vacuum sled next to the one the xenobiologist had abandoned and cycled through the airlock in unseemly haste, with hardly a glance for the grim doorman.

Inside they paused briefly to collapse their helmets. "I can still hear him," the man said.

The woman nodded. "The sound is coming from the lounge. Hurry."

They kicked and pulled their way down the corridor in less than a minute. The sounds grew steadily louder, nearer. "He's in there," the woman said when they reached the chamber door.

"Yes," her partner said, "but is he alone? We need a weapon. What if ... Royd had to be lying. There *is* someone else on board. We need to defend ourselves."

The woman would not wait. "There are two of us," she said. "Come *on!*"

With that she launched herself through the doorway and into the lounge.



It was dark inside. What little light there was spilled through the door from the corridor. Her eyes took a long moment to adjust. "Where are you?" she cried in confusion. The lounge seemed empty, but maybe it was only the light.

"Follow the sound," the man suggested. He stood in the door, glancing warily about for a minute, before he began to feel his way down a wall, groping with his hands.

The woman, impatient, propelled herself across the room, searching.

She brushed against a wall in the kitchen area, and that made her think of weapons. She knew where the utensils were stored. "Here," she said, "Here, I've got a knife, that should thrill you." She waved it, and brushed against a floating bubble of blood as big as her fist. It burst and reformed into a hundred smaller globules.

"Oh, merciful God," the man said in a voice thick with fear. "What?" she demanded. "Did you find him? Is he—?"

He was fumbling his way back towards the door, creeping along the wall the way he had come. "Get out of here," he warned. "Oh, *hurry*."

"Why?" She trembled despite herself.

"I found the source," he said. "The screams, the crying. Come *on!*"

"Wha—"

He whimpered, "It was the grill. Oh, don't you see? It's coming from the communicator!" He reached the door, and sighed audibly, and he did not wait for her. He bolted down the corridor and was gone.

She braced herself and positioned herself in order to follow him. The sounds stopped. Just like that: turned off.

She kicked, floated towards the door, knife in hand.

Something dark crawled from beneath the dinner table and rose to block her path. She saw it clearly for a moment, outlined in the light from the corridor. The xenobiologist, still in his vacuum suit, but with his helmet pulled off. He had something in his hands that he raised to point at her. It was a laser, she saw, a simple cutting laser.

She was moving straight towards him. She flailed and tried to stop herself, but she could not.

When she got quite close, she saw that he had a second mouth below his chin, and it was grinning at her, and little droplets of blood flew from it, wetly, as he moved.

The man rushed down the corridor in a frenzy of fear, bruising himself as he smashed into walls. Panic and weightlessness made him clumsy. He kept glancing over his shoulder as he fled, hoping to see his lover coming after him, but terrified of what he might see in her stead. It took a long, *long* time for the airlock to open. As he waited, trembling, his pulse began to slow. He steadied himself with an effort. Once inside the chamber, with the inner door sealed between him and the lounge, he began to feel safe.

Suddenly he could barely remember why he had been so terrified.

And he was ashamed; he had run, abandoned her. And for what? What had frightened him so? An empty lounge? Noises from a communicator? Why, that only meant the xenobiologist was alive somewhere else in the ship, in pain, spilling his agony into a comm unit.

Resolute, he reached out and killed the cycle on the airlock, then reversed it. The air that had been partially sucked out came gusting back into the chamber.

The man shook his head ruefully. He'd hear no end of this, he knew. She would never let him forget it. But at least he would return, and apologize. That would count for something.

As the inner door rolled back, he felt a brief flash of fear again, an instant of stark terror when he wondered what might have emerged from the lounge to wait for him in the corridors of the *Nightflyer*. He willed it away. When he stepped out, she was waiting for him. He could see neither anger nor disdain in her curiously calm features, but he pushed himself toward her and tried to frame a plea for forgiveness anyway. "I don't know why I—"

With languid grace, her hand came out from behind her back. The knife was in it. That was when he finally noticed the hole burned in her suit, just between her breasts.

"Your *mother*?" Melantha Jhirl said incredulously as they hung helpless in the emptiness beyond the ship.

"She can hear everything we say," Royd replied. "But at this point, it no longer makes any difference. Your friend must have done something very foolish, very threatening. Now she is determined to kill you all."

"She, she, what do you mean?" D'Branin's voice was puzzled. "Royd, surely you do not tell us that your mother is still alive. You said she died even before you were born."

"She did, Karoly," Royd said. "I did not lie to you."

"No," Melantha said. "I didn't think so. But you did not tell us the whole truth, either."

Royd nodded. "Mother is dead, but her—ghost still lives, and animates my *Nightflyer*. My control is tenuous at best."

"Royd," d'Branin said, "My *volcryn* are more real than any ghosts." His voice chided gently.

"I don't believe in ghosts either," Melantha Jhirl said with a frown.

"Call it what you will, then," Royd said. "My term is as good as any. The reality is unchanged. My mother, or some part of my mother, lives in the *Nightflyer*, and she is killing you all as she has killed others before."

"Royd, you do not make sense," d'Branin said. "I—" "Karoly, let the captain explain."

"Yes," Royd said. "The *Nightflyer* is very—very *advanced*, you know. Automated, self-repairing, large. It had to be, if Mother were to be freed from the necessity of crew. It was built on Newholme, you will recall. I have never been there, but I understand that Newholme's technology is quite sophisticated. Avalon could not duplicate this ship, I suspect. There are few worlds that could."

"The point, Captain?"

"The point—the point is the computers, Melantha. They had to be extraordinary. They are, believe me, they are. Crystal-matrix cores, lasergrid data retrieval, and other—other features."

"Are you telling us that the *Nightflyer* is an Artificial Intelligence?" "No," Royd said, "not as I understand it. But

it is something close.

Mother had a capacity for personality impress built in. She filled the central crystal with her own memories, desires, quirks, her loves and her—hates. That was why she trusted the computer with my education, you see? She knew it would raise me as she herself would, had she the patience. She programmed it in certain other ways as well."

"And you cannot deprogram, my friend?" Karoly asked.

Royd's voice was despairing. "I have *tried*, Karoly. But I am a weak hand at systems work, and the programs are very complicated, the machines very sophisticated. At least three times I have eradicated her, only to have her surface once again. She is a phantom program, and I cannot track her. She comes and goes as she will. A ghost, do you see? Her memories and her personality are so intertwined with the programs that ran the *Nightflyer* that I cannot get rid of her without wiping the entire system. But that would leave me helpless. I could never reprogram, and with the computers down the entire ship would fail, drives, life support, everything. I would have to leave the *Nightflyer*, and that would kill me."

"You should have told us, my friend," Karoly d'Branin said. "On Avalon, we have many cyberneticists, some very great minds. We might have aided you. We could have provided expert help."

"Karoly, I have *had* expert help. Twice I have brought systems specialists on board. The first one told me what I have just told you; that it was impossible without wiping the programs completely. The second had trained on Newholme. She thought she could help me. Mother killed her."

"You are still omitting something," Melantha Jhirl said. "I understand how your cybernetic ghost can open and close airlocks at will and arrange other accidents of that nature. But that first death, our telepath, how do you explain that?"

"Ultimately I must bear the guilt," Royd replied. "My loneliness led me to a grievous error. I thought I could safeguard you, even with a telepath among you. I have carried other riders safely. I watch them constantly, warn them away from dangerous acts. If Mother attempts to interfere, I countermand her directly from the control room. That usually works. Not always. Usually. Before you she had killed only five times, and the first three died when I was quite young. That was how I learned about her. That party included a telepath too."

"I should have known better, Karoly. My hunger for life has doomed you all to death. I overestimated my own abilities, and underestimated her fear of exposure. She strikes out when she is threatened, and telepaths are always a threat. They sense her, you see. A malign, looming presence, they tell me, something cool and hostile and inhuman."

"Yes," Karoly d'Branin said, "yes, that was what he said. An alien, he was certain of it."

"No doubt she feels alien to a telepath used to the familiar contours of organic minds. Hers is not a human brain, after all. What it is I cannot say—a complex of crystalline memories, a hellish network of interlocking programs, a meld of circuitry and spirit. Yes, I can understand why she might feel alien."

"You still haven't explained how a computer program could explode a man's skull," Melantha said patiently. "Have you ever held a whisper-jewel?" Royd Eris asked her.

"Yes," she replied. She had even owned one once; a dark blue crystal, packed with the memories of a particularly satisfying bout of lovemaking. It had been esper-etched on Avalon, her feelings impressed onto the jewel, and for more than a year she had only to touch it to grow randy. It had finally faded, though, and afterwards she had lost it.

"Then you know that psionic power can be stored," Royd said. "The central core of my computer system is resonant crystal. I think Mother impressed it as she lay dying."

"Only an esper can etch a whisper-jewel," Melantha said.

"You never asked me the *why* of it, Karoly," Royd said. "Nor you, Melantha. You never asked why Mother hated people so. She was born gifted, you see. On Avalon, she might have been a class one, tested and trained and honored, her talent nurtured and rewarded. I think she might have been very famous. She might have been stronger than a class one, but perhaps it is only after death that she acquired such power, linked as she is to the *Nightflyer*."

"The point is moot. She was not born on Avalon. On her birth world, her ability was seen as a curse, something alien and fearful. So they cured her of it. They used drugs and electroshock and hypnotraining that made her violently ill whenever she tried to use her talent. She never lost her power, of course, only the ability to use it effectively, to control it with her conscious mind. It remained part of her, suppressed, erratic, a source of shame and pain. And half a decade of institutional cure almost drove her insane. No wonder she hated people."

"What was her talent? Telepathy?"

"No. Oh, some rudimentary ability perhaps. I have read that all psi talents have several latent abilities in addition to their one developed strength. But Mother could not read minds. She had some empathy, although her cure had twisted it curiously, so that the emotions she felt literally sickened her. But her major strength, the talent they took five years to shatter and destroy, was teke."

Melantha Jhirl swore. "No wonder she hated gravity. Telekinesis under weightlessness is—"

"Yes," Royd finished. "Keeping the *Nightflyer* under gravity tortures me, but it limits Mother."

In the silence that followed that comment, each of them looked down the dark cylinder of the driverroom. Karoly d'Branin moved awkwardly on his sled. "They have not returned," he said finally.

"They are probably dead," Royd said dispassionately.

"What will we do, friend Royd? We must plan. We cannot wait here indefinitely."

"The first question is what can *I* do," Royd Eris replied. "I have talked freely, you'll note. You deserved to know. We have passed the point where ignorance was a protection. Obviously things have gone too far. There have been too many deaths and you have been witness to all of them.

Mother cannot allow you to return to Avalon alive."

"Ah," said Melantha, "true. But what shall she do with *you*? Is your own status in doubt, Captain?"

"The crux of the problem," Royd admitted. "You are still three moves ahead, Melantha. I wonder if it will suffice. Your opponent is four ahead this game, and most of your pawns are already captured. I fear checkmate is imminent."

"Unless I can persuade my opponent's king to desert, no?"

She could see Royd smile at her wanly. "She would probably kill me too if I choose to side with you."

Karoly d'Branin was slow to grasp the point. "But—but what else could you—"

"My sled has a laser. Yours do not. I could kill you both, right now, and thereby earn my way into the *Nightflyer's* good graces."

Across the three meters that lay between their sleds, Melantha's eyes met Royd's. Her hands rested easily on the thruster controls. "You could try, Captain. Remember, the improved model isn't easy to kill."

"I would not kill you, Melantha Jhirl," Royd said seriously. "I have lived sixty-eight standard years and I have never lived at all. I am tired, and you tell grand gorgeous lies. If we lose, we will all die together. If we win, well, I shall die anyway, when they destroy the *Nightflyer*—either that or live as a freak in an orbital hospital, and I would prefer death—"

"We will build you a new ship, Captain," Melantha said.

"Liar," Royd replied. But his tone was cheerful. "No matter. I have not had much of a life anyway. Death does not frighten me. If we win, you must tell me about your *volcryn* once again, Karoly. And you, Melantha, you must play chess with me once more, and . . ." His voice trailed off.

"And sex with you?" she finished, smiling.

"If you would," he said quietly. "I have never— *touched*, you know. Mother died before I was born." He shrugged. "Well, Mother has heard all of this. Doubtless she will listen carefully to any plans we might make, so there is no sense making them. There is no chance now that the control lock will admit me, since it is keyed directly into the ship's computer. So we must follow your colleagues through the driverroom, and enter through the manual lock, and take what chances we are given. If I can reach consoles and restore gravity, perhaps we—" He was interrupted by a low groan.

For an instant Melantha thought the *Nightflyer* was wailing at them again, and she was surprised that it was so stupid as to try the same tactic twice. Then the groan sounded a second time, and in the back of Karoly d'Branin's sled the forgotten fourth survivor struggled against the bonds that held her down. D'Branin hastened to free her, and the psipsych tried to rise to her feet and almost floated off the sled, until he caught her hand and pulled her back.

"Are you well?" he asked. "Can you hear me? Have you pain?"

Imprisoned beneath a transparent faceplate, wide frightened eyes flicked rapidly from Karoly to Melantha to Royd, and then to the broken *Nightflyer*. Melantha wondered whether the woman was insane, and started to caution d'Branin, when the psipsych spoke suddenly.

"The *volcryn*," was all she said, "the *volcryn*. Oh, oh, the *volcryn*!"

Around the mouth of the driverroom, the ring of nuclear engines took on a faint glow. Melantha Jhirl heard Royd suck in his breath sharply. She gave the thruster controls of her sled a violent twist. "Hurry," she said, "the *Nightflyer* is preparing to move."

A third of the way down the long barrel of the drive-room; Royd pulled abreast of her, stiff and menacing in his black, bulky armor. Side by side they sailed past the cylindrical stardrives and the cyberwebs; ahead, dimly lit, was the main airlock and its ghastly sentinel.

"When we reach the lock, jump over to my sled," Royd said. "I want to stay armed and mounted, and the chamber is not large enough for two sleds."

Melantha Jhirl risked a quick glance behind her. "Karoly," she called. "Where are you?"

"I am outside, Melantha," the answer came. "I cannot come, my friend.

Forgive me."

"But we have to stay together," she said.

"No," d'Branin's voice replied, "no, I could not risk it, not when we are so close. It would be so tragic, so futile, Melantha, to come so close and fail. Death I do not mind, but I must see them first, finally, after all these years." His voice was firm and calm.

Royd Eris cut in. "Karoly, my mother is going to move the ship. Don't you understand? You will be left behind, lost."

"I will wait," d'Branin replied. "My *volcryn* are coming, and I will wait for them."

Then there was no more time for conversation, for the airlock was almost upon them. Both sleds slowed and stopped, and Royd Eris reached out and began the cycle while Melantha moved to the rear of the huge oval work-sled. When the outer door moved aside, they glided through into the lock chamber.

"When the inner door opens, it will begin," Royd told her evenly. "Most of the permanent furnishings are either built in or welded or bolted into place, but the things that your team brought on board are not. Mother will use those things as weapons. And beware of doors, airlocks, any equipment tied in to the *Nightflyer's* computer. Need I warn you not to unseal your suit?"

"Hardly," she replied.

Royd lowered the sled a little, and its grapplers made a metallic sound as they touched against the chamber floor.

The inner door opened, and Royd applied his thrusters.

Inside the linguists were waiting, swimming in a haze of blood. The man had been slit from crotch to throat and his intestines moved like a nest of pale, angry anakes. The woman still held the knife. They swam closer with a grace they had never possessed in life.

Royd lifted his foremost grapplers and smashed them to the side. The man caromed off a bulkhead, leaving a wide wet mark where he struck, and more of his guts came sliding out. The woman lost control of the knife. Royd accelerated past them, driving up the corridor, through the cloud of blood.

"I'll watch behind," Melantha said, and she turned and put her back to his. Already the two corpses were safely behind them. The knife was floating uselessly in the air. She started to tell Royd that they were all right when the blade abruptly shifted and came after them, as if some invisible force had taken hold of it.

"*Swerve!*" she shouted.

The sled shot wildly to one side. The knife missed by a full meter, and glanced ringingly off a bulkhead.

But it did not drop. It came at them again. The lounge loomed ahead.

Dark.

"The door is too narrow," Royd said. "We will have to abandon the sled, Melantha." Even as he spoke, they hit: he wedged the sled squarely into the doorframe, and the sudden impact jarred them loose.

For a moment Melantha floated clumsily in the corridor, trying to get her balance. The knife slashed at her, opening her suit and her shoulder. She felt sharp pain and the warm flush of bleeding "*Damn*," she shrieked. The knife came around again, spraying droplets of blood.

Melantha's hand darted out and caught it.

She muttered something under her breath, and wrenched the blade free of the force that had been gripping it.

Royd had regained the controls of his sled and seemed intent on some manipulation. Beyond, in the dimness of the lounge, Melantha saw a dark semi-human shape float into view.

"*Royd!*" she warned, but as she did the thing activated its laser. The pencil beam caught Royd square in the chest.

He touched his own firing stud. The sled's heavy-duty laser cindered the xenobiologist's weapon and burned off his right arm and part of his chest. Its pulsing shaft hung in the air, and smoked against the far bulkhead.

Royd made some adjustments and began cutting a hole. "We'll be through in five minutes or less," he said curtly, without stopping or looking up.

"Are you all right?" Melantha asked.

"I'm uninjured," he replied. "My suit is better armored than yours, and his laser was a low-powered toy."

Melantha turned her attention back to the corridor.

The linguists were pulling themselves toward her, one on each side of the passage, to come at her from two directions at once. She flexed her muscles. Her shoulder throbbed where she had been cut. Otherwise she felt strong, almost reckless. "The corpses are coming after us again," she told Royd. "I'm going to take them."

"Is that wise?" he asked. "There are two of them."

"I'm an improved model," Melantha said, "and they're dead." She kicked herself free of the sled and sailed toward the man. He raised his hands to block her. She slapped them aside, bent one arm back and heard it snap, and drove her knife deep into his throat before she realized what a useless gesture that was. The man continued to flail at her. His teeth snapped grotesquely.

Melantha withdrew her blade, seized him, and with all her considerable strength threw him bodily down the corridor. He tumbled, spinning wildly, and vanished into the haze of his own blood.

Melantha then flew in the opposite direction. The woman's hands went around her from behind. Nails scrabbled against her faceplate until they began to bleed, leaving red streaks on the plastic.

Melantha spun to face her attacker, grabbed a thrashing arm, and flung the woman down the passageway to crash into her struggling companion.

"I'm through," Royd announced.

She turned to see. A smoking meter-square opening had been cut through one wall of the lounge. Royd killed the laser, gripped both sides of the door-frame, and pushed himself towards it.

A piercing blast of sound drilled through her head. She doubled over in agony. Her tongue flicked out and clicked off the comm; then there was blessed silence.

In the lounge it was raining. Kitchen utensils, glasses and plates, pieces of human bodies all lashed violently across the room, and glanced harmlessly off Royd's armored form. Melantha—eager to follow—drew back helplessly. That rain of death would cut her up to pieces in her lighter, thinner vacuum suit. Royd reached the far wall and vanished into the secret control section of the ship. She was alone.

The *Nightfiyer* lurched, and sudden acceleration provided a brief semblance of gravity. She was thrown to one side. Her injured shoulder smashed painfully against the sled.

All up and down the corridor doors were opening. The linguists were moving toward her once again.

The *Nightflyer* was a distant star sparked by its nuclear engines.

Blackness and cold enveloped them, and below was the unending emptiness of the Tempter's Veil, but Karoly d'Branin did not feel afraid. He felt strangely transformed.

The void was alive with promise.

"They *are* coming," he whispered. "Even I, who have no psi at all, even I can feel it. The Crey story must be so, even from light-years off they can be sensed. Marvelous!"

The psipsych seemed very small. "The *volcryn*," she muttered. "What good can they do us. I hurt. The ship is gone. D'Branin, my head aches." She made a small frightened noise. "The boy said that, just after I injected him, before . . . before . . . you know. He said that his head hurt."

"Quiet, my friend. Do not be afraid. I am here with you. Wait. Think only of what we shall witness, think only of that!"

"I can sense them," the psipsych said. D'Branin was eager. "Tell me, then. We have the sled. We shall go to them. Direct me."

"Yes," she agreed. "Yes. Oh, yes."

Gravity returned: in a flicker, the universe became almost normal.

Melantha fell to the deck, landed easily and rolled, and was on her feet cat-quick.

The objects that had been floating ominously through the open doors along the corridor all came clattering down.

The blood was transformed from a fine mist to a slick covering on the corridor floor.

The two corpses dropped heavily from the air, and lay still.

Royd spoke to her. His voice came from the communicator grills built into the walls, not over her suit comm. "I made it," he said.

"I noticed," she replied.

"I'm at the main control console," he continued. "I have restored the gravity with a manual override, and I'm cutting off as many computer functions as possible. We're still not safe, though. She will try to find a way around me. I'm countermanding her by sheer force, as it were. I cannot afford to overlook anything, and if my attention should lapse for even a moment . . . Melantha, was your suit breached?"

"Yes. Cut at the shoulder."

"Change into another one. *Immediately*. I think the counter programming I'm doing will keep the locks sealed, but I can't take any chances."

Melantha was already running down the corridor, towards the cargo hold where the suits and equipment were stored.

"When you have changed," Royd continued, "dump the corpses into the mass conversion unit. You'll find the appropriate hatch near the driveroom, just to the left of the main lock. Convert any other loose objects that are not indispensable as well; scientific instruments, books, tapes, tableware—"

"Knives," suggested Melantha.

"By all means."

"Is teke still a threat, Captain?"

"Mother is vastly weaker in a gravity field," Royd said. "She has to fight it. Even boosted by the *Nightflyer's* power, she can only move one object at a time, and she has only a fraction of the lifting force she wields under weightless conditions. But the power is still there, remember. Also, it is possible she will find a way to

circumvent me and cut out the gravity again. From here I can restore it in an instant, but I don't want any weapons lying around even for that brief period of time."

Melantha had reached the cargo area. She stripped off her vacuum suit and slipped into another one in record time. Then she gathered up the discarded suit and a double armful of instruments and dumped them into the conversion chamber. Afterwards she turned her attention to the bodies. The man was no problem. The woman crawled down the hall after her as she pushed him through, and thrashed weakly when it was her own turn, a grim reminder that the *Nightflyer's* powers were not all gone.

Melantha easily overcame her feeble struggles and forced her through.

The corpse of the xenobiologist was less trouble, but while she was cleaning out the lounge a kitchen knife came spinning at her head. It came slowly, though, and Melantha just batted it aside, then picked it up and added it to the pile for conversion.

She was working through the second cabin, carrying the psipsych's abandoned drugs and injection gun under her arm, when she heard Royd cry out.

A moment later, a force like a giant invisible hand wrapped itself around her chest and squeezed and pulled her, struggling, to the floor.

Something was moving across the stars.

Dimly and far off, d'Branin could see it, though he could not yet make out details. But it was there, that was unmistakable, some vast shape that blocked off a section of the starscape. It was coming at them dead on.

How he wished he had his team with him now, his telepath, his experts, his instruments. He pressed harder on the thrusters.

Pinned to the floor, hurting, Melantha Jhirl risked opening her suit's

comm. She had to talk to Royd. "Are you there?" she asked. "What's happening?" The pressure was awful, and it was growing steadily worse. She could barely move.

The answer was pained and slow in responding. "... outwitted ... me," Royd's voice managed. "... hurts... to ... talk."

"Royd—"

". . . she ... teked . . . dial ... up ... two . . . gees . . . three . . . higher . . .

right . . . here ... on ... the . . . board ... all ... I ... have to ... to do ... turn it ... back . . . back ... let me. . . ."

Silence. Then, finally, when Melantha was near despair, Royd's voice again. One word: "... can't . . ."

Melantha's chest felt as if it were supporting ten times her own weight. She could imagine the agony Royd must be in; Royd, for whom even one gravity was painful and dangerous. Even if the dial was an arm's length away she knew his feeble musculature would never let him reach it. "Why," she started, having somewhat less trouble talking than Royd, "why would she turn *up* the . . . gravity ... it... weakens her too, yes?"

". . . yes . . . but ... in a ... a . . . minute . . . my . . . my heart . and . . . and then . . . you alone . . kill gravity . . . kill you ..."

Painfully, Melantha reached out her arm and dragged herself half a length down the corridor. "Royd . . . hold on ... I'm coming . . ." She dragged herself forward again. The psipsych's drug kit was still under her arm, impossibly heavy. She eased it down and started to shove it aside, then reconsidered. Instead she opened its lid.



The ampules were all neatly labeled. She glanced over them quickly, searching for adrenaline or synthastim, anything that might give her the strength she needed to reach Royd. She found several stimulants, selected the strongest, and was loading it into the injection gun with awkward, agonized slowness when her eyes chanced on the supply of esperon.

Melantha did not know why she hesitated. Esperon was only one of a half-dozen psionic drugs in the kit, but something about seeing it bothered her, reminded her of something she could not quite lay her finger on. She was trying to sort it out when she heard the noise.

"Royd," she said, "your mother . . . could she move . . . she couldn't move anything . . . teke it ... in this high a gravity . . . could she?"

"Maybe," he answered, "... if ... concentrate . . . all her . . . power . . . hard . . . maybe possible . . . why?"

"Because," Melantha Jhirl said grimly, "because something ... someone ... is cycling through the airlock."

The *volcryn* ship filled the universe.

"It is not truly a ship, not as I thought it would be," Karoly d'Branin was saying. His suit, Academy-designed, had a built-in encoding device, and he was recording his comments for posterity, strangely secure in the certainty of his impending death. "The scale of it is difficult to imagine, difficult to estimate. Vast, vast. I have nothing but my wrist computer, no instruments, I cannot make accurate measurements, but I would say, oh, a hundred kilometers, perhaps as much as three hundred, across. No solid mass, of course, not at all. It is delicate, airy, no ship as we know ships. It is—oh, beautiful—it is crystal and gossamer, alive with its own dim lights, a vast intricate kind of spiderwebby craft—it reminds me a bit of the old starsail ships they used once, in the days before drive, but this great construct, it is not solid, it cannot be driven by light. It is no ship at all, really. It is all open to vacuum, it has no sealed cabins or life-support spheres, none visible to me, unless blocked from my line of sight in some fashion, and no, I cannot believe that, it is too open, too fragile. It moves quite rapidly. I would wish for the instrumentation to measure its speed, but it is enough to be here. I am taking our sled at right angles to it, to get clear of its path, but I cannot say that I will make it. It moves so much faster than we. Not at light speed, no, far below it, but still faster than the *Nightflyer* and its nuclear engines, I would guess. Only a guess.

"The *volcryn* craft has no visible means of propulsion. In fact, I wonder how—perhaps it is a light-sail, laser-launched millennia ago, now torn and rotted by some unimaginable catastrophe—but no, it is too symmetrical, too beautiful, the webbings, the great shimmering veils near the nexus, the beauty of it.

"I must describe it, I must be more accurate, I know. It is difficult, I grow too excited. It is large, as I have said, kilometers across. Roughly—let me count—yes, roughly octagonal in shape. The nexus, the center, is a bright area, a small darkness surrounded by a much greater area of light, but only the dark portion seems entirely solid—the lighted areas are translucent, I can see stars through them, though discolored, shifted towards the purple. Veils, I call those the veils. From the nexus and the veils eight long—oh, vastly long—spurs project, not quite spaced evenly, so it is not a true geometric octagon—ah, I see better now, one of the spurs is shifted, oh, very slowly, the veils are rippling—they are mobile then, those projections, and the webbing runs from one spur to the next, around and around, but there are— patterns, odd patterns, it is not at all the simple webbing of a spider. I cannot quite see order in the patterns, in the trceries of the webs, but I feel sure that the order is there, the meaning is waiting to be found.

"There are lights. Have I mentioned the lights? The lights are brightest around the center nexus, but they are nowhere very bright, a dim violet. Some visible radiation, then, but not much. I would like to take an ultraviolet reading of this craft, but I do not have the instrumentation.

The lights move. The veils seem to ripple, and lights run constantly up and down the length of the spurs, at differing rates of speed, and sometimes other lights can be seen traversing the webbing, moving across the patterns. I do not know what the lights are or whether they emanate from inside the craft or outside.

"The *volcryn* myths, this is really not much like the legends, not truly.

Though, as I think, now I recall a Nor T'alush report that the *volcryn* ships were impossibly large, but I took that for exaggeration. And lights, the *volcryn* have often been linked to lights, but those reports were so vague, they might have meant anything, described anything from a laser propulsion system to simple exterior lighting, I could not know it meant this. Ah, what mysteries! The ship is still too far away for me to see the finer detail. I think perhaps the darker area in the center is a craft, a life capsule. The *volcryn* must be inside it. I wish my team was with me, my telepath. He was a class one, we might have made contact, might have communicated with them. The things we would learn! The things they have seen! To think how old this craft is, how ancient this race, how long they have been outbound! It fills me with awe. Communication would be such a gift, such an impossible gift, but they are so alien."

"D'Branin," the psipsych said in a low, urgent voice. "Can't you feel?"

Karoly d'Branin looked at his companion as if seeing her for the first time. "Can *you* feel them? You are a three, can you sense them now, strongly?"

"Long ago," the psipsych said. "Long ago."

"Can you project? Talk to them. Where are they? In the center area?" "Yes," she replied, and she laughed. Her

laugh was shrill and hysterical,

and d'Branin had to recall that she was a very sick woman. "Yes, in the center, d'Branin, that's where the pulses come from. Only you're wrong about them. It's not a *them* at all, your legends are all lies, lies, I wouldn't be surprised if we were the first to ever see your *volcryn*, to ever come this close. The others, those aliens of yours, they merely *felt*, deep and distantly, sensed a bit of the nature of the *volcryn* in their dreams and visions, and fashioned the rest to suit themselves. Ships, and wars, and a race of eternal travellers, it is all—all—"

"What do you mean, my friend?" Karoly said, baffled. "You do not make sense. I do not understand."

"No," the psipsych said, her voice suddenly gentle. "You do not, do you? You cannot feel it, as I can. So clear now. This must be how a one feels, all the time. A one full of esperon."

"What do you feel? What?"

"It's not a *them*, Karoly," the psipsych said. "It's an *it*. Alive, Karoly, and quite mindless, I assure you."

"Mindless?" d'Branin said. "No, you must be wrong, you are not reading correctly. I will accept that it is a single creature if you say so, a single great marvelous star-traveller, but how can it be mindless? You sensed it, its mind, its telepathic emanations. You and the whole of the Crey sensitives and all the others. Perhaps its thoughts are too alien for you to read."

"Perhaps," the psipsych admitted, "but what I do read is not so terribly alien at all. Only animal. Its thoughts are slow and dark and strange, hardly thoughts at all, faint. The brain must be huge, I grant you that, but it can't be devoted to conscious thought."

"What do you mean?"

"The propulsion system, d'Bra'nin. Don't you *feel*? The pulses? They are threatening to rip off the top of my skull. Can't you guess what is driving your damned *volcryn* across the galaxy? Why they avoid gravity wells? Can't you guess how it is moving?"

"No," d'Branin said, but even as he denied it a dawn of comprehension broke across his face, and he looked away from his companion, back at the swelling immensity of the *volcryn*, its lights moving, its veils a-ripple, as it came on and on, across light-years, light-centuries, across eons.

When he looked back to her, he mouthed only a single word: "Teke," he said. Silence filled their world. She nodded.

Melantha Jhirl struggled to lift the injection gun and press it against an artery. It gave a single loud hiss, and the drug flooded her system. She lay back and gathered her strength, tried to think. Esperon, esperon, why was that important? It had killed the telepath, made him a victim of his own abilities, tripled his power and his vulnerability. Psi. It all came back to psi.

The inner door of the airlock opened. The headless corpse came through.

It moved with jerks, unnatural shufflings, never lifting its legs from the floor. It sagged as it moved, half-crushed by the weight upon it. Each shuffle was crude and sudden; some grim force was literally yanking one leg forward, then the next. It moved in slow motion, arms stiff by its sides.

But it moved.

Melantha summoned her own reserves and began to crawl away from it, never taking her eyes off its advance.

Her thoughts went round and round, searching for the piece out of place, the solution to the chess problem, finding nothing.

The corpse was moving faster than she was. Clearly, visibly, it was gaining.

Melantha tried to stand. She got to her knees, her heart pounding. Then one knee. She tried to force herself up, to lift the impossible burden on her shoulders. She was strong, she told herself. She was the improved model.

But when she put all her weight on one leg, her muscles would not hold her. She collapsed, awkwardly, and when she smashed against the floor it was as if she had fallen from a building. She heard a sharp *snap*, and a stab of agony flashed up the arm she had tried to use to break her fall. She blinked back tears and choked on her own scream.

The corpse was halfway up the corridor. It must be walking on two broken legs, she realized. It didn't care.

"Melantha . . . heard you . . . are . . . you . . . Melantha?"

"*Quiet!*" she snapped at Royd. She had no breath to waste on talk.

Now she had only one arm. She used the disciplines she had taught herself, willed away the pain. She kicked feebly, her boots scraping for purchase, and she pulled herself forward with her good arm.

The corpse came on and on.

She dragged herself across the threshold of the lounge, worming her way under the crashed sled, hoping it would delay the cadaver.

It was a meter behind her.

In the darkness, in the lounge, there where it had all begun, Melantha Jhirl ran out of strength.

Her body shuddered, and she collapsed on the damp carpet, and she knew that she could go no further.

On the far side of the door, the corpse stood stiffly. The sled began to shake. Then, with the scrape of metal against metal, it slid backwards, moving in tiny sudden increments, jerking itself free and out of the way.

Psi. Melantha wanted to curse it, and cry. Vainly she wished for a psi power of her own, a weapon to blast apart the teke-driven corpse that stalked her. She was improved, she thought angrily, but not improved enough. Her parents had given her all the genetic gifts they could arrange, but psi was beyond them. The gene was astronomically rare, recessive, and—

—and suddenly it came to her.

"*Royd!*" she yelled, put all of her remaining will into her words. "The dial . . . *teke it*. Royd, teke it!"

His reply was very faint, troubled. ". . . can't . . . I don't . . . Mother . . . only . . . her . . . not me . . . no . . ."

"Not mother," she said, desperate. "You always . . . say . . . *mother*. I forgot . . . forgot. Not your mother . . . listen . . . you're a *clone* . . . same genes . . . you have it, too. The power."

"Don't," he said. "Never . . . must be . . . sex-linked."

"*No!* It *isn't*. I know . . . Promethean, Royd . . . don't tell a Promethean .

. . . about genes . . . turn it!"

The sled jumped a third of a meter, and listed to the side. A path was clear.

The corpse came forward.

". . . trying," Royd said. "Nothing ... I *can't!*"

"She *cured* you," Melantha said bitterly. "Better than . . . she was . . . cured . . . pre-natal . . . but it's only . . . suppressed ... you *can!*"

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

The corpse now stood above her. Stopped. Pale-fleshed hands trembled spastically. Began to rise.

Melantha swore, and wept, and made a futile fist.

And all at once the gravity was gone. Far, far away, she heard Royd cry out and then fall silent.

The corpse bobbed awkwardly into the air, its hands hanging limply before it. Melantha, reeling in the weightlessness, tried to ready herself for its furious assault.

But the body did not move again. It floated dead and still. Melantha moved to it, pushed it, and it sailed across the room.

"Royd?" she said uncertainly. There was no answer.

She pulled herself through the hole into the control chamber.

And found Royd Eris, master of the *Nightflyer*, prone on his back in his armored suit, dead. His heart had given out.

But the dial on the gravity grid was set at zero.

I have held the *Nightflyer's* crystalline soul within my hands.

It is deep and red and multifaceted, large as my head, and icy to the touch. In its scarlet depths, two small sparks of light burn fiercely and sometimes seem to whirl.

I have crawled through the consoles, wound my way carefully past safeguards and cybernets, taking care to damage nothing, and I have laid rough hands on that great crystal, knowing that it is where *she* lives.

And I cannot bring myself to wipe it. Royd's ghost has asked me not to.

Last night we talked about it once again, over brandy and chess in the lounge. Royd cannot drink, of course, but he sends his spectre to smile at me, and he tells me where he wants his pieces moved.

For the thousandth time he offered to take me back to Avalon, or any world of my choice, if only I would go outside and complete the repairs we abandoned so many years ago, so that the *Nightflyer* might safely slip into star-drive.

For the thousandth time I refused.

He is stronger now, no doubt. Their genes are the same, after all. Their power is the same. Dying, he too found the strength to impress himself upon the great crystal. The ship is alive with both of them, and frequently they fight. Sometimes she outwits him for a moment, and the *Nightflyer* does odd, erratic things. The gravity goes up or down or off completely. Blankets wrap themselves around my throat when I sleep. Objects come hurtling out of dark corners.

Those times have come less frequently of late, though. When they do come, Royd stops her, or I do. Together, the *Nightflyer* is ours.

Royd claims he is strong enough alone, that he does not really need me, that he can keep her under check. I wonder. Over the chessboard, I still beat him nine games out of ten.

And there are other considerations. Our work, for one. Karoly would be proud of us.

The *volcryn* will soon enter the mists of the Tempter's Veil, and we follow close behind. Studying, recording, doing all that old d'Branin would have wanted us to do. It is all in the computer. It is also on tape and on paper, should the computer ever be wiped. It will be interesting to see how the *volcryn* thrives in the Veil. Matter is so thick there, compared to the thin diet of interstellar hydrogen on which the creature has fed for endless eons.

We have tried to communicate with it, with no success. I do not believe it is sentient at all.

And lately Royd has tried to imitate its ways, gathering all his energies in an attempt to move the *Nightflyer* by teke. Sometimes, oddly, his mother even joins him in those efforts. So far they have failed, but we will keep trying.

So the work goes on, and it *is* important work, though not the field I trained for, back on Avalon. We know that our results will reach humanity. Royd and I have discussed it. Before I die, I will destroy the central crystal and clear the computers, and afterwards I will set course manually for the close vicinity of an inhabited world. I know I can do it. I have all the time I need, and I am an improved model.

I will not consider the other option, though it means much to me that Royd suggests it again and again. No doubt I could finish the repairs.

Perhaps Royd could control the ship without . . . time . . . hour . . . will burst . . . she . . . will . . . me, and continue the work. But that is not important.

When I finally touched him, for the first and last and only time, his body was still warm. But *he* was gone already. He never felt my touch. I could not keep that promise.

But I can keep my other.

I will not leave him alone with her.

Ever.

# Nightflyers

(Novella)

When Jesus of Nazareth hung dying on his cross, the *volcryn* passed within a light-year of his agony, headed outward.

When the Fire Wars raged on Earth, the *volcryn* sailed near Old Poseidon, where the seas were still unnamed and unfished. By the time the stardrive had transformed the Federated Nations of Earth into the Federal Empire, the *volcryn* had moved into the fringes of Hrangan space. The Hrangans never knew it. Like us they were children of the small bright worlds that circled their scattered suns, with little interest and less knowledge of the things that moved in the gulfs between.

War flamed for a thousand years and the *volcryn* passed through it, unknowing and untouched, safe in a place where no fires could ever burn. Afterwards the Federal Empire was shattered and gone, and the Hrangans vanished in the dark of the Collapse, but it was no darker for the *volcryn*.

When Kleronomas took his survey ship out from Avalon, the *volcryn* came within ten light-years of him. Kleronomas found many things, but he did not find the *volcryn*. Not then and not on his return to Avalon a lifetime later.

When I was a child of three, Kleronomas was dust, as distant and dead as Jesus of Nazareth and the *volcryn* passed close to Daronne. That season all the Crey sensitives grew strange and sat staring at the stars with luminous, flickering eyes.

When I was grown, the *volcryn* had sailed beyond Tara, past the range of even the Crey, still heading outward.

And now I am old and the *volcryn* will soon pierce the Tempter's Veil where it hangs like a black mist between the stars. And we follow, we follow. Through the dark gulfs where no one goes, through the emptiness, through the silence that goes on and on, my Nightflyer and I give chase.

They made their way slowly down the length of the transparent tube that linked the orbital docks to the waiting starship ahead, pulling themselves hand over hand through weightlessness.

Melantha Jhirl, the only among them who did not seem clumsy and ill at ease in free fall, paused briefly to look at the dappled globe of Avalon below, a stately vastness in jade and amber. She smiled and moved swiftly down the tube, passing her companions with an easy grace. They had boarded starships before, all of them, but never like this. Most ships docked flush against the station, but the craft that Karoly d'Branin had chartered for his mission was too large, and too singular in design. It loomed ahead, three small eggs side-by-side, two larger spheres beneath and at right angles, the cylinder of the driveroom between, lengths of tube connecting it all. The ship was white and austere.

Melantha Jhirl was the first one through the airlock. The others straggled up on by one until they had all boarded; five women and four men, each an Academy scholar, their backgrounds as diverse as their fields of study. The frail young telepath, Thale Lasamer, was the last to enter. He glanced about nervously as the others chatted and waited for the entry procedure to be completed. "We're being watched," he said.

The outer door was closed behind them, the tube had fallen away; now the inner door slid open. "Welcome to my *Nightflyer*," said a mellow voice from within.

But there was no one there.

Melatha Jhirl stepped into the corridor. "Hello," she said, looking about quizzically. Karoly d'Branin followed her.

"Hello," the mellow voice replied. It was coming from a communicator grille beneath a darkened viewscreen. "This is Royd Eris, master of the *Nightflyer*. I'm pleased to see you again, Karoly, and pleased to welcome the rest of you."

"Where are you?" someone demanded.

"In my quarters, which occupy half of this life-support sphere," the voice of Royd Eris replied amiably. "The other half is comprised of a lounge-library-kitchen, two sanitary stations, one double cabin, and a rather small single. The rest of you will have to rid sleepwebs in the cargo spheres, I'm afraid. The *Nightflyer* was designed as a trader, not a passenger vessel. However, I've opened all the appropriate passageways and locks, so the holds have air and heat and water. I thought you'd find it more comfortable that way. Your equipment and computer system have been stowed in the holds, but there is still plenty of space, I assure you. I suggest you settle in, and then meet in the lounge for a meal."

"Will you join us?" asked the psipsych, a querulous hatchet-faced woman named Agatha Marij-Black.

"In a fashion," Royd Erid said, "in a fashion."

The ghost appeared at the banquet.

They found the lounge easily enough, after they had rigged their sleepwebs and arranged their personal belongings around their sleeping quarters. It was the largest room in this section of the ship. One end of it was a fully equipped kitchen, well stocked with provisions. The opposite end offered several comfortable chairs, two readers, a holotank, and a wall of books and tapes and crystal chips. In the center was a long table with places set for ten.

A light meal was hot and waiting. The academicians helped themselves at the table, laughing and talking to each other, more at ease now than when they had boarded.

The ship's gravity grid was on, which went a long way towards making them more comfortable; the queasy awkwardness of their weightless transit was soon forgotten.

Finally all the seats were occupied except for one at the head of the table.

The ghost materialized there.

All conversation stopped.

"Hello," said the spectre, the bright shade of a lithe, pale-eyed young man with white hair. He was dressed in clothing twenty years out of date; a loose blue pastel shirt that ballooned at the wrists, clinging white trousers with built-in boot. They could see through him, and his own eyes did not see them at all.

"A hologram," said Alys Northwind, the short, stout xenotech.

“Royd, Royd, I do not understand,” said Karoly d’Branin, staring at the ghost. “What is this? Why do you send us a projection? Will you not join us in person?”

The ghost smiled faintly and lifted an arm. “My quarters are on the other side of that wall,” he said. “I’m afraid there is no door or lock between the two halves of the sphere. I spend most of my time by myself, and I value my privacy. I hope you will understand and respect my wishes. I will be a gracious host nonetheless. Here in the lounge my projection can join you. Elsewhere, if you have anything you need, if you want to talk to me, just use a communicator. Now, please resume your meal, and your conversation. I’ll gladly listen. It’s been a long time since I had passengers.”

They tried. But the ghost at the head of the table cast a long shadow, and the meal was strained and hurried.

From the hour the *Nightflyer* slipped into stardrive, Royd Eris watched his passengers. Within a few days most of the academicians had grown accustomed to the disembodied voice from the communicators and the holographic spectre in the lounge, but only Melantha Jhirl and Karoly d’Branin ever seemed really comfortable in his presence. The others would have been even more uncomfortable if they had known that Royd was always with them. Always and everywhere, he watched. Even in the sanitary stations, Royd had eyes and ears. He watched them work, eat, sleep, copulate; he listened untiringly to their talk. Within a week he knew them, all nine, and had begun to ferret out their tawdry little secrets.

The cyberneticist, Lommie Thorne, talked to her computers and seemed to prefer their company to that of humans. She was bright and quick, with a mobile expressive face and a small, hard boyish body; most of the others found her attractive, but she did not like to be touched. She sexed only once, with Melantha Jhirl. Lommie Thorne wore shirts of softly-woven metal, and had an implant in her left wrist that let her interface directly with her computers.

The xenobiologist, Rojan Christopheris, was a surly, argumentative man, a cynic whose contempt for his colleagues was barely kept in check, a solitary drinker. He was tall and stooped and ugly.

The two linguists, Dannel and Lindran, were lovers in public, constantly holding hands and supporting each other. In private they quarreled bitterly. Lindran had mordant wit and liked to wound Dannel where it hurt the most, with jokes about his professional competence. They sexed often, both of them, but not with each other.

Agatha Marij-Black, the psipsych, was a hypochondriac given to black depressions, which worsened in the in the close confines of the *Nightflyer*.

Xenotech Alys Northwind ate constantly and never washed. Her stubby fingernails were always caked with black dirt, and she wore the same jumpsuit for the first two weeks of the voyage, taking it off only for sex and then only briefly.

Telepath Thale Lasamer was nervous and temperamental, afraid of everyone around him, yet given to bouts of arrogance in which he taunted his companions with thought he has snatched from their minds.

Royd Eris watch them all, studied them, lived with them and through them. He neglected none, not even the ones he found the most distasteful. But by the time the *Nightflyer* had been lost n the roiling flux of stardrive for two weeks, two of his riders had come to engage the bulk of his attention.



“Most of all, I want to know the why of them,” Karoly d'Branin told him one false night the second week out from Avalon.

Royd's luminescent ghost sat close to d'Branin in the darkened lounge, watching him drink bittersweet chocolate. The others were all asleep. Night and day are meaningless on a starship, but the *Nightflyer* kept the usual cycles, and most of the passengers followed them. Only Karoly d'Branin, administrator, generalist and mission leader, was the exception. He kept his own hours, preferred work to sleep, and liked nothing better than to talk about his pet obsession, the *volcryn* he hunted.

“The *if* of them is important as well, Karoly,” Royd answered. “Can you be truly certain if these aliens of yours exist?”

“I can be certain,” Karoly d'Branin said with a broad wink. He was a compact man, short and slender, iron gray hair carefully styled and his tunic almost fussily neat, but the expansiveness of his gestures and the giddy enthusiasms to which he was prone belied his sober appearance. “That is enough. If everyone else were certain as well, we would have a fleet of research ships instead of your little *Nightflyer*.” He sipped at his chocolate, and sighed with satisfaction. “Do you know the Nor T'alush, Royd?”

The name was strange, but it took Royd only a moment to consult his library computer. “An alien race on the other side of human space, past the Fyndii worlds and the Damoosh. Possibly legendary.”

D'Branin chuckled. “No, no, no! Your library is out-of-date, my friend. You must supplement it the next time you are on Avalon. Not legends, no, real enough, though far away. We have little information about the Nor T'alush, but we are sure they exist, though you and I may never meet one. They were the start of it all.

“Tell me,” Royd said. “I am interested in your work, Karoly.”

“I was coding some information into the Academy computers, a packet newly arrived from Dam Tullian after twenty standard years in transit. Part of it was Nor T'alush folklore. I had no idea how long that had taken to get to Dam Tullian, or by what route it had come, but it was fascinating material. Did you know that my first degree was in xenomythology?”

“I did not,” Royd said. “Please continue.”

“The *volcryn* story was among the Nor T'alush myths. It awed me; a race of sentients moving out from some mysterious origin in the core of the galaxy, sailing towards the galactic edge and, it was alleged, eventually bound for intergalactic space itself, meanwhile keeping always to the interstellar depths, no planetfalls, seldom coming within a light-year of a star.” D'Branin's gray eyes sparkled, and as he spoke his hands swept enthusiastically to either side, as if they could encompass the galaxy. “And doing it all *without a stardrive*, Royd, that is the real wonder! Doing it in ships moving only a fraction of the speed of light! That was the detail that obsessed me! How different they must be, my *volcryn*—wise and patient, long-lived and long-viewed, with non of the terrible haste and passion that consumes the lesser races. Think how old they must be, those *volcryn* ships!”

“Old,” Royd agreed. “Karoly, you said ships. More than one?”

“Oh, yes,” d'Branin said. “According to the Nor T'alush, one or two appeared first, on the innermost edges of their trading sphere, but others followed. Hundreds of them, each solitary, moving by itself, bound outward, always outward. The direction was always the same. For fifteen thousand standard years they moved between the Nor T'alush stars, and then they began to pass out from among them. The myth said that the last *volcryn* ship was gone three thousand years ago.”

“Eighteen thousand years,” Royd said, adding, “are your Nor T'alush that old?”

"Not as star-travellers, no," D'Branin said, smiling. According to their own histories, the Nor T'alush have only been civilized for about half that long. That bothered me for a while. It seemed to make the *volcryn* story clearly a legend. A wonderful legend, true, but nothing more.

"Ultimately, however, I could not let it alone. In my spare time, I investigated, cross-checking with other alien cosmologies to see whether this particular myth was shared by any races other than the Nor T'alush. I thought perhaps I would get a thesis out of it. It seemed a fruitful line of inquiry.

"I was startled by what I found. Nothing from the Hrangans, or the Hrangan slaveraces, but that made sense, you see. Since, they were out from human space, the *volcryn* would not reach them until after they had passed through our own sphere. When I looked in, however, the *volcryn* story was everywhere." D'Branin leaned forward eagerly. "Ah, Royd, the stories, the *stories!*"

"Tell me," Royd said.

"The Fyndii call them *iy-wivii*, which translates to something like void-horde or dark-horde. Each Fyndii horde tells the same story, only the mindmates disbelieve. The ships are said to be vast, much larger than any known in their history or ours. Warships, they say. There is a story of a lost Fyndii horde, three hundred ships under *rala-fyn*, all destroyed utterly when they encountered an *iy-wivii*. This was many thousands of years ago, of course, so the details are unclear,

"The Damoosh have a different story, but they accept it as literal truth—and the Damoosh, you know, are the oldest race we've yet encountered. The people of the gulf, they call my *volcryn*. Lovely stories, Royd, lovely! Ships like great dark cities, still and silent, moving at a slower pace than the universe around them. Damoosh legends say the *volcryn* are refugees from some unimaginable war deep in the core of the galaxy, at the very beginning of time. They abandoned the worlds and stars on which they had evolved, sought true peace in the emptiness between.

"The gethsoids of Aath have a similar story, but in their tale that war destroyed all life in our galaxy, and the *volcryn* are gods of a sort, reseeding the worlds as they pass. Other races see them as god's messengers, or shadows out of hell warning us all to flee some terror soon to emerge from the core."

"Your stories contradict each other, Karoly."

"Yes, yes, of course, but they all agree on the essentially—the *volcryn*, sailing out, passing through our short-lived empires and transient glories in their ancient eternal sublight ships. That is what matters! The rest is frippery, ornamentation; we will soon know the truth of it. I checked what little was known about the races said to flourish further in still, beyond even the Nor T'alush—civilizations and people half legendary themselves, like the Dan'lai and the ullish and the Rohenna'kh—and where I could find anything at all, I found the *volcryn* story once again."

"The legend of the legends," Royd suggested. The spectre's wide mouth turned up in a smile.

"Exactly, exactly," d'Branin agreed. "At that point, I called in the experts, specialists from the Institute for the Study of Non-human Intelligence. We researched for two years. It was all there, in the libraries and memories and matrices of the Academy. No one had ever looked before, or bothered to put it together.

"The *volcryn* have been moving through the manrealm for most of human history, since before the dawn of spaceflight. While we twist the fabric of space itself to cheat relativity, they have been sailing their great ships right through the heart of our alleged civilization, past our most populous worlds, at stately, slow sublight speeds, bound for the Fringe and the dark between the galaxies. Marvelous, Royd, marvelous!"

"Marvelous!" Royd agreed.

Karoly d'Branin drained his chocolate cup with a swig, and reached out to catch Royd's arm, but his hand passed through empty light when he tried to grasp his companion by the forearm. He seemed disconcerted for a moment, before he began to laugh at himself. "Ah, my *volcryn*. I grow overenthused, Royd. I am so close now. They have preyed on my mind for a dozen years, and within a month I will have them, will behold their splendor with my own weary eyes. Then, then, if only I can open communication, if only my people can reach ones so great and strange as they, so different from us—I have hopes, Royd, hopes that at last I will know the why of it!

The ghost of Royd Eris smiled for him, and looked on through calm transparent eyes.

Passengers soon grow restless on a starship under drive, sooner on one as small and spare as the Nightfiyer. Late in the second week, the speculation began in deadly earnest.

"Who is this Royd Eris, really?" the xenobiologist, Rojan Christopheris, complained one night when four of them were playing cards. "Why doesn't he come out? What's the purpose of keeping himself sealed off from the rest of us?"

"Ask him," suggested Dannel, the male linguist.

"What if he's a criminal of some sort?" Christopheris said. "Do we know anything about him? No, of course not. D'Branin engaged him, and d'Branin a senile old fool, we all know that."

"It's your play," Lammie Thorne said.

Christopheris snapped down a card. "Setback," he declared, "you'll have to draw again." He grinned. "As for this Eris, who knows that he isn't planning to kill us all."

"For our vast wealth, no doubt," said Lindran, the female linguist. She played a card on top of the one Christopheris had laid down. "Ricochet," she called softly. She smiled. So did Royd Eris, watching.

Melantha Jhirl was good to watch.

Young, healthy, active, Melantha Jhirl had a vibrancy about her the others could not match. She was big in every way; a head taller than anyone else on board, large-framed, large-breasted, long-legged, strong, muscles moving fluidly beneath shiny coal-black skin. Her appetites were big as well. She ate twice as much as any of her colleagues, drank heavily without ever seeming drunk, exercised for hours every day on equipment she had brought with her and set up in one of the cargo holds. By the third week out she had sexed with all four of the men on board and two of the other women. Even in bed she was always active, exhausting most of her partners. Royd watched her with consuming interest.

"I am an improved model," she told him once as she worked out on her parallel bars, sweat glistening on her bare skin, her long black hair confined in a net.

"Improved?" Royd said. He could not send his projection down to the holds, but Melantha had summoned him with the communicator to talk while she exercised, not knowing he would have been there anyway. She paused in her routine, holding her body aloft with the strength of her arms and her back. "Altered, Captain," she said. She had taken to calling him captain "Born on Prometheus among the elite, child of two genetic wizards. Improved, captain. I require twice the energy you do, but I use it all. A more efficient metabolism, a stronger and more durable body, an expected lifespan half again the normal human's. My people have made some terrible mistakes when they try to radically redesign humanity, but the small improvements they do well."

She resumed her exercises, moving quickly and easily, silent until she had finished. When she was done, she vaulted away from the bars and stood breathing heavily for a moment, then crossed her arms and cocked her head and grinned. "Now you know my life story, captain," she said. She pulled off the net to shake free her hair.

"Surely there is more," said the voice from the communicator.

Melantha Jhirl laughed. "Surely," she said. "Do you want to hear about my defection to Avalon, the whys and wherefores of it, the trouble it caused my family on Promethius? Or are you more interested in my extraordinary work in cultural xenology? Do you want to hear about that?"

"Perhaps some other time," Royd said, politely. "What is that crystal you wear?"

It hung between her breasts ordinarily; she had removed it when she stripped for her exercises. She picked it up again and slipped it over her head; a small green gem laced with traceries of black, on a silver chain. When it touched her Melantha closed her eyes briefly, then opened them again, grinning. "It's alive," she said. "Haven't you ever seen one? A whisperjewel, captain. Resonant crystal, etched psionically to hold a memory, a sensation. The touch bring it back, for a time."

"I am familiar with the principle," Royd said, "but not this use. Yours contains some treasured memory, then? Of your family, perhaps?"

Melantha Jhirl snatched up a towel and began to dry the sweat from her body. "Mine contains the sensations of a particularly satisfying session in bed, captain. It arouses me. Or it did. Whisperjewels fade in time, and this isn't as potent as it once was. But sometimes—often when I've come from lovemaking or strenuous exercise—it comes alive on me again, like it did just then."

"Oh," said Royd's voice. "It has made you aroused, then? Are you going off to copulate now?"

Melantha grinned. "I know what part of my life you want to hear about, captain—my tumultuous and passionate love life. Well, you won't have it. Not until I hear your life story, anyway. Among my modest attributes is an insatiable curiosity. Who are you, captain? Really?"

"One as improved as you," Royd replied, "should certainly be able to guess."

Melantha laughed, and tossed her towel at the communicator grill.

Lommie Thorne spent most of her days in the cargo hold they had designated as the computer room, setting up the system they would use to analyze the *volcryn*. As often as not, the xenotech Alys Northwind came with her to lend a hand. The cyberneticist whistled as she worked; Northwind obeyed her orders in a sullen silence. Occasionally they talked.

"Eris isn't human," Lommie Thorne said one day, as she supervised the installation of a display viewscreen.

Alys Northwind grunted. "What?" A frown broke across her square, flat features. Christopheris and his talk had made her nervous about Eris. She clicked another component into position, and turned.

"He talks to us, but he can't be seen," the cyberneticist said. "This ship is uncrewed, seemingly all automated except for him. Why not entirely automated then? I'm wager Royd Eris is a fairly sophisticated computer system, perhaps a genuine Artificial Intelligence. Even a modest program can carry on a blind conversation indistinguishable from a human's. This one could fool you, I'd bet, once it's up and running."

The xenotech grunted and turned back to her work. “Why fake being human, then?”

“Because,” said Lommie Thorne, “most legal systems give AIs no rights. A ship can’t own itself, even on Avalon. The *Nightflyer* is probably afraid of being seized and disconnected.” She whistled. “Death, Alys; the end of self-awareness and conscious thought.”

“I work with machines every day,” Alys Northwind said stubbornly. “Turn them off, turn them on, makes no difference. They don’t mind. Why should this machine care?”

Lommie Thorne smile. “A computer is different, Alys,” she said. “Mind, thought, life, the big systems have all of that.” Her right hand curled around her left wrist, and her thumb began idly rubbing the nubs of her implant. “Sensation, too, I know. No one wants the end of sensation. They are not so different fro you and I, really.”

The xenotech glanced back and shook her head. “Really,” she repeated, in a flat, disbelieving voice.

Royd Eris listened and watched, unsmiling.

Thale Lasamer was a frail young thing; nervous, sensitive, with limp flaxen hair that fell to his shoulders, and watery blue eyes. Normally he dressed like a peacock, favoring the lacy V-necked shirts and codpieces that were still the fashion among the lower classes of his homeworld. But on the day he sought out Karoly d’Branin in his cramped, private cabin, Lasamer was dressed almost somberly, in an austere gray jumpsuit.

“I feel it,” he said, clutching d’Branin by the arm, his long fingernails digging in painfully. “Something is wrong, Karoly, something is very wrong. I’m beginning to get frightened.”

The telepath’s nails bit, and d’Branin pulled away hard. “You are hurting me,” he protested. “My friend, what is it? Frightened? Of what, of whom? I do not understand. What could there be to fear?”

Lasamer raised pale hands to his face. “I don’t know, I don’t *know*,” he wailed. “Yet it’s *there*, I feel it. Karoly, I’m picking up something. You know I’m good, I am, that’s why you picked me. Just a moment ago, when my nails dug into you, I felt it. I can read you now, in flashes. You’re thinking I’m too excitable, that it’s the confinement, that I’ve got to be calmed down.” The young man laughed a thin hysterical laugh that died as quickly as it had begun. “No, you see. I am good. Class one, tested, and I tell you I’m afraid. I sense it. Feel it. Dream of it. I felt it even as we were boarding, and it’s gotten worse. Something dangerous. Something volatile. And alien, Karoly, *alien!*”

“The *volcryn!*” d’Branin said.

“No, impossible. We’re in drive, they’re light years away.” The edgy laughter sounded again. “I’m not that good, Karoly. I’ve heard your Crey story, but I’m only a human. No, this is close. On the ship.”

“One of us?”

“Maybe,” Lassamer said. He rubbed his cheek absently. “I can’t sort it out.”

D’Branin put a fatherly hand on his shoulder. “Thale, this feeling of yours—could it be that you are just tired? We have all of us been under strain. Inactivity can be taxing.”

“Get your hand off me,” Lasamer snapped.

D'Branin drew back his hand quickly.

"This is *real*," the telepath insisted, "and I don't need you thinking that maybe you shouldn't have taken me, all that crap. I'm as stable as anyone on this...this...how *dare* you think I'm unstable, you ought to look inside some of these others, Christopheris with his bottle and his dirty little fantasies, Dannel hald sick with fear, Lommie and her machines, with her it's all metal and lights and cool circuits, sick, I tell you, and Jhirl's arrogant and Agatha whines even in her head to herself all the time, and Alys is empty, like a cow. You, you don't touch them, see into them, what do you know of *stable*? Losers, d'Branin, they've given you a bunch of losers, and I'm one of your best, so don't you go thinking that I'm not stable, not sane, you hear." His blue eyed were fevered. "Do you *hear*?"

"Easy," d'Branin said. "Easy, Thale, you're getting excited."

The telepath blinked, and suddenly the wildness was gone. "Excited?" he said. "Yes." He looked around guiltily. "It's hard, Karoly, but listen to me, you must, I'm warning you. We're in danger."

"I will listen," d'Branin said, "but I cannot act without more definite information. You must use your talent and get it for me, yes? You can do that."

Lasamer nodded. "Yes," he said. "Yes." They talked quietly for more than an hour, and finally the telepath left peacefully.

Afterwards d'Branin went straight to the psipsych, who was lying in her sleepweb surrounded by medicined, complaining bitterly of aches. "Interesting," she said when d'Branin told her. "I've felt something too, a sense of threat, very vague, diffuse. I thought it was me, the confinement, the boredom, the way I feel. My moods betray me at times. Did he say anything more specific?"

"No."

"I'll make an effort to move around, read him, read the others, see what I can pick up. Although, if this is real, he should know it first. He's a one, I'm only a three."

D'Branin nodded. "He seems very receptive," he said. "He told me all kinds of things about the others."

"Means nothing. Sometimes, when a telepath insists he is picked up everything, what it means is that he's picking up nothing at all. He imagines feelings, readings, to make up for those that will not come. I'll keep careful watch on him, d'Branin. Sometimes a talent can crack, slip into a kind of hysteria, and begin to broadcast instead of receive. In a closed environment, that's very dangerous."

Karoly d'Branin nodded. "Of course, of course."

In another part of the ship, Royd Eris frowned.

"Have you noticed the clothing on that holograph he sends us?" Rojan Christopheris asked Alys Northwind. They were alone in one of the holds, reclining on a mat, trying to avoid the wet spot. The xenobiologist had lit a joystick. He offered it to his companion, but Northwind waved it away.

"A decade out of style, maybe more. My father wore shirts like that when he was a boy on Old Poseidon."

"Eris has old-fashioned taste," Alys Northwind said. "So? I don't care what he wears. Me, I like my jumpsuits. They're comfortable. Don't care what people think."

“You don’t, do you?? Christopheris said, wrinkling his huge nose. She did not see the gesture. “Well, you miss the point. What if that isn’t really Eris? A projection can be anything, can be made up out of whole cloth. I don’t think he really looks like that.”

“No?” Now her voice was curious. She rolled over and curled up beneath his arm, her heavy white breasts against his chest.

“What if he’s sick, deformed, ashamed to be seen the way he really looks? Christopheris said. “Perhaps he has some disease. The Slow Plague can waste a person terribly, but it takes decades to kill, and there are other contagions—manthrax, new leprosy, the melt, Langamen’s Disease, lots of them. Could be that Royd’s self-imposed quarantine is just that. A quarantine. Think about it.”

Alys Northwind frowned. “All this talk of Eris,” she said, “is making me edgy.”

The xenobiologist sucked on his joystick and laughed. “Welcome to the *Nightflyer*, then. The rest of us are already there.”

In the fifth week out, Melantha Jhirl pushed her pawn to the sixth rank and Royd saw that it was unstoppable and resigned. It was his eighth straight defeat at her hands in as many days. He was sitting cross-legged on the floor of the lounge, the chessmen spread out before her in front of a darkened viewscreen. Laughing, she swept them all away. “Don’t feel bad, Royd,” she told him. “I’m an improved model. Always three moved ahead.”

“I should tie in my computer,” he replied. “You’d never know.” his ghost materialized suddenly, standing in front of the viewscreen, and smiled at her.

“I’d know with three moves,” Melantha Jhirl said. “Try it.”

They were the last victims of a chess fever that has swept the *Nightflyer* for more than a week. Initially it had been Christopheris who produced the set and urged people to play, but the others had lost interest quickly when Thale Lasamer sat down and beat them all one by one. Everyone was certain that he’d done it by reading their minds, but the telepath was in a volatile, nasty mood, and no one dared voice the accusation. Melantha, however, had been able to defeat Lasamer without very much trouble.

“He isn’t that good a player,” she told Royd afterwards, “and if he’s trying to lift ideas from me, he’s getting gibberish. The improved model knows certain mental disciplines. I can shield myself well enough, thank you.”

Christopheris and a few of the others then tried a game or two against Melantha, and were routed for their troubles. Finally, Royd asked if he might play. Only Melantha and Karoly were willing to sit down with him over the board, and since Karoly could barely recall how the pieces moved from one moment to the next that left Melantha and Royd as regular opponents. They both seemed to thrive on the games, though Melantha always won.

Melantha stood up and walked to the kitchen, stepping right through Royd’s ghostly form, which she steadfastly refused to pretend was real.

“The rest of them walk around me,” Royd complained. She shrugged, and found a bulb of beer in a storage compartment.

"When are you going to break down and let me behind your wall for a visit, captain?" she asked, talking up to a communicator grill. She refused to treat his ghost as real. "Don't you get lonely there? Sexually frustrated? Claustrophobic?"

"I have flown the Nightflyer all my life, Melantha," Royd said. His projection ignored, winked out. "If I were subject to claustrophobia, sexual frustration, or loneliness, such a life would have been impossible. Surely that should be obvious to you, being as improved a model as you are?"

She took a squeeze of her beer and laughed her mellow, musical laugh at him. "I'll solve you yet, captain," she warned.

"Meanwhile," he said, "tell me some more lies about your life."

"Have you ever heard of Jupiter?" the xenotech demanded of the others.

She was drunk, lolling in her sleep-web in the cargo hold.

"Something to do with Earth," said Lindran. "The same myth system originated both names, I believe."

"Jupiter," the xenotech announced loudly, "is a gas giant in the same solar system as Old Earth. Didn't know that, did you?"

"I've got more important things to occupy my mind than such trivia, Alys," Lindran said.

Alys Northwind smiled down smugly. "Listen, I'm talking to you. They were on the verge of exploring this Jupiter when the stardrive was discovered, oh, way back. After that, of course, nobody bothered with gas giants. Just slip into drive and find the habitable worlds, settle them, ignore the comets and the rocks and the gas giants—there's another star just a few light-years away, and it has more habitable planets. But there were people who thought those Jupiters might have life, you know. Do you see?"

"I see that you're blind drunk," Lindran said.

Christopheris looked annoyed. "If there is intelligent life on the gas giants, it shows no interest in leaving them," he snapped. "All of the sentient species we have met up to now have originated on worlds similar to Earth, and most of them are oxygen breathers. Unless you're suggesting that the *volcryn* are from a gas giant?"

The xenotech pushed herself up to a sitting position and smiled conspiratorially. "Not the *volcryn*," she said. "Royd Eris. Crack that forward bulkhead in the lounge, and watch the methane and ammonia come smoking out." Her hand made a sensuous waving motion through the air, and she convulsed with giddy laughter.

The system was up and running. Cyberneticist Lommie Thorne sat at the master console, a featureless black plastic plate upon which the phantom images of a hundred keyboard configurations came and went in holographic display, vanishing and shifting even as she used them. Around her rose crystalline data grids, ranks of viewscreens and readout panels upon which columns of figures marched and geometric shapes did stately whirling dances, dark columns of seamless metal that contained the mind and soul of her system. She sat in the semi-darkness happily, whistling as she ran the computer through several simple routines, her fingers moving across the flickering keys with blind speed and quickening tempo. "Ah," she said once smiling. Later, only, "Good."



Then in was time for the final run-through. Lommie Thorne slid back the metallic fabric of her left sleeve, pushing her wrist beneath the console, found the prongs, jacked herself in. Interface.

Ecstasy.

Inkblot shapes in a dozen glowing colors twisted and melded and broke apart on the readout screens.

In an instant it was over.

Lommie Thorne pulled free her wrist. The smile on her face was shy and satisfied, but across it lay another expression, the merest hint of puzzlement. She touched her thumb to the holes of her wrist jack, and found them warm to the touch, tingling. Lommie shivered.

The system was running perfectly, hardware in good condition, all software systems functioning according to plan, interface meshing well. It had been a delight, as it always was. When she joined with the system, she was wise beyond her years, and powerful, and full of light and electricity and the stuff of life, cool and clean and exciting to touch and never alone, never small or weak. That was what it was always like when she interfaced and let herself expand.

But this time something had been different. Something cold had touched her, only for a moment. Something very cold and very frightening, and together she and the system had seen it clearly for a brief moment, and then it had been gone again.

The cyberneticist shook her head, and drove the nonsense out. She went back to work. After a time, she began to whistle.

During the sixth week, Alys Northwind cut herself badly while preparing a snack. She was standing in the kitchen, slicing a spiced meatstick with a long knife, when suddenly she screamed.

Dannel and Lindran rushed to her, and found her staring down in horror at the chopping block in front of her. The knife had taken off the first joint of the index finger on her left hand, and the blood was spreading in ragged spurts. "The ship lurched," Alys said numbly, staring up at Dannel. "Did you feel it jerk? It pushed the knife to the side."

"Get something to stop the bleeding," Lindran said. Dannel looked around in panic. "Oh, I'll do it myself," Lindran finally said, and she did.

The psipsych, Agatha Marij-Black, gave Northwind a tranquilizer, then looked at the two linguists. "Did you see it happen?"

"She did it herself, with the knife," Dannel said.

From somewhere down the corridor, there came the sound of wild, hysterical laughter.

"I dampened him," the Marij-Black reported to Karoly d'Branin later the same day. "Psionine-4. It will blunt his receptivity for several days, and I have more if he needs it."

D'Branin wore a stricken look. "We talked several times and I could see that Thale was becoming ever more fearful, but he could never tell me the why of it. Did you have to shut him off?"

The psipsych shrugged. "He was edging into the irrational. Given his level of talent, if he'd gone over the edge he might have taken us all with him. You should never have taken a class one telepath, d'Branin. Too unstable."

"We must communicate with an alien race. I remind you that is no easy task. The *volcryn* will be more alien than any sentients we have yet encountered. We needed class one skills if we were to have any hope of reaching them. And they have so much to teach us, my friend!"

"Glib," she said, "but you might have no working skills at all, given the condition of your class one. Half the time he's curled up into the fetal position in his sleepweb, half the time he's strutting and crowing and half mad with fear. He insists we're all in real physical danger, but he doesn't know why or from what. The worst of it is I can't tell if he's really sensing something or simply having an acute attack of paranoia. He certainly displays some classic paranoid symptoms. Among other things, he insists that he's being watched. Perhaps his condition is completely unrelated to us, the *volcryn*, and his talent. I can't be sure."

"What of your own talent?" d'Branin said. "You are an empath, are you not?"

"Don't tell me my job," she said sharply. "I sexed with him last week. You don't get more proximity or better rapport for esping than that. Even under those conditions, I couldn't be sure of anything. His mind is a chaos, and his fear is so rank it stank up the sheets. I don't read anything from the others either, besides the ordinary tensions and frustrations. But I'm only a three, so that doesn't mean much. My abilities are limited. You know I haven't been feeling well, d'Branin. I can barely breathe on this ship. The air seems thick and heavy to me. My head throbs. Ought to stay in bed."

"Yes, of course," d'Branin said hastily. "I did not mean to criticize. You have been doing all you can under difficult circumstances. How long will it be until Thale is with us again?"

The psipsych rubbed her temple wearily. "I'm recommending we keep him dampened until the mission is over, d'Branin. I warn you, an insane or hysterical telepath is dangerous. That business with Northwind and the knight might have been his doing, you know. He started screaming not long after, remember. Maybe he'd touched her, for just an instant—oh, it's a wild idea, but it's possible. The point is, we don't take chances. I have enough psionine-4 to keep him numb and functional until we're back on Avalon."

"*But*—Royd will take us out of drive soon, and we will make contact with the *volcryn*. We will need Thale, his mind, his talent. Is it vital to keep him dampened? Is there no other way?"

Marij-Black grimaced. "My other option was an injection of esperon. It would have opened him up completely, increased his psionic receptivity tenfold for a few hours. Then, I'd hope, he could focus in this danger he's feeling. Exorcise it if it's false, deal with it if it's real. But psionine-4 is a lot safer. Esperon is a hell of a drug, with devastating side effects. It raises the blood pressure dramatically, sometimes brings hyperventilation or seizures, has even been known to stop the heart. Lasamer is young enough so that I'm not worried around that, but I don't think he has the emotional stability to deal with that kind of power. The psionine should tell us something. If his paranoia persists, I'll know it has nothing to do with his telepathy."

"And if it does not persist?" Karoly d'Brania said.

Agatha Marij-Black smiled wickedly at him. "If Lasamer becomes quiescent, and stops babbling about danger? Why, that would mean he was no longer picking up anything, wouldn't it. And that would mean there had been something to pick up, that he's been right all along."

At dinner that night, Thale Lasamer was quiet and distracted, eating in a rhythmic, mechanical sort of way, with a cloudy look in his blue eyes. Afterwards he excused himself and went straight to bed, falling into exhausted slumber almost immediately.

“What did you do to him?” Lommie Thorne asked Marij-Black.

“I shut off that prying mind of his,” she replied.

“You should have done it two weeks ago,” Lindran said. “Docile, he’s a lot easier to take.”

Karoly d’Branin hardly touched his food.

False night came, and Royd’s wraith materialized while Karoly d’Branin sat brooding over his chocolate. “Karoly,” the apparition said, “would it be possible to tie in the computer your team brought on board with my shipboard system? Your *volcryn* stories fascinate me, and I would like to be able to study them further at my leisure. I assume the details of your investigation are in storage.”

“Certainly,” d’Branin replied in an offhand, distracted manner. “Our system is up now. Patching into the *Nightflyer* should present no problem. I will tell Lommie to attend to it tomorrow.”

Silence hung in the room heavily. Karoly d’Branin sipped at this chocolate and stared off into the darkness, almost unaware of Royd.

“You are troubled,” Royd said after a time.

“Eh? Oh, yes.” D’Branin looked up. “Forgive me, my friend. I have much on my mind.”

“It concerns Thale Lasamer, does it not?”

Karoly d’Branin looked the the pale, luminescent figure across from him for a long time before he finally managed a stiff nod. “Yes. Might I ask how you knew that?”

“I know everything that occurs on the *Nightflyer*,” Royd said.

“You have been watching us,” d’Branin said gravely, accusation in his tone. “Then it is so, what Thale says, about us being watched. Royd, how could you? Spying is beneath you.”

The ghost’s transparent eyes had no life in them, did not see. “Do not tell the others,” Royd warned. “Karoly, my friend—if I may call you my friend—I have my own reasons for watching, reasons it would not profit you to know. I mean you no harm. Believe that. You have hired me to take you safely to the *volcryn* and safely back, and I mean to do just that.”

“You are being evasive, Royd,” d’Branin said. “Why do you spy on us? Do you watch everything? Are you a voyeur, some enemy, is that why you do not mix with us? Is watching all you intend to do?”

“Your suspicions hurt me, Karoly.”

“Your deception hurts me. Will you not answer me?”

“I have eyes and ears everywhere,” Royd said. “There is no place to hide from me on the *Nightflyer*. Do I see everything? No, not always. I am only human, no matter what your colleagues might think. I sleep. The monitors remain on, but there is no one to observe them. I can only pay attention to one or two scenes or inputs at once. Sometimes I grow distracted, unobservant. I watch everything, Karoly, but I do not see everything.”

“Why?” D’Branin poured himself a fresh cup of chocolate, steadying his hand with an effort.

“I do not have to answer that question. The *Nightflyer* is my ship.”

D’Branin sipped chocolate, blinked, nodded to himself. “You grieve me, my friend. You give me no choice. Thale said we were being watched, I now learn that he was right. He says also that we are in danger. Something alien, he says. You?”

The projection was still and silent.

D’Branin clucked. “You do not answer. Ah, Royd, what am I to do? I must believe him, then. We are in danger, perhaps from you. I must abort our mission, then. Return us to Avalon, Royd. That is my decision.” The ghost smiled wanly. “So close, Karoly? Soon now we will be dropping out of drive.”

Karoly d’Branin made a small sad noise deep in his throat. “My *volcryn*,” he said, sighing. “So close—ah, it pains me to desert them. But I cannot do otherwise, I cannot.”

“You can,” said the voice of Royd Eris. “Trust me. That is all I ask, Karoly. Believe me when I tell you that I have no sinister intentions. Thale Lasamer may speak of of danger, but no one has been harmed so far, have they?”

“No,” admitted d’Branin. “No, unless you count Alys, cutting herself this afternoon.”

“What?” Royd hesitated briefly. “Cutting herself? I did not see, Karoly. When did this happen?”

“Oh, early—just before Lasamer began to scream and rant, I believe.”

“I see.” Royd’s voice was thoughtful. “I was watching Melantha go through her exercises,” he said finally, “and talking to her. I did not notice. Tell me how it happened.”

D’Branin told him.

“Listen to me,” Royd said. “Trust me, Karoly, and I will give you your *volcryn*. Calm your people. Assure them that I am no threat. And keep Lasamer drugged and quiescent, do you understand? That is very important. He is the problem.”

“Agatha advises much the same thing.”

“I know,” said Royd. “I agree with her. Will you do as I ask?”

“I do not know,” d’Branin said “You make it hard for me. I do not understand what is going wrong, my friend. Will you not tell me more?”

Royd Eris did not answer. His ghost waited.

“Well,” d’Branin said as last, “you do not talk. How difficult you make it. How soon, Royd? How soon will we see my *volcryn*?”

“Quite soon,” Royd replied. “We will drop out of drive in approximately seventy hours.”

“Seventy hours,” d’Branin said. “Such a short time. Going back would gain us nothing.” He moistened his lips, lifted his cup, found it empty. “Go on then. I will do as you bid. I will trust you, keep Lasamer drugged, I will not tell the others of your spying. Is that enough, then? Give me my *volcryn*. I have waiting so long!”

“I know,” said Royd Eris. “I know.”

Then the ghost was gone, and Karoly d’Branin sat alone in the darkened lounge. He tried to refill his cup, but his hand began to tremble unaccountably, and he poured the chocolate over his fingers and dropped the cup, swearing, wondering, hurting.

The next day was of rising tensions and a hundred small irritations. Lindran and Dannel had a “private” argument that could be overheard through half the ship. A three-handed war game in the lounge ended in disaster when Christopheris accused Melantha Jhirl of cheating. Lommie Thorne complained of unusual difficulties in tying her system into the shipboard computers. Alys Northwind sat in the lounge for hours, staring at her bandaged finger with a look of sullen hatred on her face. Agatha Marij-Black prowled through the corridors, complaining that the ship was too hot, that her joints throbbed, that the air was thick and full of smoke, that the ship was too cold. Even Karoly d’Branin was despondent and on edge.

Only the telepath seemed content. Shot full of psionine-4, Thale Lasamer was often sluggish and lethargic, but at least he no longer flinched at shadows.

Royd Eris made no appearance, either by voice or holographic projection.

He was still absent at dinner. The academicians ate uneasily, expecting him to materialize at any moment, take his accustomed place, and join in the mealtime conversation. Their expectations were still unfulfilled when the after-dinner pots of chocolate and spiced tea and coffee were set on the table.

“Our captain seems to be occupied,” Melantha Jhirl observed, leaning back in her chair and swirling a snifter of brandy.

“We will be shifting out of drive soon,” Karoly d’Branin said.

“Undoubtedly there are preparations to make.” Secretly, he fretted over Royd’s absence, and wondered if they were being watched even now.

Rojan Christopheris cleared his throat. “Since we’re all here and he’s not, perhaps this is a good time to discuss certain things. I’m not concerned about his missing dinner. He doesn’t eat. He’s a damned hologram. What does it matter? Maybe it’s just as well, we need to talk about this. Karoly, a lot of us have been getting uneasy about Royd Eris. What do you know about this mystery man, anyway?”

“Know, my friend?” D’Branin refilled his cup with the thick bittersweet chocolate and sipped at it slowly, trying to give himself a moment to think. “What is there to know?”

“Surely you’ve noticed that he never comes out to play with us,” Lindran said drily. “Before you engaged his ship, did anyone remark on this quirk of his?”

“I’d like to know the answer to that one, too,” said Dannel, the other linguist. “A lot of traffic comes and goes through Avalon. How did you come to choose Eris? What were you told about him?”

“Told about him? Very little, I must admit. I spoke to a few port officials and charter companies, but none of them were acquainted with Royd. He had not traded out of Avalon originally, you see.”

“How convenient,” said Lindran.

“How suspicious,” added Dannel.

“Where is he from, then?” Lindran demanded. “Dannel and I have listened to him pretty carefully. He speaks standard very flatly, with no discernible accent, no idiosyncrasies to betray his origins.”

“Sometimes he sounds a bit archaic,” Dannel put in, “and from time to time one of his constructions will give me an association. Only, it’s a different one each time. He’s traveled a lot.”

“Such a deduction,” Lindran said, patting his hand. “Traders frequently do, love. Comes of owning a starship.”

Dannel glared at her, but Lindran just went on. “Seriously, though, do you know anything about him? Where did this *Nightflyer* of ours come from?”

“I do not know,” d’Branin admitted. “I—I never thought to ask.”

The members of his research team glanced at one another incredulously. “You never thought to *ask*?” Christopheris said. “How did you come to select this ship?”

“It was available. The administrative council approved my project and assigned me personnel, but they could not spare an Academy ship. There were budgetary constraints as well.”

Agatha Marij-Black laughed sourly. “What d’Branin is telling those of you who haven’t figured it out is that the Academy was pleased with his studies in xenomyth, with the discovery of the *volcryn* legend, but less than enthusiastic about his place to seek them out. So they have him a small budget to keep him happy and productive, assuming this little mission would be fruitless, and they assigned him people who wouldn’t be missed back on Avalon.” She looked around. “Look at the lot of you. None of us had worked with d’Branin in the early stages, but we were all available for this jaunt. And not a one of us is a first-rate scholar.”

“Speak for yourself,” Melantha Jhirl said. “I volunteered for this mission.”

“I won’t argue the point,” the psipsych said. “The crux is that the choice of the *Nightflyer* is no large enigma. You just engaged the cheapest charter you could find, didn’t you, d’Branin?”

“Some of the available ships would not consider my proposition,” d’Branin said. “The sound of it is odd, we must admit. And many shipmasters have an almost superstitious fear of dropping out of drive in interstellar space, without a planet near. Of those who would agree to the condition, Royd Eris offered the best terms, and he was able to leave at once.”

“And we had to leave at once,” said Lindran. “Otherwise the *volcryn* might get away. They’ve only been passing through this region for ten thousand years, give or take a few thousand.”

Someone laughed. D’Branin was nonplussed. “Friends, no doubt I could have postponed departure. I admit I was eager to meet my *volcryn*, to see their great ships and ask them all the questions that have haunted me, to discover the why of them. But I admit also that a delay would have no great hardship. But why? Royd has been a gracious host, a good pilot. We have been treated well.”

“Did you meet him?” Alys Northwind asked. “When you were making arrangements, did you ever see him?”

“We spoke many times, but I was on Avalon, and Royd in orbit. I saw his face on my viewscreen.”

“A projection, a computer simulation, could be anything,” Lommie Thorne said. “I can have my system conjure up all sorts of faces for your viewscreen, Karoly.”

“No one has ever seen this Royd Eris,” Christopheris said. “He has made himself a cipher from the start.”

“Our host wishes his privacy to remain inviolate,” d’Branin said.

“Evasions,” Lindran said. “What is he hiding?”

Melantha Jhirl laughed. When all eyes had moved to her, she grinned and shook her head. “Captain Royd is perfect, a strange man for a strange mission. Don’t any of you love a mystery? Here we are flying light years to intercept a hypothetical alien starship from the core of the galaxy that has been outward-bound for longer than humanity has been having wars, and all of you are upset because you can’t count the warts on Royd’s nose.” She leaned across the table to refill her brandy snifter. “My mother was right,” she said lightly. “Normals are subnormal.”

“Maybe we should listen to Melantha,” Lommie Thorne said thoughtfully. “Royd’s foibles and neuroses are his business, if he does not impose them on us.”

“It makes me uncomfortable,” Dannel complained weakly.

“For all we know,” said Alys Northwind, “we might be traveling with a criminal or an alien.”

“Jupiter,” someone muttered. The xenotech flushed red and there was sniggering around the long table. But Thale Lasamer looked up furtively from his plate, and giggled. “An alien,” he said. His blue eyes flicked back and forth in his skull, as if seeking escape. They were bright and wild

Marij-Black swore. “The drug is wearing off,” she said quickly to d’Branin. “I’ll have to go back to my cabin to get some more.”

“What drug?” Lommie Thorne demanded. D’Branin had been careful not to tell the others too much about Lasamer’s ravings, for fear of inflaming the shipboard tensions. “What’s going on?”

“Danger,” Lasamer said. He turned to Lommie, sitting next to him, and grasped her forearm hard, his long painted fingernails clawing at the silvery metal of her shirt. “We’re in danger, I tell you, I’m reading it. Something *alien*. It means us ill. Blood, I see blood.” He laughed. “Can you taste it, Agatha? I can almost taste the blood. *It* can, too.”

Marij-Black rose. “He’s not well,” she announced to the others. “I’ve been dampening him with psionine, trying to hold his delusions in check. I’ll get some more.” She started toward the door.

“Dampening him?” Christopher said, horrified. “He’s warning us of something. Don’t you hear him? I want to know what it *is*?”

“Not psionine,” said Melantha Jhirl. “Try esperon.”

“Don’t tell me my job, woman!”

“Sorry,” Melantha said. She gave a modest shrug. “I’m one step ahead of you, though. Esperon might exorcise his delusions, no?”

“Yes, but—“

“And it might help him focus on this threat he claims to detect, correct?”

“I know the characteristics of esperon quite well,” the psipsych said testily.

Melantha smiled over the rim of her brandy glass. “I’m sure you do. Now listen to me. All of you are anxious about Royd, it seems. You can’t stand not knowing whatever it is he’s concealing. Rojan has been making up stories for weeks, and he’s ready to believe any of them. Alys is so nervous she cut her finger off. We’re squabbling constantly. Fears like that won’t help us work together as a team. Let’s end them. Easy enough.” She pointed to Thale. “here sits a class one telepath. Boost his power with esperon and he’ll be able to recite our captain’s life history to us, until we’re suitably bored with it. Meanwhile he’ll also be vanquishing his personal demons.”

“He’s watching us,” the telepath said in a low, urgent voice.

“No,” said Karoly d’Branin, “we must keep Thale dampened.”

“Karoly,” Christopheris said, this has gone too far. Several of us are nervous and this boy is terrified. I believe we all need an end to the mystery of Royd Eris. For once, Melantha is right.”

“We have no right,” d’Branin said.

“We have the need,” said Lommie Thorne. “I agree with Melantha.”

“Yes,” echoes Alys Northwind. The two linguists were nodding.

D’Branin thought regretfully of his promise to Royd. They were not giving him any choice. His eyes met those of the psipsych, and he sighed. “Do it, then,” he said. “Get him the esperon.”

“He’s going to kill me.” Thale Lasamer screamed. He leapt to his feet, and when Lommie Thorne tried to calm him with a hand on his arm, he seized a cup of coffee and threw it square in her face. It took three of them to hold him down.

“Hurry,” Christopheris barked, as the telepath struggled.

Marij-Black shuddered and left the lounge.

When she returned, the others had lifted Lasamer to the table and forced him down, pulling aside his long pale hair to bare the arteries in his neck.

Marij-Black moved to his side.

“Stop that,” Royd said. “There is no need.”

His ghost shimmered into being in its empty chair at the head of the long dinner table. The psipsych froze in the act of slipping an ampule of esperon into her injection gun, and Alys Northwind startled visibly and released one of Lasamer’s arms. The captive did not pull free. He lay on the table, breathing heavily, his pale blue eyes fixed glassily on Royd’s projection, transfixed by the vision of his sudden materialization.

Melantha Jhirl lifted her brandy glass in salute. “Boo,” she said. “You’re missed dinner, captain.”

“Royd,” said Karoly d’Branin, “I am sorry.”



The ghost stared unseeing at the far wall. "Release him," said the voice from the communicators. "I will tell you my great secrets, if my privacy intimidates you so."

"He *has* been watching us," Dannel said.

"We're listening," Northwind said suspiciously. "What are you?"

"I liked your guess about the gas giants," Royd said. "Sadly, the truth is less dramatic. I am an ordinary *Homo sapien* in middle age. Sixty-eight standard, if you require precision. The hologram you see before you is the real Royd Eris, or was so some years ago. I am somewhat older now, but I use computer simulation to project a more youthful appearance to my guests."

"Oh?" Lommie Thorne's face was red where the coffee had scalded her. "Then why the secrecy?"

"I will begin the tale with my mother," Royd replied. "The *Nightflyer* was her ship originally, custom-built to her design in the Newholme spaceyards. My mother was a freetrader, a notably successful one. She was born trash on a world called Vess, which is a very long way from here, although perhaps some of you have heard of it. She worked her way up, position by position, until she won her own command. She soon made a fortune through a willingness to accept the unusual consignment, fly off the major trade routes, take her cargo a month or a year or two years beyond where it was customarily transferred. Such practices are riskier but more profitable than flying the mail runs. My mother did not worry about how often she and her crews returned home. Her ships were her home. She forgot about Vess as soon as she left it, and seldom visited the same world twice if she could avoid it."

"Adventurous," Melantha Jhirl said.

"No," said Royd. "Sociopathic. My mother did not like people, you see. Not at all. Her crews had no love for her, nor she for them. Her one great dream was to free herself from the necessity of crew altogether. When she grew rich enough, she had it done. The *Nightflyer* was the result. After she boarded it at Newholme, she never touched a human being again, or walked a planet's surface. She did all her business from the compartments that are now mine, by viewscreen or lasercom. You would call her insane. You would be right." The ghost smiled faintly. "She did have an interesting life, though, even after her isolation. The worlds she saw, Karoly! The things she might have told you would break your heart, but you'll never hear them. She destroyed most of her records for fear that other people might get some use or pleasure from her experiences after her death. She was like that."

"And you?" asked Alys Northwind.

"She must have touched at least *one* other human being," Lindran put in, with a smile.

"I should not call her my mother," Royd said. "I am her cross-sex clone. After thirty years of flying this ship alone, she was bored. I was to be her companion and lover. She could shape me to be a perfect diversion. She had no patience with children, however, and no desire to raise me herself. After she had done the cloning, I was sealed in a nurturant tank, an embryo linked into her computer. It was my teacher. Before birth and after. I had no birth, really. Long after the time a normal child would have been born, I remained in the tank, growing, learning, on slow-time, blind and dreaming and living through tubes. I was to be released when I had attained the age of puberty, at which time she guessed I would be fit company."

"How horrible," Karoly d'Branin said. "Royd, my friend, I did not know."

"I'm sorry, captain," Melantha Jhirl said. "You were robbed of your childhood."

"I never missed it," Royd said. "Nor her. Her plans were all futile, you see. She died a few months after the cloning, when I was still a fetus in the tank. She had programmed the ship for such an eventuality, however. It dropped out of drive and shut down, drifted in interstellar space for eleven standard years while the computer

made me—“ He stopped, smiling. “I was going to say *while the computer made me a human being*. Well, while the computer made me whatever I am, then. That was how I inherited the *Nightflyer*. When I was born, it took me some months to acquaint myself with the operations of the ship and my own origins.”

“Fascinating,” said Karoly d’Branin.

“Yes,” said the linguist Lindran, “but it doesn’t explain why you keep yourself in isolation.”

“Ah, but it does,” Melantha Jhirl said. “Captain, perhaps you should explain further for the less-improved models?”

“My mother hated planets,” Royd said. “She hated stinks and dirt and bacteria, the irregularity of the weather, the sight of other people. She engineered for us a flawless environment, as sterile as she could possibly make it. She disliked gravity as well. She was accustomed to weightlessness for years of service on ancient freetraders that could not afford gravity grids, and she preferred it. These were the conditions under which I was born and raised.

“My body has no immune systems, no natural resistance to anything. Contact with any of you would probably kill me, and would certainly make me very sick. My muscles are feeble, in a sense atrophied. The gravity the *Nightflyer* is now generating is for your comfort, not mine. To me it is agony. At this moment the real me is seated in a floating chair that supports my weight. I still hurt, and my internal organs may be suffering damage. It is one reason why I do not often take on passengers.”

“You share your mother’s opinion of the run of humanity?” asked Marij-Black.

“I do not. I like people. I accept what I am, but I did not choose it. I experience human life in the only way I can, vicariously. I am a voracious consumer of books, tapes, holoplays, fictions and drama and histories of all sorts. I have experimented with dreamdust. And infrequently, when I dare, I carry passengers. At those time, I drink in as much of their lives as I can.”

“If you kept your ship under weightlessness at all times, you could take on more riders,” suggested Lommie Thorne.

“True,” Royd said politely. “I have found, however, that most planet-born are as uncomfortable weightless as I am under gravity. A shipmaster who does not have artificial gravity, or elects not to use it, attracts few riders. The exceptions often spend much of the voyage sick or drugged. No. I could also mingle with my passengers, I know, if I kept to my chair and wore a sealed environ-wear suit. I have done so. I find it lessens my participation instead of increasing it. I become a freak, a maimed thing, one who must be treated differently and kept at a distance. These things do not suit my purpose. I prefer isolation. As often as I dare, I study the aliens I take on as riders.”

“Aliens?” Northwind’s voice was confused.

“You are all aliens to me,” Royd answered.

Silence filled the *Nightflyer*’s lounge.

“I am sorry this has happened, my friend,” Karoly d’Branin said. “We ought not have intruded on your personal affairs.”

“Sorry,” muttered Agatha Marij-Black. She frowned and pushed the ampule of esperon into the injection chamber. “Well, it’s glib enough, but is it the truth? We still have no proof, just a new bedtime story. The hologram could have claimed it was a creature from Jupiter, a computer, or a diseased war criminal just as easily. We have no way of verifying anything that he’s said. No—we have one way, rather.” She took two quick steps forward to where Thale Lasamer lay on the table. “He still needs treatment and we still need confirmation, and I don’t see any sense

in stopping now after we've gone this far. Why should we live with all this anxiety if we can it all now? Her hand pushed the telepath's unresisting head to one side. She found the artery and pressed the gun to it.

"Agatha," said Karoly d'Branin. "Don't you think...perhaps we should forgo this, now that Royd...?"

"NO," Royd said. "Stop. I order it. This is my ship. Stop, or..."

"...or what?" The gun hissed loudly, and there was a red mark on the telepath's neck when she lifted it away.

Lasamer raised himself to a half-sitting position, supported by his elbows, and Marij-Black moved close to him. "Thale," she said in her best professional tones, "focus on Royd. You can do it, we all know how good you are. Wait just a moment, the esperon will open it all up for you."

His pale blue eyes were clouded. "Not close enough," he muttered. "One, I'm one, tested. Good, you know I'm good, but I got to be *close*." He trembled.

The psipsych put an arm around him, stroked him, coaxed him. "The esperon will give you range, Thale," she said. "Feel it, feel yourself grow stronger. Can you feel it? Everything's getting clear, isn't it?" Her voice was a reassuring drone. "You can hear what I'm thinking, I know you can, but never mind that. The others too, push them aside, all that chatter, thoughts, desires, fear. Push it all aside. Remember the danger now? Remember? Go find it, Thale, go find the danger. Look beyond the wall there, tell us what it's like beyond the wall. Tell us about Royd. Was he telling the truth? Tell us. You're good, we all know that, you can tell us."

The phrases were almost an incantation. He shrugged off her support and sat upright by himself. "I can feel it," he said. His eyes were suddenly clearer. "Something — my head hurts — I'm afraid!"

"Don't be afraid," said Marij-Black. "The esperon won't make your head hurt, it just makes you better. Were all here with you. Nothing to fear." She stroked his brow. "Tell us what you see."

Thale Lasamer looked at Royd's ghost with terrified little-boy eyes; and his tongue flicked across his lower lips. "He's—"

Then his skull exploded.

#### Hysteria and confusion

The telepath's head had burst with awful force, splattering them all with blood and bits of bone and flesh. His body thrashed madly on the tabletop for a long instant, blood and spurting from the arteries in his neck in a crimson stream, his limbs twitching in a macabre dance. His head had simply ceased to exist, but he would not be still.

Agatha Marij-Black, who had been standing closest to him, dropped her injection gun and stood slack-mouthed. She was drenched with his blood, covered with pieces of flesh and brain. Beneath her right eye, a long sliver of bone had penetrated her skin, and her own blood was mingling with his. She did not seem to notice.

Rojan Christopher fell over backward, scrambled to his feet, and pressed himself hard against the wall.

Dannel screamed, and screamed, and screamed, until Lindran slapped him hard across a blood-smeared cheek and told him to be quiet.

Alys Northwind dropped to her knees and began to mumble a prayer in a strange tongue.

Karoly d'Branin sat very still, staring, blinking, his chocolate cup forgotten in his hand.

"Do something," Lommie Thorne moaned. "Somebody *do* something." One of Lasamer's arms moved feebly, and brushed against her. She shrieked and pulled away.

Melantha Jhirl pushed aside her brandy snifter. "Control yourself," she snapped. "He's dead, he can't hurt you."

They all looked at her, but for d'Branin and Marij-Black, both of whom seemed frozen in shock. Royd's projection had vanished at some point, Melantha realized suddenly. She began to give orders. "Dannel, Lindran, Rojan—find a sheet or something to wrap him in, and get him out of here. Alys, you and Lommie get some water and sponges. We've got to clear up." Melantha moved to d'Branin's side as the others rushed to do as she had told them.

"Karoly," she said, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder, "are you alright, Karoly?"

He looked up at her, gray eyes blinking. "I—yes, yes, I am—I told her not to go ahead, Melantha. I told her."

"Yes, you did," Melantha Jhirl said. She gave him a reassuring pat and moved around the table to Agatha Marij-Black. "Agatha," she called. But the psipsych did not respond, not even when Melantha shook her bodily by the shoulders. Her eyes were empty. "She's in shock," Melantha announced. She frowned at the sliver of bone protruding from Marij-Black's cheek. Sponging off her face with a napkin, she carefully removed the splinter.

"What do we do with the body?" asked Lindran. They had found a sheet and wrapped it up. It had finally stopped twitching, although blood continued to seep out, turning the concealing sheet red.

"Put it in a cargo hold," suggested Christopheris.

"No," Melantha said, "not sanitary. It will rot." She thought for a moment. "Suit up and take it down to the driveroom. Cycle it through and lash it in a place somehow. Tear up the sheet if you have to. That section of the ship is vacuum. It will be best there."

Christopheris nodded, and the three of them moved off, the dead weight of Lasamer's corpse supported between them. Melantha turned back to Marij-Black, but only for an instant. Lommie Thorne, who was mopping the blood from the tabletop with a piece of cloth, suddenly began to retch violently. Melantha swore. "Someone help her," she snapped.

Karoly d'Branin finally seemed to stir. He rose and took the blood soaked cloth from Lommie's hand, and led her back to his cabin.

"I can't do this alone," whined Alys Northwind, turning away in disgust.

"Help me, then," Melantha said. Together she and Northwind half-led and half-carried the psipsych from the lounge, cleaned her and undressed her, and put her to sleep with a shot of one of her own drugs. Afterwards, Melantha took the injection gun and made the rounds. Northwind and Lommie Thorne required mild tranquilizers, Dannel a somewhat stronger one.

It was three hours before they met again.

The survivors assembled in the largest of the cargo holds, where three of them hung their sleepwebs. Seven of eight attended. Agatha Marij-Black was still unconscious, sleeping or in a coma or deep shock; none of them were

sure. The rest seemed to have recovered, though their faces were pale and drawn. All of them had changed clothes, even Alys Northwind, who had slipped into a new jumpsuit identical to the old one.

“I do not understand,” Karoly d’Branin said. “I do not understand what...”

“Royd killed him, is all,” Northwind said bitterly, “His secret was endangered so he just—just blew him apart. We all saw it.”

“I cannot believe that,” Karoly d’Branin said in an anguished voice. “I cannot. Royd and I, we have talked, talked many a night when the rest of you were sleeping. He is gentle, inquisitive, sensitive. A dreamer. He understands about the *volcryn*. He would not do such a thing, could not.”

“His projection certainly winked out quick enough when it happened,” Lindran said. “And you’ll notice he hasn’t had much to say since.”

“The rest of us haven’t been unusually talkative either,” said Melantha Jhirl. “I don’t know what to think, but my impulse is to side with Karoly. We have no proof that the captain was responsible for Thale’s death. There’s something here none of us understands yet.”

Alys Northwind grunted. “Proof,” she said disdainfully.

“In fact,” Melantha continued, unperturbed, “I’m not even sure *anyone* is responsible. Nothing happened until he was given the esperon. Could the drug be at fault?”

“Hell of a side effect,” Lindran muttered.

Rojan Christopheris frowned. “This is not my field, but I would think no. Esperon is extremely potent, with both physical and psionic side effects verging on the extreme, but not *that* extreme.”

“What, then?” said Lommie Thorne. “What killed him?”

“The instrument of death was probably his own talent,” the xenobiologist said, “undoubtedly augmented by the drug. Besides boosting his principal power, his telepathic sensitivity, esperon would also tend to bring out other psi-talents that might have been latent in him.”

“Such as?” Lommie demanded.

“Biocontrol. Telekinesis.”

Melantha Jhirl was way ahead of him. “Esperon shoots blood pressure way up anyway. Increase the pressure in his skull even more by rushing all the blood in his body to his brain. Decrease the air pressure around his head simultaneously, using teke to induce a short-lived vacuum. Think about it.”

They thought about it, and none of them liked it.

“Who could do such a thing?” Karoly d’Branin said. “It could only have been self-induced, his own talent wild, out of control.”

“Or turned against him by a greater talent,” Alys Northwind said stubbornly.

“No human telepath has talent on that order, to seize control of someone else, body and mind and soul, even for an instant.”

“Exactly,” the stout xenotech replied. “No *human* telepath.”

“Gas giant people?” Lommie Thorne’s tone was mocking.

Alys Northwind stared her down. “I could talk about Crey sensitives or *githyanki* soulsucks, name a half-dozen others off the top of my head, but I don’t need to. I’ll only name one. A Hrangan Mind.”

That was a disquieting thought. All of them fell silent and stirred uneasily thinking of the vast, inimical power of a Hrangan Mind hidden in the command chambers of the *Nightflyer*, until Melantha Jhirl broke the spell with a short, derisive launch. “You’re frightening yourself with shadows, Alys,” she said. “What you’re saying is ridiculous, if you stop to think about it. I hope that isn’t too much to ask. You’re supposed to be xenologists, the lot of you, experts in alien languages, psychology, biology, technology. You’re don’t act the part. We warred with Old Hranga for a thousand years, but we *never* communicated successfully with a Hrangan Mind. If Royd Eris is Hrangan, they’re improved their conversational skills markedly in the centuries since the Collapse.”

Alys Northwind flushed. “You’re right,” she said. “I’m jumpy.”

“Friends,” said Karoly d’Branin, “we must not let our actions be dictated by panic or hysteria. A terrible thing has happened. One of our colleagues is dead, and we do not know why. Until we do we can only go on. This is no time for rash actions against the innocent. Perhaps, when we return to Avalon, an investigation will tell us what happened. The body is safe for examination, is it not?”

“We cycled it through the airlock into the driverroom,” Dannel said. “It’ll keep.”

“And it can be studied closely on our return,” d’Branin said.

“Which should be immediate,” said Northwind. “Tell Eris to turn this ship around!”

D’Branin looked stricken. “But the *volcryn*! A week more and we shall know them, if my figures are correct. To return would take us six weeks. Surely it is worth one additional week to know that they exist? Thale would not have wanted his death to be for nothing.”

“Before he died, Thale was raving about aliens, about danger,” Northwind insisted. “We’re rushing to meet some aliens. What if they’re the danger? Maybe these *volcryn* are even more potent than a Hrangan Mind, and maybe they don’t want to be met, or investigated, or observed. What about that, Karoly? You ever think about that? Those stories of yours—don’t some of them talk about terrible things happening to the races that meet the *volcryn*?”

“Legends,” d’Branin said. “Superstition.”

“A whole Fyndii horde vanishes in one legend,” Rojan Christopheris put in.

“We cannot put credence in these fears of others,” d’Branin argued.

“Perhaps there’s nothing to the stories,” Northwind said, “but do you care to risk it? I don’t. For what? Your sources may be fictional or exaggerated or wrong, your interpretations and computations may be in error, or they may have changed course- the *volcryn* may not even be within light years of where we’ll drop out.”

“Ah,” Melantha Jhirl said, “I understand. Then we shouldn’t go on because they won’t be there, and besides, they might be dangerous.”

D’Branin smiled and Lindran laughed. “Not funny,” protested Alys Northwind, but she argued no further.

“No,” Melantha continued, “any danger we are in will not increase significantly in the time it will take us to drop out of drive and look about for *volcryn*. We have to drop out anyway, to reprogram for the shunt home. Besides,

we've come a long way for these volcryn, and I admit to being curious." She looked at each of them in turn, but no one spoke. "We continue then."

"And Royd?" demanded Christopheris. "What do we do about him?"

"What *can* we do?" said Dannel.

"Treat the captain as before," Melantha said decisively. "We should open lines to him and talk. Maybe not we can clear up some of the mysteries that are bothering us, if Royd is willing to discuss things frankly."

"He is probably as shocked and dismayed as we are, my friends," said d'Branin. "Possibly he is fearful that we will blame him, try to hurt him."

"I think we should cut through to his section of the ship and drag him out kicking and screaming," Christopheeris said. "We have the tools. That would write a quick end to all our fears."

"It could kill Royd," Melantha said. "Then he's be justified in anything he did to stop us. He controls this ship. He could do a great deal, if he decided we were his enemies." She shook her head vehemently. "No, Rojan, we can't attack Royd. We've got to reassure him. I'll do it, if no one else wants to talk to him." There were no volunteers. "All right. Bt I don't want any of you trying any foolish schemes. Go about your business. Act normally."

Karoly d'Branin was nodding agreement. "Let us put Royd and poor Thale from our minds, and concern ourselves with our work, with our preparations. Our sensory instruments must be ready for deployment as soon as we shift out of drive and reenter normal space, so we can find our quarry quickly. We must review everything we know about the *volcryn*." He turned to the linguists and began discussing some fo the preliminaries he expected of them, and in a short time the talk had turned to the *volcryn*, and bit by bit, the fear drained out of the group.

Lommie Thorne sat listening quietly, her thumb absently rubbing her wrist implant, but no one noticed the thoughtful look in her eyes. Not even Royd Eris, watching.

Melantha Jhirl returned to the lounge alone Someone had turned out the lights. "Captain?" she said softly.

He appeared to her; pale, glowing softly, with eyes that did not see. His clothes, filmy and out-of-date, were all shades of white and faded blue. "Hello, Melantha," the mellow voice said from the communicators, as the ghost silently mouthed the same words.

"Did you hear, captain?"

"Yes," he said, his voice vaguely tinged by surprise. "I hear and I see everything on my *Nightflyer*, Melantha. Not only in the lounge, and not only when the communicators and viewscreens are on. How long have you known?"

"Known?" She smiled. "Since you praised Alys' gas giant solution to the Roydian mystery. The communicators were not on that night. You had no way of knowing. Unless..."

"I have never made a mistake before," Royd said. "I told Karoly, but that was deliberate. I am sorry. I have been under stress."

"I believe you captain," she said, "No matter, I am the improved model, remember? I'd guessed weeks ago."

For a time, Royd said nothing. Then: "When do you begin to reassure me?"

“I'm doing so right now. Don't you feel reassured, yet?”

The apparition gave a ghostly shrug. “I am pleased that you and Karoly do not think I murdered that man. Otherwise, I am frightened. Things are getting out of control, Melantha. Why didn't she listen to me? It old Karoly to keep him dampened.”

“I told Agatha not to give him that injection. I warned them.”

“They were afraid, too,” Melantha said. “Afraid that you were only trying to frighten them off, to protect some awful plan. I don't know. It was my fault, in a sense. I was the one who suggested esperon. I thought it would put Thale at ease, and tell us something about you. I was curious.” She frowned. “A deadly curiosity. Now I have blood on my hands.”

Melantha's eyes were adjusting to the darkness in the lounge. By the faint light of the holograph, she could see the table where it had happened, dark streaks of drying blood across its surface among the plates and cups and cold pots of tea and chocolate. She heard a faint dripping as well and could not tell if it was blood or coffee. She shivered. “I don't like it in here.”

“If you would like to leave, I can be with you where you go.”

“No,” she said. “I'll stay. Royd, I think it might be better if you were *not* with us with us wherever we go. If you kept silent and out of sight, so to speak. If I asked you to, would you shut off your monitors throughout the ship? Except for the lounge, perhaps. It would make the others feel better, I'm sure.”

“They don't know.”

“They will. You made that remark about gas giants in everyone's hearing. Some of them have probably figured it out by now.”

“If I told you I had cut myself off, you would have no way of knowing whether it was the truth.”

“I could trust you,” Melantha Jhirl said.

Silence. The spectre stared at her. “As you wish,” Royd's voice said finally. “Everything off.” Now I see and hear only in here. Now, Melantha, you must promise to control them. No secret schemes, or attempts to breach my quarters. Can you do that?”

“I think so,” she said.

“Did you believe my story?” Royd asked.

“Ah,” she said. “A strange and wondrous story, captain. If it's a lie, I'll swap lies with you anytime. You do it well. If it's true, then you are a strange and wondrous man.”

“It's true,” the ghost said quietly. “Melantha...”

“Yes?”

“Does it bother you that I have...watched you? Watched you when you were not aware?”

“A little,” she said, “but I think I can understand it.”



“I watched you copulating.”

She smiled. “Ah,” she said, “I’m good at it.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Royd said. “You’re good to watch.”

Silence. She tried not to hear the steady, faint dripping off to her right. “Yes,” she said after a long hesitation.

“Yes? What?”

“Yes, Royd,” she said, “I would probably sex with you if it were possible.”

“*How did you know what I was thinking?*” Royd’s voice was suddenly frightened, full of anxiety and something close to fear.

“Easy,” Melantha said, startled. “I’m an improved model. It wasn’t so difficult to figure out. I told you, remember? I’m three moves ahead of you.”

“You’re not a telepath, are you?”

“No,” Melantha said. “No.”

Royd considered that for a long time. “I believe I’m reassured,” he said at last.

“Good,” she said.

“Melantha,” he added, “one thing. Sometimes it is not wise to be too many moves ahead. Do you understand?”

“Oh? No, not really. You frighten me. Now reassure me. Your turn, Captain Royd.”

“What happened in here? Really?”

Royd said nothing.

“I think you know something,” Melantha said. “You gave up your secret to stop us from injecting Lasamet with esperon. Even after your secret was forfeit, you ordered us not to go ahead. Why?”

“Esperon is a dangerous drug,” Royd said.

“More than that, captain,” Melantha said. “You’re evading. What killed Thale Lasamer. Or is it *who*?”

“I didn’t”

“One of us? The *volcyn*?”

Royd said nothing.

“Is there an alien aboard your ship, captain?”

Silence.

“Are we in danger? Am *I* in danger, captain. I’m not afraid. Does that make me a fool?”

“I like people,” Royd said at last. “When I can stand it, I like to have passengers. I watch them, yes. It’s not so terrible. I like you and Karoly especially. I won’t anything happen to you.”

“What might happen?”

Royd said nothing.

“And what about the others, Royd? Christopheris and Northwind, Dannel and Lindran, Lommie Thorne? Are you taking care of them, too? Or only Karoly and I?”

No reply.

“You’re not very talkative tonight,” Melantha observed.

“I’m under strain,” his voice replied. “And certain things you are safer not to know. Go to bed, Melantha Jhirl. We’ve talked long enough.”

“All right, captain,” she said. She smiled at the ghost and lifted her hand. His on rose to meet it. Warm dark flesh and pale radiance brushed, melded, were one. Melantha Jhirl turned to go. It was not until she was out in the corridor, safe in the light once more, that she began to tremble.

False midnight.

The talks had broken up, and one by one academicians had gone to bed. Even Karoly d’Branin had retired, his appetite for chocolate quelled by his memories of the lounge.

The linguists had made violent, noisy love before giving themselves up to sleep, as if to reaffirm their life in the face of Thale Lasamer’s grisly death. Rojan Christopheris had listened to music. But now they were all still.

The *Nightflyer* was filled with silence.

In the darkness of the largest cargo hold, three sleepwebs hung side by side. Melantha Jhirl twisted occasionally in her sleep, her face feverish, as if in the grip of some nightmare. Alys Northwind lay flat on her back snoring loudly, a reassuring wheeze of noise from her solid, meaty chest.

Lommie Thorne lay awake, thinking.

Finally she rose and dropped to the floor, nude, quiet, light and careful as a cat. She pulled on a tight pair of pants, slipped a wide-sleeved shift of black metallic cloth over her head, belted it with a silver chain, shook out her short hair. She did not don her boots. barefoot was quieter. Her feet were small and soft, with no trace of callous.

She moved to the middle sleepweb and shook Alys Northwind by her shoulder. The snoring stopped abruptly. “Huh” the xenotech said. She grunted in annoyance.

“Come,” whispered Lommie Thorne. She beckoned.

Northwind got heavily to her feet, blinking, and followed the cyberneticist through the door, out into the corridor. She'd been sleeping in her jumpsuit, its seams open nearly to her crotch. She frowned and sealed it. "What the hell," she muttered. She was disarrayed and unhappy.

"There's a way to find out if Royd's story was true," Lommie Thorne said carefully. "Melantha won't like it, though. Are you game to try?"

"What?" Northwind asked. Her face betrayed her interest.

"Come," the cyberneticist said.

They moved silently through the ship, to the computer room. The system was up, but dormant. They entered quietly; all empty. Currents of light ran silkily down crystalline channels in the data grids, meeting, joining, splitting apart again; rivers of wan multihued radiance crisscrossing a black landscape. The chamber was dim, the only noise a buzz at the edge of human hearing, until Lommie Thorne moved through it, touching keys, tripping switches, directing the silent luminescent currents. Bit by bit the machine woke.

"What are you *doing*?" Alys Northwind said.

"Karoly told me to tie in our system with the ship," Lommie Thorne replied as she worked. "I was told Royd wanted to study the *volcryn* data. Fine, I did it. Do you understand what that means?" Her shirt whispered in soft metallic tones when she moved.

Eagerness broke across the flat features of xenotech Alys Northwind. "The two systems are tied together!"

"Exactly. So Royd can find out about the *volcryn*, and we can find out about Royd." She frowned. "I wish I knew more about the *Nightflyer*'s hardware, but I think I can feel my way though. This is a pretty sophisticated system d'Branin requisitioned.

"Can you take over from Eris?"

"Take over?" Lommie sounded puzzled. "You been drinking again, Alys?"

"No, I'm serious. Use your system to break into the ship's control, overwhelm Eris, countermand his orders, make the *Nightflyer* respond to us, down here. Wouldn't you feel safer if we were in control?"

"Maybe," the cyberneticist said doubtfully. "I could try, but why do that?"

"Just in case. We don't have to use the capacity. Just so we have it, if an emergency arises."

Lommie Thorne shrugged. "Emergencies and gas giants. I only want to put my mind at rest about Royd, whether he had anything to do with killing Lasamer." She moved over to a readout panel, where a half-dozen meter-square viewscreens curved around a console, and brought one of them to life. Long fingers ghosted through holographic keys that appeared and disappeared as she used them, the keyboard changing shape again and yet again. The cyberneticist's pretty face grew thoughtful and serious.

"We're in," she said. Characters began to flow across a viewscreen, red flickerings in glassy black depths. On a second screen, a schematic of the *Nightflyer* appeared, revolved, halved; its spheres shifted size and perspective at the whim of Lommie's fingers, and a line of numerals below gave the specifications. The cyberneticist watched, and finally froze both screens. "Here," she said, "here's my answer about the hardware. You can dismiss your take over idea, unless unless those gas giant people of yours are going to help. The *Nightflyer*'s bigger and smarter than our little system here. Makes sense, when you stop to think about it. Ship's all automated, except for Royd."

Her hands moved again, and two more display screens stirred. Lommie Thorne whistled and coaxed her search program with soft words of encouragement.

“It looks as though there is a Royd, though. Configurations are all wrong for a robot ship. Damn, I would have bet anything.” The characters began to flow again, the Lommie watching the figures as they drifted by. “Here's life support specs, might tell us something.” A finger jabbed, and one screen froze yet again.

“Nothing unusual,” Alys Northwind said in disappointment.

“Standard waste disposal. Water recycling. Food processor, with protein and vitamin supplements in stores. She began to whistle. “Tanks of Renny's moss and neograss to eat up the CO2. Oxygen cycle, then. No methane or ammonia. Sorry about that.”

“Go sex with a computer!”

The cyberneticist smiled. “Ever tried it? Her fingers moved again. “What else should I look for? You're the tech, what would be a giveaway? Give me some ideas.”

“Check the specs for nurturant tanks, cloning equipment, that sort of thing,” the xenotech said. “That would tell us whether we was lying.”

“I don't know,” Lommie Thorne said. “Long time ago. He might have junked that stuff. No use for it.”

“Find Royd's life history,” Northwind said. “His mother's. Get a readout on the business they've done, all this alleged trading. They must have records. Account books, profit-and-loss, cargo invoices, that kind of thing.” Her voice few excited, and she gripped the cyberneticist from behind by her shoulders. “A log, a ship's log! There's got to be a log. Find it!”

“All right.” Lommie Thorne whistled, happy, at ease with her system, riding the data winds, curious, in control. Then the screen in front of her turned bright red and began to blink. She smiled, touched a ghost key, and the keyboard melted away and re-formed under her. She tried another tack. Three more screens turned red and began to blink. Her smile faded.

“What is it?”

“Security,” said Lommie Thorne. “I'll get through it in a second. Hold on.” She changed the keyboard yet again, entered another search program, attached on a rider in case it was blocked. Another screen flashed red. She had her machine chew the data she's gathered, sent out another feeler. More red. Flashing. Blinking. Bright enough to hurt the eyes. All the screens were red now. “A good security program,” she said with admiration. “The log is well protected.”

Alys Northwind grunted. “Are we blocked?”

“Response time is too slow,” Lommie Thorne said, chewing on her lower lip as she thought. “There's a way to fix that.” She smiled, and rolled back the soft black metal of her sleeves.

“What are you doing?”

“Watch,” she said. She slid her arm under the console, found the prongs, jacked in.

“Ah,” she said, low in her throat. The flashing red blocks vanished fro her readout screens, one after the other, as she sent minds coursing into the *Nightflyer's* system, easing though all the blocks. “Nothing like slipping past

another system's security. Like slipping only a man." Log entries were flickering past in a whirling, blurring rush, too fast for Alys Northwind to read. But Lommit read them.

Then she stiffened, "Oh," she said. It was almost a whimper. "Cold," she said. She shook her head and it was gone, but there was a sound in her ears, a terrible whooping sound. "Damn," she said, "that'll wake everyone." She glanced up when she felt Alys' fingers dig painfully into her shoulder, squeezing, hurting.

A grey steel panel slid almost silently across to the corridor, cutting off the whooping cry of the alarm. "What?" Lommie Thorne said.

"That's an emergency airseal," said Alys Northwind in a dead voice. She knew starships. "It closes where they're about to load or unload cargo in vacuum."

Their eyes went to the huge curving outer airlock above their heads. The inner lock was almost completely open, and as they watching it clicked into place, and the seal on the out door cracked, and now it was open a half a meter, sliding, and beyond was twisted nothingness so burning-bright it seared the eyes.

"Oh," said Lommie Thorne, as the cold coursed up her arm. She had stopped whistling.

Alarms were hotting everywhere. The passengers began to stir. Melantha Jhirl tumbled from her sleepweb and darted into the corridor, nude, frantic, alter. Karoly d'Branin sat up drowsily. The psipysch muttered fitfully in drug-induced sleep, Rojan Christopheris cried out in alarm.

Far away metal crunched and tore, and a violent shudder ran through the ship, throwing the linguists out of their sleepwebs, knocking Melantha from her feet.

In the command quarters of the *Nightflyer* was a spherical room with featureless white walls, a lesser sphere—a suspended control console—floating in its center. The walls were always blank when the ship was in drive; the warped and glaring underside of spacetime was painful to behold.

But now darkness woke in the room, a holoscope coming to life, cold black and stars everywhere, points of icy unwinking brilliance, no up and down and no direction, the floating control sphere the only feature in the simulated sea of night.

The *Nightflyer* had shifted out of drive.

Melantha Jhirl found her feet again and thumbed on a communicator. The alarms were still hooting, and it was hard to hear. "Captain," she shouted, "what's happening?"

"I don't know," Royd's voice replied. "I'm trying to find out. Wait."

Melantha waited. Karoly d'Branin came staggering out into the corridor blinking and rubbing his eyes. Rojan Christopheris was not long behind him. "What is it? What's wrong?" He demanded, but Melantha just shook her head. Lindran and Dannel soon appeared as well. There was no sign of Marij-Black, Alys Northwind, or Lommie Thorne. The academicians looked uneasily at the seal that blocked cargo hold three. Finally Melantha told Christopheris to go look. He returned a few minutes later. "Agatha is still unconscious," he said, talking at the stop of his voice to be heard over the alarms. "The drugs still have her. She's moving around, though. Crying out."

“Alys and Lommie?”

Christopheris shrugged. “I can’t find them. Ask your friend Royd.”

The communicator came back to life as the alarms died. “We have returned to normal space,” Royd’s voice said, “but the ship is damaged. Hold three, your computer room, was breached while we were under drive. It was ripped apart by the flux. The computer dropped us out of drive automatically, fortunately for us, or the drive forces might have torn my entire ship apart.”

“Royd,” said Melantha, “Northwind and Thorne are missing.”

“It appears your computer was in use when the hold was breached,” Royd said carefully. “I would presume them dead, although I cannot say that with certainty. At Melantha’s request I have deactivated most of my monitors, retaining only the lounge input. I do not know what transpired. But this is a small ship, and if they are not with you, we must assume the worst.” He paused briefly. “If it is any consolation, they died swiftly and painlessly.”

“You killed them,” Christopheris said, his face red and angry. He started to say more, but Melantha slipped her hand firmly over his mouth. The two linguists exchanged a long, meaningful look. “Do we know how it happened, captain?” Melantha asked.

“Yes,” he said, reluctantly.

The xenobiologist had taken the hint, and Melantha took away her hand to let him breathe. “Royd?” she prompted.

“It sounds insane, Melantha,” his voice replied, “but it appears your colleagues opened the hold’s loading lock. I doubt they did so deliberately of course. They were using the system interface to gain entry to the *Nightflyer*’s data storage and controls, and they shunted aside all the safeties.”

“I see,” Melantha said. “A terrible tragedy.”

“Yes. Perhaps more terrible than you think. I have yet to discover the extent of damage to my ship.”

“We should not keep you if you have duties to perform,” Melantha said. “All of us are shocked, and it is difficult to talk now. Investigate the condition of your ship, and we’ll continue our discussion at a more opportune time. Agreed?”

“Yes,” said Royd.

Melantha turned off the communicator. Now, in theory, the device was dead; Royd could neither see nor hear them.

“Do you believe him?” Christopheris snapped.

“I don’t know,” Melantha Jhirl said, “but I do know that the other cargo holds can all be flushed just as hold three was. I’m moving my sleepweb into a cabin. I suggest that those of you who are living in hold two do the same.”

“Clever,” Lindran said, with a sharp nod of her head. “We can crowd in. It won’t be comfortable, but I doubt that I’d sleep the sleep of angels in the holds after this.”

“We should also get our suits out of storage in four,” Dannel suggested. “Keep them close at hand. Just in case.”

“If you wish,” Melantha said. “It’s possible that all the locks might pop open simultaneously. Royd can’t fault us for taking precautions.” She flashed a grim smile. “After today we’ve earned the right to act irrationally.” “This is no time for your damned jokes, Melantha,” Christopheris said. He was still red-faced, and his tone was full of fear and anger. “Three people are dead, Agatha is perhaps deranged or catatonic, the rest of us are endangered—“

“Yes. And we still have no idea what is happening,” Melantha pointed out.

“*Royd Eris is killing us!*” Christopheris shrieked. “I don’t know who or what he is and I don’t know if that story he gave us is true and I don’t care. Maybe he’s a Hrangan Mind or the avenging angel of the *volcryn* or the second coming of Jesus Christ. What the hell difference does it make? He’s *killing* us!” He looked at each of them in turn. “Any one of us could be next, “he added. “Any one of us. Unless...we’ve got to make plans, *do* something, put a stop to this once and for all.”

“You realize,” Melantha said gently, “that we cannot actually know whether the good captain has turned off his sensory inputs down here. He could be watching and listening to us right now. He isn’t, of course. He said he wouldn’t and I believe him. But we have only his word on that. Now, Rojan, you don’t appear to trust Royd. If that’s so, you can hardly put any faith in his promises. It follows therefore that from your own point of view it might not be wise to say the things that you’re saying.” She smiled slyly. “Do you understand the implications of what I’m saying?”

Christopheris opened his mouth and closed it again, looking very like a tall, ugly fish. He said nothing, but his eyes moved furtively, and his flush deepened.

Lindran smiled thinly. “I think he’s got it,” she said.

“The computer is gone, then,” Karoly d’Branin said suddenly in a low voice.

Melantha looked at him. “I’m afraid so, Karoly.”

D’Branin ran his fingers through his hair, as if half aware of how untidy he looked. “The *volcryn*,” he muttered. “How will we work without the computer?” He nodded to himself. “I have a small unit in my cabin, a wrist model, perhaps it will suffice. It must suffice, it must. I will get the figured from Royd, learn where we have dropped out. Excuse me, my friends. Pardon, I must go.” He wandered away in a distracted haze, talking to himself.

“He hadn’t heard a word we’ve said,” Dannel said, incredulous.

“Think how distraught he’d be if *all* of us were dead,” added Lindran. “Then he’d have no one to help him look for *volcryn*.”

“Let him go,” Melantha said. “He is hurt as any of us, maybe more so. He wears it differently. His obsessions are his defense.”

“Ah, And what is *our* defense?”

“Patience, maybe,” said Melantha Jhirl. “All of the dead were trying to breach Royd’s secret when they died. We haven’t tried. Here we are discussing their deaths.”

“You don’t find that suspicious?”

“Very,” Melantha said. “I even have a method of testing my suspicions. One of us can make yet another attempt to out whether our captain told us the truth. If he or she dies, we’ll know.” She shrugged. “Forgive me, however, if I’m not the one who tries. But don’t let me stop you if you have the urge. I’ll note the result with interest. Until

then, I'm going to move out of the cargo hold and get some sleep." She turned and strode off, leaving the others to stare at one another.

"Arrogant bitch," Dannel observed almost conversationally after Melantha had left.

"Do you really think he can hear us?" Christopheris whispered to the two linguists.

"Every pithy word," Lindran said. She smiled at his discomfiture. "Come Dannel, let's get to a safe area and back to bed."

He nodded.

"But," said Christopheris, "we have to *do* something. Make plans. Defenses."

Lindran gave him a final withering look, and pulled Dannel off behind her down the corridor.

"Melantha? Karoly?" She woke quickly, alert at the mere whisper of her name, fully awake almost at once, and sat up in the narrow single bed. Squeezed in beside her, Karoly d'Branin groaned and rolled over, yawning. "Royd?" she asked. "Is it morning?"

"We are drifting in interstellar space three light years from the nearest star, Melantha," replied the soft voice from the walls. "In such a context, the term morning has no meaning. But, yes, it is morning."

Melantha laughed. "Drifting, you said? How bad is the damage?"

"Serious, but not dangerous. Hold three is a complete ruin, hanging from my ship like half of a broken egg, but the damage was confined. The drives themselves are intact, and the *Nightflyer's* computers did not seem to suffer from your system's destruction. I feared they might. I have heard of phenomena like electronic death traumas."

D'Branin said, "Eh? Royd?"

Melantha stroked him affectionately. "I'll tell you later, Karoly," she said. "Go back to sleep. Royd, you sound serious. Is there more?"

"I am worried about our return flight, Melantha," Royd said. "When I take the *Nightflyer* back into drive, the flux will be playing directly on portions of the ship that were never engineered to withstand it. Our configurations are askew now; I can show you the mathematics of it, but the question of the flux forces in the vital one. The airseal across the access to hold three is a particular concern. I've run some simulations, and I don't know if it can take the stress. If it bursts, my whole ship will split apart in the middle. My engines will go shunting off by themselves, and the rest...Even if the life support sphere remains in tact, we will all soon be dead."

"I see. Is there anything we can do?"

"Yes. The exposed areas would be easy enough to reinforce. The outer hull is armored to withstand the warping forces, of course. We could mount it in place, a crude shield, but according to my projections, it would suffice. If we do it correctly, it will help correct out configurations we well. Large portions of the hull were torn loose when the locks opened, but they are still out there, floating within a kilometer or two, and could be used."



At some point, Karoly d'Branin had finally come awake. "My team has four vacuum sleds. We can retrieve those pieces for you, my friend."

"Fine, Karoly, but that is not my primary concern. My ship is self-repairing within certain limits, but this exceeds those limits by an order of magnitude. I will have to do this myself."

"You?" D'Branin was startled. "Royd, you said—that is, your muscles, your weakness— this work will be too much for you. Surely we can do this for you!"

Royd's reply was tolerant. "I am only cripple in a gravity field, Karoly. Weightless, I am in my element, and I will be killing the *Nightflyer*'s gravity grid momentarily, to try to gather my own strength for the repair work. No, you misunderstand. I am capable of the work. I have the tools, including my own heavy-duty sled."

"I think I know what you are concerned about, captain," Melantha said.

"I'm glad," Royd said. "Perhaps then you can answer my question. If I emerge from the safety of my chambers to do this work, can you keep your colleagues from harming me?"

Karoly d'Branin was shocked. "Oh, Royd, Royd, how could you think such a thing? We are scholars, scientists, not—not criminals, or soldiers, or—or animals, we are human, how can you believe we would threaten you or do you harm?"

"Human," Royd repeated, "but alien to me, suspicious of me. Give me no false assurances, Karoly."

He sputtered. Melantha took him by the hand and bid him quiet. "Royd," she said, "I won't lie to you. You'd be in some danger. But I'd hope that, by coming out, you'd make our friends joyously happy. They'd be able to see that you told the truth, see that you were only human." She smiled. "They *would* see that, wouldn't they?"

"They would," Royd said, "but would it be enough to offset their suspicions? They believe I am responsible for the deaths of the other three, do they not?"

"Believe is too strong a word. They suspect it, they fear it. They are frightened, captain, and with good cause. *I am frightened.*"

"No more than I."

"I would be less frightened if I knew what *did* happen. Will you tell me?"

Silence.

"Royd, if—"

"I have made mistakes, Melantha," Royd said gravely. "But I am not alone in that. I did my best to stop the esperon injection, and I failed. I might have saved Alys and Lommie if I had seen them, heard them, known what they were about. But you made me turn off my monitors, Melantha. I cannot help what I cannot see. Why, if you saw three moves ahead, did you calculate these results?"

Melantha Jhirl felt briefly guilty. "*Mea culpa*, captain, I share the blame. I know that. Believe me, I know that. It is hard to see three moves ahead when you do not know the rules, however. Tell me the rules."

"I am blind and deaf," Royd said, ignoring her. "It is frustrating. I cannot help if I am blind and deaf. I am going to turn on the monitors again, Melantha. I am sorry if you do not approve. I want your approval, but I must do this with or without it. I have to see."

“Turn them on,” Melantha said thoughtfully. “I was wrong captain. I should never have asked you to blind yourself. I did not understand the situation, and I overestimated my own power to control the others. A failing of mine. Improved models too often think they can do anything.” Her mind was racing, and she felt almost sick; she had miscalculated, misled, and there was more blood on her hands. “I think I understand better now.”

“Understand what?” Karoly d’Branin said, baffled.

“You do *not* understand,” Royd said sternly. “Don’t pretend that you do, Melantha Jhirl. Don’t! It is not wise or safe to be too many moves ahead.” There was something disturbing in his tone.

Melantha understood that, too.

“What?” Karoly said. “I do not understand.”

“Neither do I,” Melantha said carefully. “Neither do I, Karoly.” She kissed him lightly. “None of us understands, do we?”

“Good,” said Royd.

She nodded, and put a reassuring arm around Karoly. “Royd,” she said, “to return to the question of repairs, it seems to me you must do this work, regardless of what promises we can give you. You won’t risk your ship by slipping back into drive in your present condition, and the only other option is to drift out here until we all die. What choice do we have?”

“I have a choice,” Royd said with deadly seriousness. “I could kill all of you, if that were the only way to save myself and my ship.”

“You could try,” Melantha said.

“Let us have no more talk of dead,” d’Branin said.

“You are right, Karoly,” Royd said, “I do not wish to kill any of you. But I must be protected.”

“You will be,” Melantha said. “Karoly can set the others to chasing your hull fragments. I’ll be your protection. I’ll stay by your side. If anyone tries to attack you, they’ll have to deal with me. They won’t find that easy. And I can assist you. The work will be done three times as fast.”

Royd was polite. “It is my experience that most planet-born are clumsy and easily tired in weightlessness. It would be more efficient if I worked alone, although I will gladly accept your services as a bodyguard.”

“I remind you that I’m the improved model, captain,” Melantha said. “Good in free fall as well as in bed. I’ll help.”

“You are stubborn. As you will, then. In a few moments I shall de-power the gravity grid. Karoly, go and prepare your people. Unship your vacuum sleds and suit up. I will exit the *Nightflyer* in three standard hours, after I have recovered from the pains of your gravity. I want all of you outside the ship before I leave. Is that condition understood?”

“Yes,” said Karoly. “All except Agatha. She has not regained consciousness, friend, she will not be a problem.”

“No,” said Royd, “I meant *all* of you, including Agatha. Take her outside with you.”

“But Royd!” protested d’Brinin.

“You’re the captain,” Melantha Jhirl said firmly. “It will be as you say; all of us outside. Including Agatha.”

Outside. It was as though some vast animal had taken a bite out of the stars.

Melantha Jhirl waited on her sled close by the *Nightflyer* and looked at stars. It was not so very different out here in the depths of interstellar space. The stars were cold, frozen points of light; unwinking, austere, more chill and uncaring somehow than the same suns made to dance and twinkle by an atmosphere. Only the absence of a landmark primary reminded her of where she was: in the places between, where men and women and their ships do not stop, where the *volcryn* sail crafts impossible ancient. She tried to pick out Avalon’s sun, but she did not know where to search. The configurations were strange to her and she had no idea of how she was oriented. Behind her, before her, above, all around, the starfields stretched endlessly. She glanced down, or what seemed like down just then, beyond her feet and her sled and the *Nightflyer*, expecting still more alien stars. And the *bite* hit her with an almost physical force.

Melanth fought off a wave of vertigo. She was suspended above a pit, a yawning chasm in the universe, black, starless, vast.

Empty.

She remembered then: the Tempter’s Veil. Just a cloud of dark gases, nothing really, galactic pollution that obscured the light from the stars of the Fringe. But this close at hand, it seemed immense, terrifying, and she had to break her gaze when she began to feel as if she were falling. It was a gulf beneath her and the frail silver-white shell of the *Nightflyer*, a gulf about to swallow them.

Melantha touched one of the controls on the sled’s forked handle, swinging around so the Veil was to her side instead of beneath her. That seemed to help somehow. She concentrated on the *Nightflyer*, ignoring the looming wall of blackness beyond. It was the largest object in her universe, bright amid the darkness, ungainly, its shattered cargo sphere giving the whole craft an unbalanced cast.

She could see the other sleds as they angled through the black, tracking the missing pieces of hull, grappling with them, bringing them back. The linguistic team worked together, as always, sharing a sled. Rojan Christopheris was alone, working in a sullen silence. Melantha had almost had to threaten him with physical violence before he agreed to join them. The xenobiologist was certain that it was all another plot, that once they were outside, the *Nightflyer* would slip into drive without them and leave them to lingering deaths. His suspicions were inflamed by drink, and there had been alcohol on his breath when Melantha and Karoly had finally forced him to suit up. Karoly had a sled too, and a silent passenger; Agatha Marij-Black, freshly drugged and asleep in her vacuum suit, safely locked into place.

While her colleagues labored, Melantha Jhirl waited for Royd Eris, talking to the others occasionally over the comm link. The two linguists unaccustomed to weightlessness, were complaining a good deal, and bickering as well. Karoly tried to sooth them frequently. Christopheris said little, and his few comments were edged and biting. He was still angry. Melantha watched him flit across her field of vision, a stick figure in form-fitting black armor standing erect at the controls of his sled.

Finally the circular airlock atop the foremost of the *Nightflyer*’s major spheres dilated and Royd Eris emerged.

She watched him approach, curious, wondering what he would look like. In her mind were a half-dozen contradictory pictures. His genteel, cultured, too-formal voice sometimes reminded her of the dark aristocrats of her native Prometheus, the wizards who toyed with human genes and played baroque status games. At other times,

his naiveté made her imagine him as an inexperienced youth. His ghost was a tired-looking thin young man, and he was supposed to be considerably older than that pale shadow, but Melantha found it difficult to hear an old man talking when he spoke.

Melantha felt a nervous tingle as he neared. The lines of his sled and his suit were different than theirs, disturbingly so. Alien, she thought, and quickly squelched the thought. Such differences meant nothing. Royd's sled was large, a long oval plate with eight jointed grappling arms bristling from its underside like the legs of a metallic spider. A heavy-duty cutting laser was mounted beneath the controls, its snout jutting threateningly forward. His suit was far more massive than the carefully engineered Academy worksuits they wore, with a bulge between its shoulder blades that was probably a power pack, and rakish radiant fins atop shoulders and helmet. It made him seem hulking; hunched and deformed.

But when he finally came near enough for Melantha to see his face, it was just a face.

White, very white, that was the predominant impression she got; white hair cropped very short; a white stubble around the sharply chiseled lines of his jaw, almost invisible eyebrows beneath which his eyes moved restlessly. His eyes were large and vividly blue, his best feature. His skin was pale and unlined, scarcely touched by time.

He looked wary, she thought. And perhaps a bit frightened.

Royd stopped his sled close to hers, amid the twisted ruin that had been cargo hold three, and surveyed the damage, the pieces of floating wreckage that once had been flesh, blood, glass, metal, plastic. Hard to distinguish now, all of them fused and burned and frozen together. "We have a good deal of work to do," he said. "Shall we begin?"

"First let's talk," she she replied. She shifted her sled closer and reached out to him, but the distance was still too great, the width of the bases of the two vacuum sleds keeping them apart. Melantha backed off and turned herself over completely, so that Royd stood upside down in her world and she upside down in his. She moved to him again, positioning her sled directly over/under his. Their gloved hands met, brushed, parted. Melantha adjusted her altitude. Their helmets touched.

"Now I have touched you," Royd said, with a tremor in his voice. "I have never touched anyone before, or been touched."

"Oh, Royd. This isn't touching, not really. The suits are in the way. But I will touch you, really touch you. I promise you that."

"You can't. It's impossible."

"I'll find a way," she said firmly. "Now, turn off your comm. The sound will carry through our helmets."

He blinked and used his tongue controls and it was done.

"Now we can talk," she said. "Privately."

"I do not like this, Melantha," he said. "This is too obvious. This is dangerous."

"There is no other other way. Royd, I *do* know."

"Yes," he said. "I knew you did. Three moved ahead, Melantha. I remember the way you play chess. But this is a more serious game, and you are safer if you feign ignorance."

"I understand that, captain. Other things I'm less sure about. Can we talk about them?"

“No. Don’t ask me to. Just do as I tell you. You are in peril, all of you, but I can protect you. The less you know, the better I can protect you.” Through the transparent faceplates, his expression was somber.

She stared into his upside-down eyes. “It might be a second crew member, someone else hidden in your quarters, but I don’t believe that. It’s the ship, isn’t it? Your ship is killing us. Not you. It. Only that doesn’t make sense. You command the *Nightflyer*. How can it act independently? And why? What motive? And how was Thale Lasamer killed? The business with Alys and Lommie, that was easy, but a psionic murder? A starship with psi? I can’t accept that. It can’t be the ship. Yet it can’t be anything else. Help me, captain.”

He blinked, anguish behind his eyes. “I should never have accepted Karoly’s charter, not with a telepath among you. It was too risky. But I wanted to see the *volcryn*, and he spoke of them so movingly.” He sighed. “You understand too much already, Melantha. I can’t tell you more, or I would be powerless to protect you. The ship is malfunctioning, that is all you need to know. It is not safe to push too hard. As long as I am at the controls, I think I can keep you and the others from harm. Trust me.”

“Trust is a two-way bond,” Melantha said.

Royd listed his hand and pushed her away, then tongued his communicator back to life. “Enough gossip,” he announced. “We have work to do. Come. I want to see just how improved you actually are.”

In the solitude of her helmet, Melantha Jhirl swore softly.

With an irregular twist of metal locked between him in his sled’s magnetic grip, Rojan Christopheris sailed back towards the *Nightflyer*. He was watching from a distance when Royd Eris emerged on his over-sized work sled. He was closer when Melantha Jhirl moved to him, inverted her sled, and pressed her faceplate to Royd’s. Christopheris listened to their soft exchange, heard Melantha promise to touch him. Eris, the *thing*, the killer. He swallowed his rage. Then they cut him out, cut all of them out, went off the open circuit. But still she hung there, suspended by that cipher in the hunchback spacesuit, faces pressed together like two lovers kissing.

Christopheris swept in close, unlocked his captive plate so it would drift towards them. “Here,” he announced. “I’m off to get another.” He tongued off his own comm and swore, and his sled slid around the spheres and tubes to the *Nightflyer*.

Somehow they were all in it together, Royd and Melantha and possibly old d’Branin as well, he thought sourly. She had protected Eris from the first, stopped them when they might have taken action together, found out who or what he was. He did not trust her. His skin crawled when he remembered that they had been to bed together. She and Eris were the same, whatever they might be. And now poor Alys was dead, and that fool Thorne and even that damned telepath, but still Melantha was with him, against them. Rojan Christopheris was deeply afraid, and angry, and half drunk.

The others were out of sight, off chasing spinning wedges of half-slugged metal. Royd and Melantha were engrossed in each other, the ship abandoned and vulnerable. This was his chance. No wonder Eris had insisted that all of them precede him into the void; outside, isolated from the controls of the *Nightflyer*, he was only a man. A weak one at that.

Smiling a thin hard smile, Christopheris brought his sled curling around to the cargo spheres, hidden from sight, and vanished into the gaping maw of the driveroom. It was a long tunnel, everything open to vacuum, safe from the corrosion of an atmosphere. Like most starships, the *Nightflyer* had a triple propulsion system: the gravfield for landing and lifting, useless away from a gravity well, the nukes for deep space sublight maneuverings, and the great stardrives themselves. The lights of his sled flickered past the encircling rings of nukes and sent long bright

streaks along the sides of the closed cylinders of the stardrives, the huge engines that bent the stuff of spacetime, encased in webs of metal and crystal.

At the end of the tunnel was a great circular door, reinforced metal, closed: the main airlock.

Christopheris set the sled down, dismounted—pulling his boots free of the sled’s magnetic grip with an effort—and moved to the airlock. This was the hardest part, he thought. The headless body of Thale Lasamer was tethered loosely to a massive support strut by the lock, like a grisly guardian of the way. The xenobiologist had to stare at it while he waited for the lock to cycle. Whenever he glanced away, somehow he would find his eyes creeping back to it. The body looked almost natural, as if it had never had a head. Christopheris tried to remember what Lasamer had looked like, but the features would not come to mind. He moved uncomfortably, but then the lock door slid open and he gratefully entered the chamber to cycle through.

He was alone in the *Nightflyer*.

A cautious man, Christopheris kept his suit on, thought he collapsed the helmet and yanked loose the suddenly-limp metallic fabric so it fell behind his back like a hood. He could snap it in place quickly enough if the need arose. In cargo hold four, where they had stored their equipment, the xenobiologist found what he was looking for; a portable cutting laser, charged and ready. Low power, but it would do.

Slow and clumsy in weightlessness, he pulled himself down the corridor into the darkened lounge.

It was chilly inside, the air cold on his cheeks. He tried not to notice. He braced himself at the door and pushed off across the width of the room sailing above the furniture, which was all safely bolted into place. As he drifted towards his objective, something wet and cold touched his face. It startled him, but it was gone before he could quite make out what it was.

When it happened again, Christopheris snatched at it, caught it, and felt briefly sick. He had forgotten. No one had cleaned the lounge yet. The—the remains were still there, floating now, blood and flesh and bits of bone and brain. All around him.

He reached the far wall, stopped himself with his arms, pulled himself down to where he wanted to go. The bulkhead. The wall. No doorway was visible, but the metal couldn’t be very thick. Beyond as the control room, the computer access, safety, power. Rojan Christopheris did not think of himself as a vindictive man. He did not intend to harm Royd Eris, that judgement was not his to make. He would take control of the *Nightflyer*, warn Eris away, make certain the man stayed sealed in his suit. He would take them all back without any more mysteries, any more killings. The Academy arbiters could listen to the story, and probe Eris, and decide the right and wrong of it, guilty and innocent, what should be done.

The cutting laser emitted a thin pencil of scarlet light. Christopheris smiled and applied it to the bulkhead. It was slow work, but he had patience. They would not have missed him, quiet as he’d been, and if they did they would assume he was off sledding after some hunk of salvage. Eris’ repairs would take hours, maybe days, to finish. The bright blade of the laser smoked where it touched the metal. Christopheris applied himself diligently.

Something moved on the periphery of his vision, just a little flicker, barely seen. A floating bit of brain, he thought. A sliver of bone. A bloody piece of flesh, hair still hanging from it. Horrible things, but nothing to worry about. He was a biologist, he was used to blood and brains and flesh. And worse, and worse; he had dissected many an alien in his day, cutting through chitin and mucous, pulsing stinking food sacs and poisonous spines, he had seen and touched it all.

Again the motion caught his eye, teased at it. Not wanting to, Christopheris found himself drawn to look. He could not *not* look, somehow, just as he had been unable to ignore the headless corpse near the airlock. He looked.

It was an eye.

Christopheris trembled and the laser slipped sharply off to one side, so he had to wrestle with it to bring it back to the channel he was cutting. His heart raced. He tried to calm himself. Nothing to be frightened of. No one was home, and if Royd should return, well, he had the laser as a weapon and he had his suit on if an airlock blew.

He looked at the eye again, willing away his fear. It was just an eye, Thale Lasamer's eye, pale blue, bloody but intact, the same watery eye the boy had when alive, nothing supernatural. A piece of dead flesh, floating in the lounge amid other pieces of dead flesh. Someone should have cleaned up the lounge, Christopheris thought angrily. It was indecent to leave it like this, it was uncivilized.

The eye did not move. The other grisly bits were drifting on the air currents that flowed across the room, but the eye was still. It neither bobbed nor spun. It was fixed on him. Staring.

He cursed himself and concentrated on the laser, on his cutting. He had burned an almost straight line up the bulkhead for about a meter. He began another at a right angle.

The eye watched dispassionately. Christopheris suddenly found he could not stand it. One hand released its grip on the laser, reached out, caught the eye, flung it across the room. The action made him lose balance. He tumbled backward, the laser slipping from his grasp, his arms flapping like the wings of some absurd heavy bird. Finally he caught an edge of the table and stopped himself.

The laser hung in the center of the room, floating amid coffee pots and pieces of human debris, still firing, turning slowly. That did not make sense. It should have ceased fire when he released it. A malfunction, Christopheris thought nervously. Smoke was rising where the thin line of the laser traced a path across the carpet.

With a shiver of fear, Christopher realized that the laser was turning toward him

He raised himself, put both hands flat against the table, pushed up out of the way, bobbing towards the ceiling.

The laser was turning more swiftly now.

He pushed away from the ceiling hard, slammed into a wall, grunted in pain, bounced off the floor, kicked. The laser was spinning quickly, chasing him. Christopheris soared, braced himself for another ricochet off the ceiling. The beam swung around, but not fast enough. He'd get it while it was still firing off in the other direction.

He moved close, reached, and saw the eye.

It hung just above the laser. Staring.

Rojan Christopheris made a small whimpering sound low in his throat, and his hand hesitated—not long, but long enough—and the scarlet beam came up and around.

Its touch was a light, not caress across his neck.

It was more than an hour later before they missed him. Karoly d'Branin noticed his absence first, called for him over the comm link, and got no answer. He discussed it with the others.

Royd Eris moved his sled back from the armor plate he had just mounted, and through his helmet Melantha Jhirl could see the lines around his mouth grow hard.

It was just then that the noises began.

A shrill bleat of pain and fear, followed by moans and sobbing. Terrible wet sounds, like a man choking on his own blood. They all heard. The sounds filled their helmets. And almost clear amid the anguish was something that sounded like a word: "Help."

"That's Christopheris," a woman's voice said. Lindran.

"He's hurt," Dannel added. "He's crying for help. Can't you hear it?"

"Where—?" someone started.

"The ship," Lindran said. "He must have returned to the ship."

Royd Eris said, "The fool. No I warned—"

"We're going to check," Lindran announced. Dannel cut free the hull fragment they had been bringing in, and it spun away, tumbling. Their sled angled down towards the *Nightflyer*.

"Stop," Royd said. "I'll return to my chambers and check from there, if you wish. But you may not enter the ship. Stay outside until I give you clearance."

The terrible sounds went on and on.

"Go to hell," Lindran snapped at him over the open circuit.

Karoly d'Branin had his sled in motion too, hastening after the linguists, but he had been farther out and it was a long way back to the ship. "Royd, what can you mean? We must help, don't you see? He is hurt, listen to him. Please, my friend."

"No," Royd said. "Karoly, stop! If Rojan went back to the ship alone, he is dead."

"How do you know that?" Dannel demanded. "Did you arrange it? Set traps in case we disobeyed you?"

"No," Royd said, "listen to me. You can't help him now. Only I could have helped him, and he did not listen to me. Trust me. Stop." His voice was despairing. In the distance, d'Branin's sled slowed. The linguists did not.

"We've already listened to you too damn much, I'd say," Lindran said. She almost had to shout to be heard above the noises, the whimpers and moans, the awful wet sucking sounds, the distorted pleas for help. Agony filled their universe. "Melantha," Lindran continued, "keep Eris right where he is. We'll go carefully, find out what is happening inside, but I don't want him getting back to his controls. Understood?"

Melantha Jhirl hesitated. The sounds beat against her ears. It was hard to think.

Royd swung his sled around to face her, and she could feel the weight of his stare. "Stop them," he said. "Melantha, Karoly, order it. They will not listen to me. They do not know what they are doing." He was clearly in pain.

In his face, Melantha found devision. "Go back inside quickly, Royd. Do what you can. I'm going to try to intercept them."

"Whose side are you on?" Lindran demanded.

Royd nodded to her across the gulf, but Melantha was already in motion. Her sled backed clear of the work area, congested with hull fragments and other debris, then accelerated briskly as she raced around the exterior of the *Nightflyer* towards the driveroom.



But even as she approached, she knew it was too late. The linguists were too close, and already moving much faster than she was.

“*Don’t*,” she said, authority in her tone. “Christopheris is dead.”

“His ghost is crying for help, then,” Lindran replied. “When they tinkered you together, they must have damaged the genes for hearing, bitch.”

“The ship isn’t safe.”

“Bitch,” was all the answer she got.

Karoly’s sled pursued vainly. “Friends, you must stop, please, I beg it of you. Let us talk this out together.”

The sounds were his only reply.

“I am your superior,” he said. “I order you to wait outside. Do you hear me? I order it, I invoke the authority of the Academy of Human Knowledge. Please, my friends, please.”

Melantha watched helplessly as Lindran and Dannel vanished down the long tunnel of the driverroom.

A moment later she halted her won sled near the waiting black mouth, debating whether she should follow them on into the *Nightflyer*. She might be able to catch them before the airlock opened.

Royd’s voice, hoarse counterpoint to the sounds, answered her unvoiced question. “Stay, Melantha. Proceed no farther.”

She looked behind her. Royd’s sled was approaching.

“What are you doing here? Royd, use you own lock. You have to get back inside!”

“Melantha,” he said calmly, “I cannot. The ship will not respond to me. The lock will not dilate. The main lock in the driverroom is the only one with manual override. I am trapped outside. I don’t want you or Karoly inside teh ship until I can return to my console.”

Melantha Jhirl looked down the shadowed barrel of the driverroom, where the linguists had vanished.

“What will—“

“Beg them to come back, Melantha. Plead with them. Perhaps there is still time.”

She tried. Karoly d’Branin tried as well. The twisted symphony of pain and pleading went on and on, but they could not raise Dannel or Lindran at all.

They’ve cut out their comm,” Melantha said furiously. “They don’t want to listen to us. Or that...that sound.”

Royd’s sled and d’Branin’s reached her at the same time. “I do not understand,” Karoly said. “Why can you not enter, Royd? What is happening?”

“It is simple, Karoly,” Royd replied. “I am being kept outside until—until—“

“Yes?” prompted Melantha.

“—until Mother is done with them.”

The linguists left their vacuum sled next to the one that Christopheris had abandoned, and cycled through the airlock in unseemly haste, with hardly a glance for the grim headless doorman.

Inside they paused briefly to collapse their helmets. “I can still hear him,” Dannel said. The sounds were faint inside the ship.

Lindran nodded. “It’s coming from the lounge. Hurry.”

They kicked and pulled their way down the corridor in less than a minute. The sounds grew steadily louder, nearer. “He’s in there,” Lindran said when they reached the doorway.

“Yes,” Dannel said, “but is he alone? We need a weapon. What if...Royd had to be lying. There is someone else on board. We need to defend ourselves.”

Lindran would not wait. “There are two of us,” she said. “Come *on!*” She launched herself through the doorway, calling Christopheris by name.

It was dark inside. What little light there was spilled through the door from the corridor. Her eyes took a long moment to adjust. Everything was confused; walls and ceilings and floor were all the same, she had no sense of direction. “Rojan,” she called, dizzily. “Where are you?” The lounge seemed empty, but maybe it was only the light, or her sense of unease.

“Follow the sound,” Dannel suggested. He hung in the door, peering warily about for a minute, and then began to feel his way cautiously down a wall, groping with his hands.

As if in response to his comment, the sobbing sounds grew suddenly louder. But they seemed to come first from one corner of the room, then from another.

Lindran, impatient, propelled herself across the chamber, searching. She brushed against a wall in the kitchen area, and that made her think of weapons, and Dannel’s fears. She knew where the utensils were stored. “Here,” she said a moment later, turning towards him, “Here, I’ve got a knife, that should thrill you.” She flourished it, and brushed against a floating bubble of liquid as big as her fist. It burst and re-formed into a hundred smaller globules. One moved past her face, close, and she tasted it. Blood.

But Lasamer had been dead a long time. His blood ought to have dried by now, she thought.

“Oh, merciful god,” said Dannel.

“What?” Lindran demanded. “Did you find them?”

Dannel was fumbling his way back towards the door, creeping along the wall like an oversized insect, back the way he had come. “Get out, Lindran,” he warned. “*Hurry!*”

“Why? She trembled despite herself. “What’s wrong?”

“Teh screams,” he said. “The wall, Lindran, the wall. The sounds.”

“You’re not making sense,” she snapped. “Get ahold of yourself.”

He gibbered, “Don’t you see? The sounds are coming from the *wall*. The communicator. Faked. Simulated.” Dannel reached the door, and dove through it, signing audibly. He did not wait for her. He bolted down the corridor and was gone, pulling himself hand over hand wildly, his feet thrashing and kicking behind him.

Lindran braced herself and moved to follow.

The sounds came from in front of her, from the door. “Help me,” it said, in Rojan Christopheris’ voice. She heard moaning and that terrible wet choking sound, and she stopped.

From her side came a wheezing ghastly death rattle. “Ahhhh,” it moaned, loudly, building in a counterpoint to the other noise. “Help me.”

“Help me, help me, help me,” said Christopheris from the darkness behind her.

Coughing and a weak groan sounded under her feet.

“Help me,” all the voices chorused, “help me, help me, help me.” Recordings, she thought, recording being played back. “Help me, help me, help me, help me.” All the voices rose higher and louder, and the worlds turned into a scream, and the scream ended in wet choking, in wheezes and gasps and death. Then the sounds stopped. Just like that; turned off.

Lindran kicked off, floated towards the door, knife in hand.

Sometime dark and silent crawled from beneath the dinner table and rose to block her path. She saw it clearly for a moment, as it emerged between her and the light. Rojan Christopheris, still in his vacuum suit, but with the helmet pulled off. He had something in his hand that he raised to point at her. It was a laser, Lindran saw, a simple cutting laser.

She was moving straight towards him, coasting, helpless. She flailed and tried to stop herself, but she could not.

When she got quite close, she saw that Rojan had a second mouth below his chin, a long blackened slash, and it was grinning at her, and little droplets of blood flew from it, wetly, as he moved.

Dannel rushed down the corridor in a frenzy of fear, bruising himself as he smashed off walls and doorways. Panic and weightlessness made him clumsy. He kept glancing over his shoulder as he fled, hoping to see Lindran coming after him, but terrified what he might see in her stead. Every time he looked back, he lost his sense of balance and went tumbling again.

It took a long, long time for the airlock to open. As he waited, trembling, his pulse began to slow. The sounds had dwindled behind him, and there was no sign of pursuit. He steadied himself with an effort. Once inside the lock chamber, with the inner door sealed between him and the lounge, he began to feel safe.

Suddenly Dannel could barely remember why he had been so terrified.

And he was ashamed; he had run, abandoned Lindran. And for what? What had frightened him so? An empty lounge? Noises from the walls? A rational explanation for that forced itself on him all at once. It only meant that poor Christopheris was somewhere else in the ship, that’s all, just somewhere else, alive and in pain, spilling his agony into a comm unit.

Dannel shook his head ruefully. He’d hear no end of this, he knew. Lindran liked to taunt him. She would never let him forget it. But at least he would return, and apologize. That would count for something. Resolute, he

reached out and killed the cycle on the airlock, then reversed it. The air that had been partially sucked out came gusting back into the chamber.

As the inner door rolled back, Dannel felt his fear return briefly, an instant of stark terror when he wondered what might have emerged from the lounge to wait for him in the corridors of the *Nightflyer*. He faces the fear and willed it away. He felt strong.

When he stepped out, Lindran was waiting.

He could see neither anger no disdain in her curious calm featured, but he pushed himself towards her and tried to frame a pleas for forgiveness anyway. "I don't know why I—"

With languid grace, her hand came out from behind her back. The knife flashed up in a killing arc, and that was when Dannel finally noticed the hold burned in her suit, still smoking, just between her breasts.

"Your mother?" Melantha Jhirl said incredulously as they hung helpless in the emptiness beyond the ship.

"She can hear everything we say," Royd replied. "But at this point it no longer makes any difference. Rojan must have done something very foolish, very threatening. Now she is determined to kill you all."

"She, she, what do you mean?" D'Branin's voice was puzzled. "Royd, surely you do not tell us that your mother is still alive. You said she died even before you were born."

"She did, Karoly," Royd said. "I did not lie to you."

"No," Melantha said. "I didn't think so. But you did not tell us the whole truth either."

Royd nodded. "Mother is dead, but her—her spirit still lives, and animates my *Nightflyer*." He sighed. "Perhaps it would be more fitting to say her *Nightflyer*. My control has been tenuous at best."

"Royd," d'Branin said, "spirits do not exist. They are not real. There is no survival after death. My *volcryn* are more real than any ghosts."

"I don't believe in ghosts, either," said Melantha curtly.

"Call it what you will, then," Royd said. "My term is as good as any. The reality is unchanged by the terminology. My mother, or some part of my mother, lives in the *Nightflyer*, and she is killing all of you as she has killed others before."

"Royd, you do not make sense," d'Branin said.

"Quiet, Karoly. Let the captain explain."

"Yes," Royd said. "The *Nightflyer* is very—very advanced, you know. Automated, self-repairing, large. It had to be, if Mother were to be freed from the necessity of a crew. It was built on Newholme, you will recall. I have never been there, but I understand that Newholme's technology is quite sophisticated. Avalon could not duplicate this ship I suspect. There are few worlds that could."

"The point, captain?"

“The point—the point is the computers, Melantha. They had to be extraordinary. They are, believe me, they are. Crystal-matrix cores, lasergrid data retrieval, full sensory extension, and other—features.”

“Are you trying to tell us that the *Nightflyer* is an Artificial Intelligence? Lommie Thorne suspected as much.”

“She was wrong,” Royd said. “My ship is not an Artificial Intelligence, not as I understand it. But it is something close. Mother had a capacity for personality impress built in. She filled the central crystal with her own memories, desires, quirks, her loves and her—her hates. That was why she could trust the computer with my education, you see? She knew it would raise me as she herself would, had she the patience. She programmed it in certain other ways as well.”

“And you cannot deprogram, my friend?” Karoly asked. Karoly's voice was despairing.

“I have tried, Karoly. But I am a weak hand at systems work, and the programs are very complicated, the machines very sophisticated. At least three times I have eradicated her, only to only to have her surface once again. She is a phantom program, and I cannot track her. She comes and goes as she will. A ghost, do you see? Her memories and her personality are so intertwined with the programs that run the *Nightflyer* that I cannot get rid of her without destroying the central crystal, wiping the entire system. But that would leave me helpless. I could never reprogram, and with the computers down the entire ship would fail, drivers, life support, everything. I would have to leave the *Nightflyer*, and that would kill me.”

“You should have told us, my friend,” Karoly d'Branin said. “On Avalon, we have many cyberneticists, some very great minds. We might have aided you. We could have provided expert help. Lommie Thorne might have might have helped you.”

“Karoly, I have *had* expert help. Twice I have brought systems specialists on board. The first one told me what I have just told you; that it was impossible without wiping the programs completely. The second had trained on Newholme. She thought she might be able to help me. Mother killed her.”

“You are still holding something back,” Melantha Jhirl said. I understand how your cybernetic ghost can open and close airlocks at will and arrange other accidents of that nature. But how do you explain what she did to Thale Lasamer?”

“Ultimately I must bear the guilt, Royd replied. “My loneliness led me to a grievous error. I thought I could safeguard you, even with a telepath among you. I have carried other riders safely. I watch them constantly, warn them away from dangerous acts. If Mother attempts to interfere, I countermand her directly from the master control console. That usually works. Not always. Usually. Before this trip she had killed only five times, and the first three died when I was quite young. That was how I learned about her, about her presence in my ship. That party included a telepath, too.”

“I should have known better, Karoly. My hunger for life has doomed you all to death. I overestimated my own abilities, and underestimated her fear of exposure. She strikes out when she is threatened, and telepaths are always a threat. They sense her, you see. A malign, looming presence, they tell me, something cool and hostile and inhuman.”

“Yes,” Karoly d'Branin said, “yes, that was what Thale said. An alien, he was certain of it.”

“No doubt she feels alien to a telepath used to the familiar contours of organic minds. Hers is not a human brain, after all. What it is I cannot say - a complex of crystallized memories, a hellish network of interlocking programs, a meld of circuitry and spirit. Yes, I can understand why she might feel alien.”

“You still haven't explain how a computer program could explode a man's skull,” Melantha said.

“You war the answer between your breasts, Melantha.”

“My whisperjewel?” she said, puzzled. She felt it then beneath her vacuum suit and her clothing; a touch of cold, a vague hint of eroticism that made her shiver. It was as if his mention had been enough to make the gem come alive.

“I was not familiar with whisperjewels until you told me of yours.” Royd said, “but the principle is that same. Esper-etched, you said. Then you know that psionic power can be stored. The central core of my computer is resonant crystal, many times larger than your tiny jewel. I think Mother impressed it as she lay dying.”

“Only an esper can etch a whisperjewel,” Melantha said.

“You never asked the *why* of it, either of you,” Royd said. “You never asked why mother hated people so. She was born gifted, you see. On Avalon she might have been a class one, tested and trained and honored, her talent nurtured and rewarded. I think she might have been very famous. She might have been stronger than a class one, but perhaps it is only after death that she acquired such power, linked as she is to the *Nightflyer*.”

“The point is moot. She was not born on Avalon. On Vess, her ability was seen as a curse, something alien and fearful. So they cured her of it. They used drugs and electroshock and hypotraining that made her violently ill whenever she tried to use her talent. They used other, less savory methods as well. She never lost her power, of course, only the ability to use it effectively, to control it with her conscious mind. It remained part of her, suppressed, erratic, a source of shame and pain, surfacing violently in times of great emotional stress. And half a decade of institutional care almost drove her insane. No wonder she hated people.”

“What was her talent? Telepathy?”

“No. Oh, some rudimentary ability perhaps. I have read that all psi talent have several latent abilities in addition to their one developed strength. But mother could not read minds. She had some empathy, although her cure had twisted it curiously, so that the emotions she felt literally sickened her. But her major strength, the talent they took five years to shatter and destroy, was teke.”

Melantha Jhirl swore. “Of *course* she hated gravity! Telekinesis under weightlessness is—“

“Yes,” Royd finished. “Keeping the *Nightflyer* under gravity tortured me, but it limits Mother.”

In the silence that followed that comment, each of them looked down the dark cylinder of the drive room. Karoly d’Branin moved awkwardly on his sled. “Dannel and Lindran have not returned,” he said.

“They are probably dead,” Royd said dispassionately.

“What will we do, then? We must plan. We cannot wait here indefinitely.”

“The first question is what I can do,” Royd Eris replied. “I have talked freely, you’ll not. You deserved to know. We have passed the point where ignorance was a protection. Obviously things have gone too far. There have been too many deaths and you have been witnesses to all of them. Mother cannot allow you to return to Avalon alive.”

“True,” said Melantha. “But what shall she do with you? Is your own status in doubt, captain?”

“The crux of the problem,” Royd admitted. “You are still three moved ahead, Melantha. I wonder if it will suffice. Your opponent is four ahead in this game, and most of your pawns are already captured. I fear checkmate is imminent.”

“Unless I can persuade my opponent’s king to desert, no?”

She could see Royd's wan smile. "She would probably kill me too if I choose to side with you. She does not need me."

Karoly d'Branin was slow to grasp the point. "But - but what else could—"

"My sled has a laser. Yours do not. I could kill you both right now, and thereby earn my way back into the *Nightflyer's* good graces."

Across the three meters that lay between their sleds, Melantha's eyes met Royd's. Her hands rested easily on the thruster controls. "You could try, captain. Remember, the improved model isn't easy to kill."

"I would not kill you, Melantha Jhirl," Royd said seriously. "I have lived sixty-eight standard years and I have never lived at all. I am tired, and you tell grand gorgeous lies. Will you really touch me?"

"Yes."

"I risk a lot for that touch. Yet in a way it is no risk at all. If we lose, we will all die together. If we win, well, I shall die anyway when they destroy the *Nightflyer*, either that or live as a freak in an orbital hospital, and I would prefer death."

"We will build you a new ship, captain," Melantha promised.

"Liar," Royd replied. But his tone was cheerful. "No matter. I have not had much of a life anyway. Death does not frighten me. If we win, you must tell me about your *volcryn* once again, Karoly. And you, Melantha, you must play chess with me, and find a way to touch me, and..."

"And sex with you?" she finished, smiling.

"If you would," she said quietly. He shrugged. "Well, Mother has heard all of this. Doubtless she will listen carefully to any plans we might make, so there is no sense making them. Now there is no chance that the control lock will admit me, since it is keyed directly into the ship's computer. So we must follow the others through the driverroom, and enter through the main lock, and take what small chances we are given. If I can reach my console and restore gravity, perhaps we can win. If not—"

He was interrupted by a low groan.

For an instant Melantha thought the *Nightflyer* was wailing at them again, and she was surprised that it was so stupid as to try the same tactic twice. Then the groan sounded once more, and in the back of Karoly d'Branin's sled, the forgotten fourth member of their company struggled against the bonds that held her down. D'Branin hastened to free her, and Agatha Marij-Black tried to rise to her feet and almost floated off the sled, until he caught her hand and pulled her back. "Are you well?" he asked. "Can you hear me? Have you pain?"

Imprisoned beneath a transparent faceplate, wide frightened eyes flicked rapidly from Karoly to Melantha to Royd, and then to the broken *Nightflyer*. Melantha wondered whether the woman was insane, and started to caution d'Branin, when Marij-Black spoke.

"The *volcryn!*" was all she said. "Oh. The *volcryn!*"

Around the mouth of the driverroom, the ring of nuclear engines took on a faint glow. Melantha Jhirl heard Royd suck in his breath sharply. She gave the thruster controls of her sled a violent twist. "Hurry," she said loudly. "The *Nightflyer* is preparing to move."

A third of the way down the long barrel of the driverroom, Royd pulled abreast of her, stiff and menacing in his black, bulky armor. Side by side they sailed past the cylindrical stardrives and cyberwebs; ahead, dimly lit, was the main airlock and its ghastly sentinel.

“When we reach the lock, jump over to my sled,” Royd said. “I want to stay armed and mounted, and the chamber is not large enough for two sleds.”

Melantha Jhirl risked a quick glance behind her. “Karoly,” she called. “Where are you?”

“Outside my love, my friend,” the answer came. “I cannot come. Forgive me.”

“We have to stay together!”

“No,” d’Branin said, “no, I could not risk it, not when we are so close. It would be so tragic, so futile, Melantha. To come so close and fail. Death I do not mind, but I must see them first, finally, after all these years.”

“My mother is going to move the ship,” Royd cut in. “Karoly, you will be left behind, lost.”

“I will wait,” d’Branin replied. “My *volcryn* come, and I must wait for them.”

Then the time for conversation was gone, for the airlock was almost upon them. Both sleds slowed and stopped, and Royd Erid reached out and began to cycle while Melantha Jhirl moved to the rear of his huge oval worksled. When the outer door moved aside, they glided through into the lock chamber.

“When the inner door opens it will begin,” Royd told her evenly. “The permanent furnishings are either built-in or welded or bolted into place, but the things that your team brought on board are not. Mother will use those things as weapons. And beware of doors, airlocks, any equipment tied into the *Nightflyer*’s computer. Need I warn you not to unseal your suit?”

“Hardly,” she replied.

Royd lowered the sled a little, and its grapplers made a metallic sound as they touched against the floor of the chamber.

The inner door hissed open, and Royd applied his thrusters.

Inside Dannel and Lindran waited, swimming in a haze of blood. Dannel had been slit from crotch to throat and his intestines moved like a nest of pale, angry snakes. Lindran still held the knife. They swam closer, moving with a grace they had never possessed in life.

Royd lifted his foremost grapplers and smashed them to the side as he surged forward. Dannel caromed off a bulkhead, leaving a wide wet mark where he struck, and more of his guts came sliding out. Lindran lost control of the knife. Royd accelerated past them, driving up the corridor through the cloud of blood.

“I’ll watch behind,” Melantha said. She turned and put her back to his. Already the two corpses were safely behind them. The knife was floating uselessly in the air. She started to tell Royd that they were all right when the blade abruptly shifted and came after them, gripped by some invisible force.

“*Swerve!*” she cried.

The sled shot wildly to one side. The knife missed by a full meter, and glanced ringingly off a bulkhead.

But it did not drop. It came at them again.



The lounge loomed ahead. Dark.

“The door is too narrow,” Royd said. “We will have to abandon—“ As he spoke, they hit; he wedged the sled squared into the doorframe, and the sudden impact jarred them loose.

For a moment Melantha floated clumsily in the corridor, her head whirling, trying to sort up from down. The knife slashed at her, opening her suit and her shoulder clear through to the bone. She felt sharp pain and the warm flush of bleeding. “Damn,” she shrieked. The knife came around again, spraying droplets of blood.

Melantha’s hand darted out and caught it.

She muttered something under breath and wrenched the blade free of the hand that had been gripping it.

Royd had regained the controls of his sled and seemed intent on some manipulations. Beyond him, in the dimness of the lounge, Melantha glimpsed a dark semi-human form rise into view.

“*Royd!*” she warned. The thing activated its small laser. The pencil beam caught Royd square in the chest.

He touched his own firing stud. The sled’s heavy-duty laser came alive, a shaft of sudden brilliance. It cindered Christopheris’ weapon and burned off his right arm and part of his chest. The beam hung in the air, throbbing, and smoked against the far bulkhead.

Royd made some adjustments and began cutting a hole. “We’ll be through in five minutes or less,” he said curtly.

“Are you all right?” Melantha asked.

“I’m uninjured,” he replied. “My suit is better armored than yours, and his laser was a low-powered toy.”

Melantha turned her attention to the corridor.

The linguists were pulling themselves towards her, one on each side of the passage, to come at her from two directions at once. She flexed her muscles. Her shoulders stabbed and screamed. Otherwise she felt strong, almost reckless. “The corpses are coming after us again,” she told Royd. “I’m going to take them.”

“Is that wise?” he asked. “There are two of them.”

“I’m an improved model,” Melantha said, “and they’re dead.” She kicked herself free of the sled and sailed towards Dannel in a high, graceful trajectory. He raised his hands to block her. She slapped them aside, bent one arm back and heard it snap, and drove her knife deep into this throat before she realized what a useless gesture that was. Blood oozed from his neck in a spreading cloud, but he continued to flail at her. His teeth snapped grotesquely.

Melantha withdrew her blade, seized him, and with all her considerable strength threw him bodily down corridor. He tumbled, spinning wildly, and vanished into the haze of his own blood.

Melantha flew in the opposite direction, revolving lazily.

Lindran’s hands caught her from behind.

Nails scrabbled against her faceplate until they began to bleed, leaving red streaks on the plastic.

Melantha whirled to face her attacker, grabbed a thrashing arm, and flung the woman down the passageway to crash into her struggling companion. The reaction sent her spinning like a top. She spread her arms and stopped herself, dizzy, gulping.

“I’m through, Royd announced.

Melantha turned to see. A smoking meter-square opening had been cut through one wall of the lounge. Royd killed the laser, gripped both sides of the doorframe, and pushed himself towards it.

A piercing blast of sound drilling through her head. She doubled over in agony. Her tongue flicked out and clicked off the comm; then there was blessed silence.

In the lounge it was raining. Kitchen utensils, glasses and plates, pieces of human bodies all lashed violently across the room, and glanced harmlessly off Royd’s armored form. Melantha—eager to follow—drew back helplessly. That rain of death would cut her to pieces in her lighter, thinner vacuum suit. Royd reached the far wall and vanished into the secret control section of the ship. She was alone.

The *Nightflyer* lurched, and sudden acceleration provided a brief semblance of gravity. Melantha was thrown to one side. Her injured shoulder smashed painfully against the sled.

All up and down the corridor doors were opening.

Dannel and Lindran were moving towards her once again.

The *Nightflyer* was a distant star sparked by its nuclear engines. Blackness and cold enveloped them, and below was the unending emptiness of the Tempter’s Veil, but Karoly d’Branin did not feel afraid. He felt strangely transformed.

The void was alive with promise.

“They are coming,” he whispered. “Even I, who have no psi at all, even I can feel it. The Crey story must be so, even from light years off they can be sensed. Marvelous!”

Agatha Marij-Black seemed small and shrunken. “The *volcryn*,” she muttered. “What good can they do us. I hurt. The ship is gone. D’Branin, my head aches.” She made a small frightened noise. “Thale said that, just after I injected him, before—before—you know. He said that his head hurt. It aches so terribly.”

“Quiet, Agatha. Do not be afraid. I am here with you. Wait. Think only of what we shall witness, think only of that!”

“I can sense them,” the psipsych said.

D’Branin was eager. “Tell me, then. We have our little sled. We shall go to them. Direct me.”

“Yes,” she agreed. “Yes. Oh, yes.”

Gravity returned; in a flicker, the universe became almost normal.

Melantha fell to the deck, landed easily and rolled, and was on her feet cat-quick.

The objects that had been floating ominously through the open doors along the corridor all came clattering down.

The blood was transformed from a fine mist to a slick covering on the corridor floor.

The two corpses dropped heavily from the air, and lay still.

Royd spoke to her from the communicators built into the walls. "I made it," he said.

"I noticed," she replied.

"I'm at the main control console. I have restored the gravity with a manual override, and I'm cutting off as many computer functions as possible. We're still not safe, though. Mother will try to find a way around me. I'm countermanding her by sheer force, as it were. I cannot afford to overlook anything, and if my attention should lapse, even for a moment...Melantha, was your suit breached?"

"Yes, Cut at the shoulder."

"Change into another one. Immediately. I think the counterprogramming I'm doing will keep the locks sealed, but I can't take any chances."

Melantha was already running down the corridor, towards the cargo hold where the suits and equipment were stored.

"When you have changed," Royd continued, "dump the corpses into the mass conversion unit. You'll find the appropriate hatch near the driveroom airlock, just to the left of the lock controls. Convert any other loose objects that are not indispensable as well; scientific instruments, books, tapes, tableware—"

"Knives," suggested Melantha.

"By all means."

"Is teke still a threat, captain?"

"Mother is vastly weaker in a gravity field," Royd said. "She has to fight it. Even boosted by the *Nightflyer's* power, she can only move one object at a time, and she has only a fraction of the lifting force she wields under weightless conditions. But the power is still there, remember. Also it is possible she will find a way to circumvent me and cut out the gravity again. From here I can restore it in an instant, but I don't want any likely weapons lying around even for that brief period of time."

Melantha reached the cargo area. She stripped off her vacuum suit and slipped into another one in record time, wincing at the pain in her shoulder. It was bleeding badly, but she had to ignore it. She gathered up the discarded suit and a double armful of instruments and dumped them into the conversion chamber. Afterwards she turned her attention to the bodies. Dannel was no problem. Lindran crawled down the corridor after her as she pushed him through, and thrashed weakly when it was her own turn, a grim reminder that the *Nightflyer's* powers were not all gone. Melantha easily overcame her feeble struggles and forced her through.

Christopheris' burned, ruined body writhed in her grasp and snapped its teeth at her, but Melantha had no real trouble with it. While she was cleaning out the lounge, a kitchen knife came spinning at her head. It came slowly, though, and Melantha just batted it aside, then picked it up and added it to the pile for conversion. She was working through the cabins, carrying Agatha Marij-Black's abandoned drugs and injection gun under her arm, when she heard Royd cry out.

A moment later a force like a giant invisible hand wrapped itself around her chest and squeezed and pulled her, struggling, to the floor.

Something was moving across the stars.

Dimly and far off, d'Branin could see it, though he could not yet make out details. But it was there, that was unmistakable, some vast shape that blocked off a section of the starscape. It was coming at them dead on.

How he wished he had his team with him now, his computer, his telepath, his experts, his instruments.

He pressed harder on the thrusters, and rushed to meet his *volcryn*.

Pinned to the floor, hurting, Melantha Jhirl risked opening her suit's comm. She had to talk to Royd. "Are you there?" she asked. "What's happen..happening?" The pressure was awful, and it was growing steadily worse. She could barely move.

The answer was pained and slow in coming. "...outwitted...me," Royd's voice managed. "...hurts to...talk."

"Royd—"

"...she teked...the...dial...up...two...gees...three...higher...right...on...the...board...all...I..have to...to do...turn it...back...back...let me."

Silence. Then, finally when Melantha was near despair, Royd's voice again. One word:

"...can't..."

Melantha's chest felt as if it were supporting ten times her own weight. She could imagine the agony Royd must be in; Royd, for whom even one gravity was painful and dangerous. Even if the dial was an arm's length away, she knew his feeble musculature would never let him reach it. "Why," she started. Talking was not as hard for her as it seemed to be for him. "Why would...she turn *up* the...the gravity...it...weakens her, too...yes?"

"...yes...but...in a...a time...hour...minute...my...my heart...will burst...and...and then...you alone...she...will...kill gravity...kill you..."

Painfully Melantha reached out her arm and dragged herself half a length down the corridor. "Royd...hold on...I'm coming..." She dragged herself forward again. Agatha's drug kit was still under her arm, impossibly heavy. She eased it down and started to shove it aside. It felt as if weighed a hundred kilos. She reconsidered. Instead she opened its lid.

The ampules were all neatly labeled. She glanced over them quickly, searching for adrenaline or synthastim, anything that might give her the strength she needed to reach Royd. She found several stimulants, selected the strongest, and was loading it into the injection gun with awkward, agonized slowness when her eyes chanced on the supply of esperon.

Melantha did not know why she hesitated. Esperon was only one of a half-dozen psionic drugs in the kit, none of which could do her any good, but something about seeing it bother her, reminded her of something she could not quite lay her finger on. She was trying to sort it out when she heard the noise.

“Royd,” she said, “you mother...could she move...she couldn’t move anything...teke it...in this high a gravity...could she?”

“Maybe,” he answered, “...if...concentrate...all her...power...hard...maybe...possible...why?”

“Because,” Melantha Jhirl said grimly, “because something...*someone*...is cycling through the airlock.”

“It is not truly a ship, not as I thought it would be,” Karoly d’Branin was saying. His suit, Academy-designed, had a built-in encoding device, and he was recording his comments for posterity, strangely secure in the certainty of his impending death. “The scale of it is difficult to imagine, difficult to estimate. Vast, vast. I have nothing but my wrist computer, no instruments, I cannot make accurate measurements, but I would say, oh, a hundred kilometers, perhaps as much as three hundred, across. Not solid mass, of course, not at all. It is delicate, airy, no ship as we know ships, no city either. It is—oh, beautiful—it is crystal and gossamer, alive with its own dim lights, a vast intricate kind of spiderwebby craft - it reminds me a bit of the old starsail ships they used one, in the days before drive, but the great construct, it is not solid, it cannot be driven by light. It is no ship at all, really. It is all open to vacuum, it has no sealed cabins or life-support spheres, none visible to me, unless blocked from my line of sight in some fashion, and no, I cannot believe that, it is too open, too fragile. It moves quite rapidly. I would wish for the instrumentation to measure its speed, but it is enough to be here. I am taking the sled at right angled to it, to get clear of its path, but I cannot say that I will make it. It moves so much faster than we. Not at light speed, no, far below light speed, but still faster than the *Nightflyer* and its nuclear engines, I would guess...only a guess.

“The *volcryn* craft has no visible means of propulsion. In fact, I wonder how—perhaps it is a light-sail, laser-launched millennia ago, now torn and rotted by some unimaginable catastrophe—but no, it is too symmetrical, too beautiful, the webbings, the great shimmering veils near the nexus, the beauty of it.

“I must describe it, I must be more accurate, I know. It is difficult, I grow excited. It is large, as I have said, kilometers across. Roughly—let me count—yes, roughly octagonal in shape. The nexus, the center is a bright area, a small darkness surrounded by a much greater area of light, but only the dark portion seems entirely solid—the lighted areas are translucent, I can see stars through them, though discolored, shifted towards the purple. Veils, I call those the veils. From the nexus and the veils eight long—oh, vastly long-spurs project, not quite spaced evenly, so it is not a true geometric octagon—ah, I see better now, one of the spurs is shifted, oh, very slowly, the veils are rippling—they are mobile then, those projections, and the webbing runs from one spur to the next, around and around, but there are— patterns, odd patterns, it is not at all the simple webbing of a spider. I cannot quite see order in the patterns, in the trceries of the webs, but I feel sure the order is there, the meaning is waiting to be found.

“There are lights. Have I mentioned the lights? The lights are brightest around the center nexus, but they are nowhere very bright, a dim violet. Some visible radiation, then, but not much. I would like to take an ultraviolet reading of this craft, but I do not have the instrumentation. The lights move. The veils seem to ripple, and lights run constantly up and down the length of the spurs, at differing rates of speed, and sometimes other lights can be seen traversing the webbing, moving across the patterns. I do not know what the lights are. Some form of communication, perhaps. I cannot tell whether they emanate from inside the craft or outside. I—oh! There was another light just then. Between the spurs, a brief flash, a starburst. It is gone now, already. It was more intense than the others, indigo. I feel so helpless, so ignorant. But they are beautiful, my *volcryn*...

“The myths, they—this is really not much like the legends, not truly. The size, the lights. The *volcryn* have often been linked to lights, but those reports were so vague, they might have meant anything, described anything from

a laser propulsion system to simple exterior lighting. I could not know it meant this. Ah, what mystery! The ship is still too far way to see the finer detail. It is so large, I do not think we shall get clear of it. It seems to have turned toward us, I think, yet I may be mistaken, it is only an impression. My instruments, if I only had my instruments. Perhaps the darker area in the center is a craft, a life capsule. The *volcryn* must be inside it. I wish my team were with me, and Thale, poor Thale. He was a class one we might have made contact, might have communicated with them. The things we would learn! The thing they have seen! To think how old this craft is, how ancient the race, how long they have been outbound...it fills me with awe. Communication would be such a gift, such an impossible gift, but they are so alien.

"D'Branin," Agatha Marij-Black said in a low, urgent voice. "Can't you feel?"

Karoly d'Branin looked at his companion as if seeing her for the first time. "Can you feel them? You are a three, can you sense them now, strongly?"

"Long ago," the psipsych said. "Long ago."

"Can you project? Talk to them. Where are they? In the center area? The dark?"

"Yes," she replied, and she laughed. Her laugh was shrill and hysterical, and d'Branin had to recall that she was a very sick woman. "Yes, in the center, d'Branin, that's where the pulses come from. Only you're wrong about them. It's not a them at all, your legends are all lies, lies, I wouldn't be surprised if we were the first to ever see your *volcryn*, to ever come this close. The others, those aliens of yours, they merely felt, deep and distantly, sensed a bit of the nature of the *volcryn* in their dreams and visions, and fashioned the rest to suit themselves. Ships, and wars, and a race of eternal travellers, it is all—all—"

"Yes. What do you mean, Agatha, my friend? You do not make sense. I do not understand."

"No, Marij-Black said, "you do not, do you?" Her voice as suddenly gentle. "You cannot feel it, as I can. So clear now. This must be how a one feels, all the time. A one full of esperon."

"What do you feel? *What?*"

"It's not a *them*, Karoly. It's an *it*. Alive, Karoly, and quite mindless, I assure you."

"Mindless?" d'Branin said. "No, you must be wrong, you are not reading correctly. I will accept that it is a single creature if you say so, a single great marvelous star-traveler, but how can it be mindless? You sense it, its mind, its telepathic emanations. You and the whole of the Crey sensitives and all the others. Perhaps its thoughts are too alien for you to read."

"Perhaps. But what I do read is not so terribly alien at all. Only animal. Its thoughts are slow and dark and strange, hardly thoughts at all, faint. Stirrings cold and distant. The brain must be huge all right, I grant you that, but it can't be devoted to conscious thought."

"What do you mean?"

"The propulsion system, d'Branin. Don't you *feel*? The pulses. They are threatening to rip off the top of my skull. Can't you guess what is driving your damned *volcryn* across the galaxy? And why they avoid gravity wells? Can't you guess how it is moving?"

"No," d'Branin said, but even as he denied it a dawn of comprehension broke across his face, and he looked away from his companion, back at the swelling immensity of the *volcryn*, its lights moving, its veils a-ripple as it came on and on, across light years, light centuries, across eons.

When he looked back at her, he mouthed only a single word: “Teke,” he said.

She nodded.

Melantha Jhirl struggled to lift the injection gun and press it against an artery. It gave a single loud hiss, and the drug flooded her system. She lay back and gathered her strength and tried to think. Esperon, esperon, why was that important? It had killed Lasamer, made him a victim of his own latent abilities, multiplied his power and his vulnerability. Psi. It all came back to psi.

The inner door of the airlock opened. The headless corpse came through.

It moved with jerks, unnatural shufflings, never lifting its lefts from the floor. It sagged as it moved, half-crushed by the weight upon it. Each shuffle was crude and sudden; some grim force was literally yanking one leg forward, then the next. It moved in slow motion, arms stiff by its sides.

But it moved.

Melantha summoned her own reserves and began to squirm away from it, never taking her eyes off its advance.

Her thoughts went round and round, searching for the piece out of place, the solution to the chess problem, finding nothing.

The corpse was moving faster than she was. Clearly, visibly, it was gaining.

Melantha tried to stand. She got to her knees with a grunt, her heart pounding. Then one knee. She tried to force herself up, to list the impossible burden on her shoulders as if she were lifting weights. She was strong, she told herself. She was the improved model.

But when she put all her weight on one leg, her muscles would not hold her. She collapsed, awkwardly, and when she smashed against the floor it was as if she had fallen from a building. She heard a sharp *snap*, and a stab of agony flashed up her arm, her good arm, the arm she had tried to use to break her fall. The pain in her shoulder was terrible and intense. She blinked back tears and choked on her own scream.

The corpse was halfway up the corridor. It must be walking on two broken legs, she realized. It didn't care. A force greater than tendons and bone and muscle was holding it up.

“Melantha...heard you...are...you...Melantha?”

“*Quiet*,” she snarled at Royd. She had no breath to waste on talk.

Now she used all the disciplined she had ever learned, willed away the pain. She kicked feebly, her boots scraping for purchase, and she pulled herself forward with her unbroken arm, ignoring the fire in her shoulder.

The corpse came on and on.

She dragged herself across the threshold of the lounge, worming her way under the crashed sled, hoping it would delay the cadaver.

The thing that had been Thale Lasamer was a meter behind her.

In the darkness, in the lounge, there where it had all begun, Melantha Jhirl ran out of strength. Her body shuddered, and she collapsed on the damp carpet, and she knew that she could go no further. On the far side of the door, the corpse stood stiffly. The sled began to shake. Then, with the scrape of metal against metal, it slid backwards, moving in tiny sudden increments, jerking itself free and out of the way.

Psi. Melantha wanted to curse it, and cry. Vainly she wished for a psi power of her own, a weapon to blast apart the teke-driven corpse that stalked her. She was improved, she thought despairingly, but not improved enough. Her parents had given her all the genetic gifts they could arrange, but psi was beyond them. The gene was astronomically rare, recessive, and—

—and suddenly it came to her.

"Royd!" she said putting all of her remaining will into her words. She was weeping, wet, frightened. "The dial...teke it. Royd, teke it!"

His reply was faint, troubled. "...can't...I don't...Mother...only...her...not me...no...Mother..."

"Not Mother," she said, desperate. "You always...say...*Mother*. I forgot...forgot. Not your mother...listen...you're a *clone*...same genes...you have it too...power."

"Don't," he said. "Never...must be...sex-linked."

"No! It *isn't*. I know...Promethean, Royd...don't tell a Promethean...about genes...turn it!"

The sled jumped a third of a meter, and listened to the side. A path was clear.

The corpse came forward.

"...trying," Royd said. "Nothing...I *can't*!"

"She *cured* you," Melantha said bitterly. "Better than...she...was cured...prenatal...but it's only...suppressed...you *can*!"

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

The corpse stood above her. Stopped. Its pale-fleshed hands trembled, spasmed, jerked upward. Long painted fingernails. Made claws. Began to rise.

Melantha swore. "Royd!"



“...sorry...”

She wept and shook and made a futile fist.

And all at once the gravity was gone. Far, far away, she heard Royd cry out and then fall silent.

“The flashes come more frequently now,” Karoly d'Branin dictated, “or perhaps it is simply that I am closer, that I can see them better. Bursts of indigo and deep violet, short and fast-fading. Between the webbing. A field, I think. The flashes are particles of hydrogen, the thin ethereal stuff of the reaches between the stars. They touch the field, between the webbing, the spurs, and shortly flare into the range of visible light. Matter to energy, yes, that is what I guess. My *volcryn* feeds.

“It fills half the universe, comes on and on. We shall not escape it, oh, so sad. Agatha is gone, silent, blood on her faceplate. I can almost see the dark area, almost, almost. I have a strange vision, in the center is a face, small, ratlike, without mouth or nose or eyes, yet still a face somehow, and it stares at me. The veils move so sensuously. The webbing looms around us.

“Ah, the light, the light!”

The corpse bobbed awkwardly into the air, its hands hanging limply before it. Melantha reeling in the weightlessness, was suddenly violently sick. She ripped off the helmet, collapsed it, and pushed away from her own nausea, trying to ready herself for the *Nightflyer's* furious assault.

But the body of Thale Lasamer floated dead and still, and nothing else moved in the darkened lounge. Finally Melantha recovered, and she moved to the corpse, weakly, and pushed it, a small and tentative shove. It sailed across the room.

“Royd?” she said uncertainly.

There was no answer. She pulled herself through the hole into the control chamber. And found Royd Eris suspended in his armored suit.

She shook him, but he did not stir. Trembling. Melantha Jhirl studied his suit, and then began to dismantle it. She touched him. “Royd,” she said, “here. Feel, Royd, here, I’m here, feel it.” His suit came apart easily, and she flung the pieces of it away. “Royd, *Royd*.”

Dead. Dead. His heart had given out. She punched it, pummeled it, tried to pound it into new life. It did not beat. Dead. Dead.

Melantha Jhirl moved back from him, blinded by her own tears, edged into the console, glanced down.

Dead. Dead.

But the dial on the gravity grid was set on zero.

“Melantha,” said a mellow voice from the walls.

I have held the *Nightflyer*'s crystalline soul within my hands.

It is deep red and multi-faceted, large as my head, and ice to the touch. In its scarlet depths, two small sparks of smoky light burn fiercely, and sometimes seem to whirl.

I have crawled through the consoles, wound my way carefully past safeguards and cybernets, taking care to damage nothing, and I have laid rough hands on that great crystal, knowing it is where *she* lives.

And I cannot bring myself to wipe it.

Royd's ghost has asked me not to.

Last night we talked about it once again, over brandy and chess in the lounge. Royd cannot drink, of course, but he sends his spectre to smile at me, and he tells me where he wants his pieces moved.

For the thousandth time he offered to take me back to Avalon, or any world of my choice, if only I would go outside and complete the repairs we abandoned so many years ago, so that the *Nightflyer* might safely slip into stardrive.

For the thousandth time I refused.

He is stronger now, no doubt. Their genes are the same, after all. Their power is the same. Dying, he too found the strength to impress himself upon the great crystal. The ship is alive with both of them, and frequently they fight. Sometimes she outwits him for a moment, and the *Nightflyer* does odd, erratic things. The gravity goes up or down or off completely. Blankets wrap themselves around my throat when I sleep. Objects come hurtling out of dark corners.

Those times have come less frequently of late, though. When they do come, Royd stops her, or I do. Together, the *Nightflyer* is ours.

Royd claims he is strong enough alone, that he does not really need me, that he can keep her under check. I wonder. Over the chessboard, I still beat him nine games out of ten.

And there are other considerations. Our work, for one. Karoly would be proud of us.

The *volcryn* will soon enter the mists of the Tempter's Veil, and we follow close behind. Studying, recording, doing all that old d'Branin would have wanted us to do. It is all in the computer, and on tape and paper as well, should the system ever be wiped. It will be interesting to see how the *volcryn* thrives in the Veil. Matter is so thick there, compared to the thin diet of interstellar hydrogen on which the creature has fed for so many endless eons.

We have tried to communicate with it, with no success. I do not believe it is sentient at all.

And lately Royd has tried to imitate its ways, gathering all his energies in an attempt to move the *Nightflyer* by teke. Sometimes, oddly, his mother even joins him in those efforts. So far they have always failed, but we will keep trying.

So goes our work goes on. We know our results will reach humanity. Royd and I have discussed it, and we have a plan. Before I die, when my time is near, I will destroy the central crystal and clear the computers, and afterwards I will set course manually for the close vicinity of an inhabited world. The *Nightflyer* will become a true ghost ship then. It will work. I have all the time I need, and I am an improved model.

I will not consider the other option, although it means much to me that Royd suggests it again and again. No doubt I could finish the repairs, and perhaps Royd could control the ship without me, and go on with the work. But that is not important.

I was wrong so many times. The esperon, the monitors, my control of the others; all of them my failures, payment for my hubris. Failure hurts. When I finally touched him, for the first and last and only time, his body was still warm. But he was gone already. He never felt my touch. I could not keep that promise.

But I can keep my other.

I will not leave him alone with her.

Ever.

# This Tower of Ashes

My tower is built of bricks, small soot-gray bricks mortared together with a shiny black substance that looks strangely like obsidian to my untrained eye, though it clearly cannot be obsidian. It sits by an arm of the Skinny Sea, twenty feet tall and sagging, the edge of the forest only a few feet away.

I found the tower nearly four years ago, when Squirrel and I left Port Jamison in the silver aircar that now lies gutted and overgrown in the weeds outside my doorstep. To this day I know almost nothing about the structure, but I have my theories.

I do not think it was built by men, for one. It clearly predates Port Jamison, and I often suspect it predates human spaceflight. The bricks (which are curiously small, less than a quarter the size of normal bricks) are tired and weathered and old, and they crumble visibly beneath my feet. Dust is everywhere and I know its source, for more than once I have pried loose a brick from the parapet on the roof and crushed it idly to fine dark powder in my naked fist. When the salt wind blows from the east, the tower flies a plume of ashes.

Inside, the bricks are in better condition, since the wind and the rain have not touched them quite so much, but the tower is still far from pleasant. The interior is a single room full of dust and echoes, without windows; the only light comes from the circular opening in the center of the roof. A spiral stair, built of the same ancient brick as the rest, is part of the wall; around and around it circles, like the threading on a screw, before it reaches roof level. Squirrel, who is quite small as cats go, finds the stairs easy climbing, but for human feet they are narrow and awkward.

But I still climb them. Each night I return from the cool forests, my arrows black with the caked blood of the dream-spiders and my bag heavy with their poison sacs, and I set aside my bow and wash my hands and then climb up to the roof to spend the last few hours before dawn. Across the narrow salt channel, the lights of Port Jamison burn on the island, and from up there it is not the city I remember. The square black buildings wear a bright romantic glow at night; the lights, all smoky orange and muted blue, speak of mystery and silent song and more than a little loneliness, while the starships rise and fall against the stars like the tireless wandering fireflies of my boyhood on Old Earth.

“There are stories over there,” I told Korbec once, before I had learned better. “There are people behind every light, and each person has a life, a story. Only they lead those lives without ever touching us, so we’ll never know the stories.” I think I gestured then; I was, of course, quite drunk.

Korbec answered with a toothy smile and a shake of his head. He was a great dark fleshy man, with a beard like knotted wire. Each month he came out from the city in his pitted black aircar to drop off my supplies and take the venom I had collected, and each month we went up to the roof and got drunk together. A track driver, that was all Korbec was, a seller of cut-rate dreams and secondhand rainbows. But he fancied himself a philosopher and a student of man.

“Don’t fool yourself,” he said to me then, his face flush with wine and darkness, “you’re not missing nothin’. Lives are rotten stories, y’know. Real stories, now, they usually got a plot to ‘em. They start and they go on a bit and when they end they’re over, unless the guy’s got a series goin’. People’s lives don’t do that nohow, they just kinda wander around and ramble and go on and on. Nothin’ ever finishes.”

“People die,” I said. “That’s enough of a finish, I’d think.”

Korbec made a loud noise. "Sure, but have you ever known anybody to die at the right time? No, don't happen that way. Some guys fall over before their lives have properly gotten started, some right in the middle of the best part. Others kinda linger on after everything is really over."

Often when I sit up there alone, with Squirrel warm in my lap and a glass of wine by my side, I remember Korbec's words and the heavy way he said them, his coarse voice oddly gentle. He is not a smart man, Korbec, but that night I think he spoke the truth, maybe never realizing it himself. But the weary realism that he offered me then is the only antidote there is for the dreams that spiders weave.

But I am not Korbec, nor can I be, and while I recognize his truth, I cannot live it.

I was outside taking target practice in the late afternoon, wearing nothing but my quiver and a pair of cutoffs, when they came. It was closing on dusk and I was loosening up for my nightly foray into the forest - even in those early days I lived from twilight to dawn, as the dream-spiders do. The grass felt good under my bare feet, the double-curved silverwood bow felt even better in my hand, and I was shooting well.

Then I heard them coming. I glanced over my shoulder toward the beach, and saw the dark blue aircar swelling rapidly against the eastern sky. Gerry, of course, I knew that from the sound; his aircar had been making noises as long as I had known him.

I turned my back on them, drew another arrow - quite steady - and notched my first bull's-eye of the day.

Gerry set his aircar down in the weeds near the base of the tower, just a few feet from my own. Crystal was with him, slim and grave, her long gold hair full of red glints from the afternoon sun. They climbed out and started toward me.

"Don't stand near the target," I told them, as I slipped another arrow into place and bent the bow. "How did you find me?" The twang of the arrow vibrating in the target punctuated my question.

They circled well around my line of fire. "You'd mentioned spotting this place from the air once," Gerry said, "and we knew you weren't anywhere in Port Jamison. Figured it was worth a chance." He stopped a few feet from me, with his hands on his hips, looking just as I remembered him: big, darkhaired and very fit. Crystal came up beside him and put one hand lightly on his arm.

I lowered my bow and turned to face them. "So. Well, you found me. Why?"

"I was worried about you, Johnny," Crystal said softly. But she avoided my eyes when I looked at her.

Gerry put a hand around her waist, very possessively, and something flared within me. "Running away never solves anything," he told me, his voice full of the strange mixture of friendly concern and patronizing arrogance he had been using on me for months.

"I did *not* run away," I said, my voice strained. "Damn it. You should never have come."

Crystal glanced at Gerry, looking very sad, and it was clear that suddenly she was thinking the same thing. Gerry just frowned. I don't think he ever once understood why I said the things I said, or did the things I did; whenever we discussed the subject, which was infrequently, he would only tell me with vague puzzlement what he would have done if our roles had been reversed. It seemed infinitely strange to him that anyone could possibly do anything differently in the same position.

His frown did not touch me, but he'd already done his damage. For the month I'd been in my self-imposed exile at the tower, I had been trying to come to terms with my actions and my moods, and it had been far from easy. Crystal and I had been together for a long time - nearly four years - when we came to Jamison's World, trying to track down some unique silver and obsidian artifacts that we'd picked up on Baldur. I had loved her all that time, and I still loved her, even now, after she had left me for Gerry. When I was feeling good about myself, it seemed to me that the impulse that had driven me out of Port Jamison was a noble and unselfish one. I wanted Crys to be happy, simply, and she could not be happy with me there.

My wounds were too deep, and I wasn't good at hiding them; my presence put the damper of guilt on the newborn joy she'd found with Gerry. And since she could not bear to cut me off completely, I felt compelled to cut myself off. For them. For her.

Or so I liked to tell myself. But there were hours when that bright rationalization broke down, dark hours of self-loathing. Were those the real reasons? Or was I simply out to hurt myself in a fit of angry immaturity, and by doing so, punish them - like a willful child who plays with thoughts of suicide as a form of revenge?

I honestly didn't know. For a month I'd fluctuated from one belief to the other while I tried to understand myself and decide what I'd do next. I wanted to think myself a hero, willing to make a sacrifice for the happiness of the woman I loved. But Gerry's words made it clear that he didn't see it that way at all.

"Why do you have to be so damned dramatic about everything?" he said, looking stubborn. He had been determined all along to be very civilized, and seemed perpetually annoyed at me because I wouldn't shape up and heal my wounds so that everybody could be friends. Nothing annoyed me quite so much as his annoyance; I thought I was handling the situation pretty well, all things considered, and I resented the inference that I wasn't.

But Gerry was determined to convert me, and my best withering look was wasted on him. "We're going to stay here and talk things out until you agree to fly back to Port Jamison with us," he told me, in his most forceful now-I'm-getting-tough tone.

"Like shit," I said, turning sharply away from them and yanking an arrow from my quiver. I slid it into place, pulled, and released, all too quickly. The arrow missed the target by a good foot and buried itself in the soft dark brick of my crumbling tower.

"What *is* this place, anyway?" Crys asked, looking at the tower as if she'd just seen it for the first time. It's possible that she had - that it took the incongruous sight of my arrow lodging in stone to make her notice the ancient structure. More likely, though, it was a premeditated change of subject, designed to cool the argument that was building between Gerry and me.

I lowered my bow again and walked up to the target to recover the arrows I'd expended. "I'm really not sure," I said, somewhat mollified and anxious to pick up the cue she'd thrown me. "A watchtower, I think, of nonhuman origin. Jamison's World has never been thoroughly explored. It may have had a sentient race once." I walked around the target to the tower, and yanked loose the final arrow from the crumbling brick. "It still may, actually. We know very little of what goes on on the mainland."

"A damn gloomy place to live, if you ask me," Gerry put in, looking over the tower. "Could fall in any moment, from the way it looks."

I gave him a bemused smile. "The thought had occurred to me. But when I first came out here, I was past caring." As soon as the words were out, I regretted saying them; Crys winced visibly. That had been the whole story of my final weeks in Port Jamison. Try as I might, it had seemed that I had only two choices; I could lie, or I could hurt her. Neither appealed to me, so here I was. But here they were too, so the whole impossible situation was back.

Gerry had another comment ready, but he never got to say it. Just then Squirrel came bounding out from between the weeds, straight at Crystal.

She smiled at him and knelt, and an instant later he was at her feet, licking her hand and chewing on her fingers. Squirrel was in a good mood, clearly. He liked life near the tower. Back in Port Jamison, his life had been constrained by Crystal's fears that he'd be eaten by alleysnarls or chased by dogs or strung up by local children. Out here I let him run free, which was much more to his liking. The brush around the tower was overrun by whipping-mice, a native rodent with a hairless tail three times its own body length. The tail packed a mild sting, but Squirrel didn't care, even though he swelled up and got grouchy every time a tail connected. He liked stalking whipping-mice all day. Squirrel always fancied himself a great hunter, and there's no skill involved in chasing down a bowl of catfood.

He'd been with me even longer than Crys had, but she'd become suitably fond of him during our time together. I often suspected that Crystal would have gone with Gerry even sooner than she did, except that she was upset at the idea of leaving Squirrel. Not that he was any great beauty. He was a small, thin, scuffy-looking cat, with ears like a fox and fur a scroungy gray-brown color, and a big bushy tail two sizes too big for him. The friend who gave him to me back on Avalon informed me gravely that Squirrel was the illegitimate offspring of a genetically-engineered psicat and a mangy alley torn. But if Squirrel could read his owner's mind, he didn't pay much attention. When he wanted affection, he'd do things like climb right up on the book I was reading and knock it away and begin biting my chin: when he wanted to be let alone, it was dangerous folly to try to pet him.

As Crystal knelt by him and stroked him and Squirrel nuzzled up to her hand, she seemed very much the woman I'd traveled with and loved and talked to at endless length and slept with every night, and I suddenly realized how I'd missed her. I think I smiled; the sight of her, even under these conditions, still gave me a cloud-shadowed joy. Maybe I was being silly and stupid and vindictive to send them away, I thought, after they had come so far to see me. Crys was still Crys, and Gerry could hardly be so bad, since she loved him.

Watching her, wordless, I made a sudden decision; I would let them stay. And we could see what happened. "It's close to dusk," I heard myself saying. "Are you folks hungry?"

Crys looked up, still petting Squirrel, and smiled. Gerry nodded. "Sure."

"All right," I said. I walked past them, turned and paused in the doorway, and gestured them inside. "Welcome to my ruin."

I turned on the electric torches and set about making dinner. My lockers were well stocked back in those days; I had not yet started living off the forests. I thawed three big sandragons, the silver-shelled crustacean that Jamie fishermen dragged for relentlessly, and served them up with bread and cheese and white wine.

Mealtime conversation was polite and guarded. We talked of mutual friends in Port Jamison, Crystal told me about a letter she'd received from a couple we had known on Baldur, Gerry held forth on politics and the efforts of the Port police to crack down on the traffic in dreaming venom. The Council is sponsoring research on some sort of super-pesticide that would wipe out the dream-spiders, he told me. "A saturation spraying of the near coast would cut off most of the supply, I'd think"

"Certainly," I said, a bit high on the wine and a bit piqued at Gerry's stupidity. Once again, listening to him, I had found myself questioning Crystal's taste. "Never mind what other effects it might have on the ecology, right?"

Gerry shrugged, "Mainland," he said simply. He was Jamie through-and-through, and the comment translated to, 'Who cares?' The accidents of history had given the residents of Jamison's World a singularly cavalier attitude toward their planet's one large continent. Most of the original settlers had come from Old Poseidon, where the sea had been a way of life for generations. The rich, teeming oceans and peaceful archipelagoes of their new

world had attracted them far more than the dark forests of the mainland. Their children grew up to the same attitudes, except for a handful who found an illegal profit selling dreams.

“Don’t shrug it all off so easy,” I said.

“Be realistic,” he replied. “The mainland’s no use to anyone, except the spider-men. Who would it hurt?”

“Damn it, Gerry, look at this tower! Where did it come from, tell me that! I tell you, there might be intelligence out there, in those forests. The Jamies have never even been bothered to look.”

Crystal was nodding over her wine. “Johnny could be right,” she said, glancing at Gerry. That was why I came here, remember. The artifacts. The shop on Baldur said they were shipped out of Port Jamison. He couldn’t trace them back any farther than that. And the workmanship - I’ve handled alien art for years, Gerry. I know Fyndii work, and Damoosh, and I’ve seen all the others. This was different!

Gerry only smiled. “Proves nothing. There are other races, millions of them, further in toward the core. The distances are too great, so we don’t hear of them very often, except maybe third-hand, but it isn’t impossible that every so often a piece of their art would trickle through.” He shook his head. “No, I’d bet this tower was put up by some early settler. Who knows? Could be there was another discoverer, before Jamison, who never reported his find. Maybe he built the place. But I’m not going to buy mainland sentiments.”

“At least not until you fumigate the damned forests and they all come out waving their spears,” I said sourly. Gerry laughed and Crystal smiled at me. And suddenly, suddenly, I had an overpowering desire to win this argument. My thoughts had the hazy clarity that only wine can give, and it seemed so logical. I was so clearly right, and here was my chance to show up Gerry like the provincial he was and make points with Crys.

I leaned forward. “If you Jamies would ever look, you might find sentiments,” I said. “I’ve only been on the mainland a month, and already I’ve found a great deal. You’ve no damned concept of the kind of beauty you talk so blithely of wiping out. A whole ecology is out there, different from the islands, species upon species, a lot probably not even discovered yet. But what do you know about it? Any of you?”

Gerry nodded. “So, show me.” He stood up suddenly. “I’m always willing to learn, Bowen. Why don’t you take us out and show us all the wonders of the mainland?”

I think Gerry was trying to make points, too. He probably never thought I’d take up his offer, but it was exactly what I’d wanted. It was dark outside now, and we had been talking by the light of my torches. Above, stars shone through the hole in my roof. The forest would be alive now, eerie and beautiful, and I was suddenly eager to be out there, bow in hand, in a world where I was a force and a friend, Gerry a bumbling tourist.

“Crystal?” I said.

She looked interested. “Sounds like fun. If it’s safe.”

“It will be,” I said. “I’ll take my bow.”

We both rose, and Crys looked happy. I remembered the times we tackled Baldurian wilderness together, and suddenly I felt very happy, certain that everything would work out well. Gerry was just part of a bad dream. She couldn’t possibly be in love with him. First I found the sober-ups; I was feeling good, but not good enough to head out into the forest when I was still dizzy from wine. Crystal and I flipped ours down immediately, and seconds after my alcoholic glow began to fade. Gerry, however, waved away the pill I offered him.

“I haven’t had that much,” he insisted. “Don’t need it.”



I shrugged, thinking that things were getting better and better. If Gerry went crashing drunkenly through the woods, it couldn't help but turn Crys away from him. "Suit yourself," I said.

Neither of them was really dressed for wilderness, but I hoped that wouldn't be a problem, since I didn't really plan on taking them very deep in the forest. It would be a quick trip, I thought; wander down my trail a bit, show them the dust pile and the spider-chasm, maybe nail a dream-spider for them. Nothing to it, out and back again.

I put on a dark coverall, heavy trail boots, and my quiver, handed Crystal a flash in case we wandered away from the bluemoos regions, and picked up my bow.

"You really need that?" Gerry asked, with sarcasm.

"Protection," I said.

"Can't be that dangerous."

It isn't, if you know what you're doing, but I didn't tell him that. "Then why do you Jamies stay on your islands?"

He smiled. "I'd rather trust a laser."

"I'm cultivating a deathwish. A bow gives the prey a chance, of sorts."

Crys gave me a smile of shared memories. "He only hunts predators," she told Gerry. I bowed. Squirrel agreed to guard my castle. Steady and very sure of myself, I belted on a knife and led my exwife and her lover out into the forests of Jamison's World.

We walked in single file, close together, me up front with the bow, Crys following, Gerry behind her. Crys used the flashlight when we first set out, playing it over the trail as we wound our way through the thick grove of spikearrows that stood like a wall against the sea. Tall and very straight, crusty gray of bark and some as big around as my tower, they climbed to a ridiculous height before sprouting their meager load of branches. Here and there they crowded together and squeezed the path between them, and more than one seemingly impassable fence of wood confronted us suddenly in the dark. But Crys could always pick out the way, with me a foot ahead of her to point her flash when it paused.

Ten minutes out from the tower, the character of the forest began to change. The ground and the very air were drier here, the wind cool but without the snap of salt; the water-hungry spikearrows had drained most of the moisture from the air. They began to grow smaller and less frequent, the spaces between them larger and easier to find. Other species of plant began to appear: stunted little goblin trees, sprawling mockoaks, graceful ebonfires whose red veins pulsed brilliandy in the dark wood when caught by Crystal's wandering flash.

And bluemoos.

Just a little at first; here a ropy web dangling from a goblin's arm, there a small patch on the ground, frequently chewing its way up the back of an ebonfire or a withering solitary spikearrow. Then more and more; thick carpets underfoot, mossy blankets on the leaves above, heavy trailers that dangled from the branches and danced around in the wind. Crystal sent the flash darting about, finding bigger and better bunches of the soft blue fungus, and peripherally I began to see the glow.

"Enough," I said, and Crys turned off the light.

Darkness lasted only for a moment, till our eyes adjusted to a dimmer light. Around us, the forest was suffused by a gentle radiance, as the bluemoos drenched us in its ghostly phosphorescence. We were standing near one

side of a small clearing, below a shiny black ebonfire, but even the flames of its red-veined wood seemed cool in the faint blue light. The moss had taken over the undergrowth, supplanting all the local grasses and making nearby shrubs into fuzzy blue beachballs. It climbed the sides of most of the trees, and when we looked up through the branches at the stars, we saw that other colonies had set upon the woods a glowing crown.

I laid my bow carefully against the dark flank of the ebonfire, bent, and offered a handful of light to Crystal. When I held it under her chin, she smiled at me again, her features softened by the cool magic in my hand. I remember feeling very good, to have led them to this beauty.

But Gerry only grinned at me. "Is this what we're going to endanger, Bowen?" he asked. "A forest full of bluemoos?"

I dropped the moss. "You don't think it's pretty?"

Gerry shrugged. "Sure, it's pretty. It is also a fungus, a parasite with a dangerous tendency to overrun and crowd out all other forms of plantlife. Bluemoos was very thick on Jolostar and the Barbis Archipelago once, you know. We rooted it all out; it can eat its way through a good corn crop in a month." He shook his head.

And Crystal nodded. "He's right, you know," she said.

I looked at her for a long time, suddenly feeling very sober indeed, the last memory of the wine long gone. Abruptly it dawned on me that I had, all unthinking, built myself another fantasy. Out here, in a world I had started to make my own, a world of dream-spiders and magic moss, somehow I had thought that I could recapture my own dream long fled, my smiling crystalline soulmate. In the timeless wilderness of the mainland, she would see us both in fresh light and would realize once again that it was me she loved.

So I'd spun a pretty web, bright and alluring as the trap of any dream-spider, and Crys had shattered the flimsy filaments with a word. She was his; mine no longer, not now, not ever. And if Gerry seemed to me stupid or insensitive or overpractical, well, perhaps it was those very qualities that made Crys choose him. And perhaps not - I had no right to second-guess her love, and possibly I would never understand it.

I brushed the last flakes of glowing moss from my hands while Gerry took the heavy flash from Crystal and flicked it on again. My blue fairyland dissolved, burned away by the bright white reality of his flashlight beam. "What now?" he asked, smiling. He was not so very drunk after all.

I lifted my bow from where I'd set it down. "Follow me," I said, quickly, curtly. Both of them looked eager and interested, but my own mood had shifted dramatically. Suddenly the whole trip seemed pointless. I wished that they were gone, that I was back at my tower with Squirrel.

I was down ...

... and sinking. Deeper in the moss-heavy woods, we came upon a dark swift stream, and the brilliance of the flashlight speared a solitary ironhorn that had come to drink. It looked up quickly, pale and startled, then bounded away through the trees, for a fleeting instant looking a bit like the unicorn of Old Earth legend. Long habit made me glance at Crystal, but her eyes sought Gerry's when she laughed.

Later, as we climbed a rocky incline, a cave loomed near at hand; from the smell, a woodsnarl lair.

I turned to warn them around it, only to discover that I'd lost my audience. They were ten steps behind me, at the bottom of the rocks, walking very slowly and talking quietly, holding hands.

Dark and angry, wordless, I turned away again and continued on over the hill. We did not speak again until I'd found the dust pile.

I paused on its edge, my boots an inch deep in the fine gray powder, and they came straggling up behind me.

“Go ahead, Gerry,” I said. “Use your flash here.”

The light roamed. The hill was at our back, rocky and lit here and there with the blurred cold fire of bluemoos-choked vegetation. But in front of us was only desolation; a wide vacant plain, black and blasted and lifeless, open to the stars. Back and forth Gerry moved the flashlight, pushing at the borders of the dust nearby, fading as he shone it straight out into the gray distance. The only sound was the wind.

“So?” he said at last.

“Feel the dust,” I told him. I was not going to stoop this time. “And when you’re back at the tower, crush one of my bricks and feel that. It’s the same thing, a sort of powdery ash.” I made an expansive gesture. “I’d guess there was a city here once, but now it’s all crumbled into dust. Maybe my tower was an outpost of the people who built it, you see?”

“The vanished sentients of the forests,” Gerry said, still smiling. “Well, I’ll admit there’s nothing like this on the islands. For a good reason. We don’t let forest fires rage unchecked.”

“Forest fire! Don’t give me that. Forest fires don’t reduce everything to a fine powder, you always get a few blackened stumps or something.”

“Oh? You’re probably right. But all the ruined cities I know have at least a few bricks still piled on top of each other for the tourists to take pictures of,” Gerry said. The flash beam flicked to and fro over the dust pile, dismissing it. “All you have is a mound of rubbish.”

Crystal said nothing.

I began walking back, while they followed in silence. I was losing points every minute; it had been idiocy to bring them out here. At that moment nothing more was on my mind than getting back to my tower as quickly as possible, packing them off to Port Jamison together, and resuming my exile. Crystal stopped me, after we’d come back over the hill into the bluemoos forest.

“Johnny,” she said. I stopped, they caught up, Crys pointed.

“Turn off the light,” I told Gerry. In the fainter illumination of the moss, it was easier to spot: the intricate iridescent web of a dream-spider, slanting groundward from the low branches of a mockoak. The patches of moss that shone softly all around us were nothing to this; each web strand was as thick as my little finger, oily and brilliant, running with the colors of the rainbow.

Crys took a step toward it, but I took her by the arm and stopped her. “The spiders are around someplace,” I said. “Don’t go too close. Papa spider never leaves the web, and Mama ranges around in the trees at night.”

Gerry glanced upward a little apprehensively. His flash was dark, and suddenly he didn’t seem to have all the answers. The dream-spiders are dangerous predators, and I suppose he’d never seen one outside of a display case. They weren’t native to the islands.

“Pretty big web,” he said. “Spiders must be a fair size.”

“Fair,” I said, and at once I was inspired. I could discomfort him a lot more if an ordinary web like this got to him. And he had been discomforting me all night. “Follow me. I’ll show you a real dreamspider.”

We circled around the web carefully, never seeing either of its guardians. I led them to the spider-chasm.

It was a great V in the sandy earth, once a creekbed perhaps, but dry and overgrown now. The chasm is hardly very deep by daylight, but at night it looks formidable enough, as you stare down into it from the wooded hills on either side. The bottom is a dark tangle of shrubbery, alive with little flickering phantom lights; higher up, trees of all kinds lean into the chasm, almost meeting in the center. One of them, in fact, does cross the gap. An ancient, rotting spikearrow, withered by lack of moisture, had fallen long ago to provide a natural bridge. The bridge hangs with bluemoos, and glows. The three of us walked out on that dim-lit, curving trunk, and I gestured down.

Yards below us, a glittering multihued net hung from hill to hill, each strand of the web thick as a cable and aglisten with sticky oils. It tied all the lower trees together in a twisting intricate embrace, and it was a shining fairy-roof above the chasm. Very pretty; it made you want to reach out and touch it. That, of course, was why the dream-spiders spun it. They were nocturnal predators, and the bright colors of their webs afire in the night made a potent lure.

“Look,” Crystal said, ‘the spider.’ She pointed. In one of the darker corners of the web, half-hidden by the tangle of a goblin tree that grew out of the rock, it was sitting. I could see it dimly, by the webfire and moss light, a great eight-legged white thing the size of a large pumpkin. Unmoving. Waiting. Gerry glanced around uneasily again, up into the branches of a crooked mockoak that hung partially above us. “The mate’s around somewhere, isn’t it?”

I nodded. The dream-spiders of Jamison’s World are not quite twins to the arachnids of Old Earth. The female is indeed the deadlier of the species, but far from eating the male, she takes him for life in a permanent specialized partnership. For it is the sluggish, great-bodied male who wears the spinnerets, who weaves the shining-fire web and makes it sticky with his oils, who binds and ties the prey snared by light and color. Meanwhile, the smaller female roams the dark branches, her poison sac full of the viscous dreaming-venom that grants bright visions and ecstasy and final blackness. Creatures many times her own size she stings, and drags limp back to the web to add to the larder. The dream-spiders are soft, merciful hunters for all that. If they prefer live food, no matter; the captive probably enjoys being eaten. Popular Jamie wisdom says a spider’s prey moans with joy as it is consumed. Like all popular wisdoms, it is vastly exaggerated. But the truth is, the captives never struggle.

Except that night, something was struggling in the web below us.

“What’s that?” I said, blinking. The iridescent web was not even close to empty - the half-eaten corpse of an ironhorn lay close at hand below us, and some great dark bat was bound in bright strands just slightly farther away - but these were not what I watched. In the corner opposite the male spider, near the western trees, something was caught and fluttering. I remember a brief glimpse of thrashing pale limbs, wide luminous eyes, and something like wings. But I did not see it clearly.

That was when Gerry slipped.

Maybe it was the wine that made him unsteady, or maybe the moss under our feet, or the curve of the trunk on which we stood. Maybe he was just trying to step around me to see whatever it was I was staring at. But, in any case, he slipped and lost his balance, let out a yelp, and suddenly he was five yards below us, caught in the web. The whole thing shook to the impact of his fall, but it didn’t come close to breaking —dream-spider webs are strong enough to catch ironhorns and woodsnarls, after all.

“Damn,” Gerry yelled. He looked ridiculous; one leg plunged right down through the fibers of the web, his arms half-sunk and tangled hopelessly, only his head and shoulders really free of the mess. “This stuff is sticky. I can hardly move.”

“Don’t try,” I told him. “It’ll just get worse. I’ll figure out a way to climb down and cut you loose. I’ve got my knife.” I looked around, searching for a tree limb to shimmy out on.

“*John,*” Crystal’s voice was tense, on edge.

The male spider had left his lurking place behind the goblin tree. He was moving toward Gerry with a heavy deliberate gait; a gross white shape clamoring over the preternatural beauty of his web.

“Damn,” I said. I wasn’t seriously alarmed, but it was a bother. The great male was the biggest spider I’d ever seen, and it seemed a shame to kill him. But I didn’t see that I had much choice. The male dream-spider has no venom, but he is a carnivore, and his bite can be most final, especially when he’s the size of this one. I couldn’t let him get within biting distance of Gerry.

Steadily, carefully, I drew a long gray arrow out of my quiver and fitted it to my bowstring. It was night, of course, but I wasn’t really worried. I was a good shot, and my target was outlined clearly by the glowing strands of his web.

Crystal screamed.

I stopped briefly, annoyed that she’d panic when everything was under control. But I knew all along that she would not, of course. It was something else. For an instant I couldn’t imagine what it could be.

Then I saw, as I followed Crys’ eyes with my own. A fat white spider the size of a big man’s fist had dropped down from the mockoak to the bridge we were standing on, not ten feet away Crystal, thank God, was safe behind me.

I stood there —how long? I don’t know. If I had just acted, without stopping, without thought, I could have handled everything. I should have taken care of the male first, with the arrow I had ready. There would have been plenty of time to pull a second arrow for the female.

But I froze instead, caught in that dark bright moment, for an instant timeless, my bow in my hand yet unable to act.

It was all so complicated, suddenly. The female was scuttling toward me, faster than I would have believed, and it seemed so much quicker and deadlier than the slow white thing below. Perhaps I should take it out first. I might miss, and then I would need time to go for my knife or a second arrow.

Except that would leave Gerry tangled and helpless under the jaws of the male that moved toward him inexorably. He could die. He could die. Crystal could never blame me. I had to save myself, and her, she would understand that. And I’d have her back again.

Yes.

NO!

Crystal was screaming, screaming, and suddenly everything was clear and I knew what it had all meant and why I was here in this forest and what I had to do. There was a moment of glorious transcendence. I had lost the gift of making her happy, my Crystal, but now for a moment suspended in time that power had returned to me, and I could give or withhold happiness forever. With an arrow, I could prove a love that Gerry would never match.

I think I smiled. I’m sure I did.

And my arrow flew darkly through the cool night, and found its mark in the bloated white spider that raced across a web of light.

The female was on me, and I made no move to kick it away or crush it beneath my heel. There was a sharp stabbing pain in my ankle.

Bright and many-colored are the webs the dream-spiders weave.

At night, when I return from the forests, I clean my arrows carefully and open my great knife, with its slim barbed blade, to cut apart the poison sacs I've collected. I slit them open, each in turn, as I have earlier cut them from the still white bodies of the dream-spiders, and then I drain the venom off into a bottle, to wait for the day when Korbec flies out to collect it.

Afterwards I set out the miniature goblet, exquisitely wrought in silver and obsidian and bright with spider motifs, and pour it full of the heavy black wine they bring me from the city. I stir the cup with my knife, around and around until the blade is shiny clean again and the wine a trifle darker than before. And I ascend to the roof.

Often Korbec's words will return to me then, and with them my story. Crystal my love, and Gerry, and a night of lights and spiders. It all seemed so very right for that brief moment, when I stood upon the moss-covered bridge with an arrow in my hand, and decided. And it has all gone so very very wrong...

... from the moment I awoke, after a month of fever and visions, to find myself in the tower where Crys and Gerry had taken me to nurse me back to health. My decision, my transcendent choice, was not so final as I would have thought.

At times I wonder if it was a choice. We talked about it, often, while I regained my strength, and the tale that Crystal tells me is not the one that I remember. She says that we never saw the female at all, until it was too late, that it dropped silently onto my neck just as I released the arrow that killed the male. Then, she says, she smashed it with the flashlight that Gerry had given her to hold, and I went tumbling into the web.

In fact, there is a wound on my neck, and none on my ankle. And her story has a ring of truth. For I have come to know the dream-spiders in the slow-flowing years since that night, and I know that the females are stealthy killers that drop down on their prey unawares. They do not charge across fallen trees like berserk ironhorns; it is not the spiders' way.

And neither Crystal nor Gerry has any memory of a pale winged thing flapping in the web. Yet I remember it clearly ... as I remember the female spider that scuttled toward me during the endless years that I stood frozen ... but then ... they say the bite of a dream-spider does strange things to your mind.

That could be it, of course.

Sometimes when Squirrel comes behind me up the stairs, scraping the sooty bricks with his eight white legs, the wrongness of it all hits me, and I know I've dwelt with dreams too long.

Yet the dreams are often better than the waking, the stories so much finer than the lives.

Crystal did not come back to me, then or ever. They left when I was healthy. And the happiness I'd brought her with the choice that was not a choice and the sacrifice not a sacrifice, my gift to her forever - it lasted less than a year. Korbec tells me that she and Gerry broke up violently, and that she has since left Jamison's World.

I suppose that's truth enough, if you can believe a man like Korbec. I don't worry about it overmuch.

I just kill dream-spiders, drink wine, pet Squirrel. And each night I climb this tower of ashes to gaze at distant lights.

# And Seven Times Never Kill Man!

*Ye may kill for yourselves, and your mates, and your cubs as they need, and ye can;*

*But kill not for pleasure of killing, and seven times never kill Man!*

—Rudyard Kipling

Outside the walls the Jaenshi children hung, a row of small gray-furred bodies still and motionless at the ends of long ropes. The oldest among them, obviously, had been slaughtered before hanging; here a headless male swung upside down, the noose around the feet, while there dangled the blast-burned carcass of a female. But most of them, the dark hairy infants with the wide golden eyes, most of them had simply been hung.

Toward dusk, when the wind came swirling down out of the ragged hills, the bodies of the lighter children would twist at the ends of their ropes and bang against the city walls, as if they were alive and pounding for admission.

But the guards on the walls paid the thumping no mind as they walked their relentless rounds, and the rust-streaked metal gates did not open.

"Do you believe in evil?" Arik neKrol asked Jannis Ryther as they looked down on the City of the Steel Angels from the crest of a nearby hill. Anger was written across every line of his flat yellow-brown face, as he squatted among the broken shards of what once had been a Jaenshi worship pyramid.

"Evil?" Ryther murmured in a distracted way. Her eyes never left the redstone walls below, where the dark bodies of the children were outlined starkly. The sun was going down, the fat red globe that the Steel Angels called the Heart of Bakkalon, and the valley beneath them seemed to swim in bloody mists.

"Evil," neKrol repeated. The trader was a short, pudgy man, his features decidedly mongoloid except for the flame-red hair that fell nearly to his waist. "It is a religious concept, and I am not a religious man. Long ago, when I was a very child growing up on ai-Emerel, I decided that there was no good or evil, only different ways of thinking." His small, soft hands felt around in the dust until he had a large, jagged shard that filled his fist. He stood and offered it to Ryther. "The Steel Angels have made me believe in evil again," he said.

She took the fragment from him wordlessly and turned it over in her hands. Ryther was much taller than neKrol. and much thinner; a hard bony woman with a long face, short black hair, and eyes without expression. The sweat-stained coveralls she wore hung loosely on her spare frame.

"Interesting," she said finally, after studying the shard for several minutes. It was as hard and smooth as glass, but stronger; colored a translucent red, yet so very dark it was almost black. "A plastic?" she asked, throwing it back to the ground.

NeKrol shrugged. "That was my very guess, but of course it is impossible. The Jaenshi work in bone and wood and sometimes metal, but plastic is centuries beyond them."

"Or behind them," Ryther said. "You say these worship pyramids are scattered all through the forest?"

"Yes, as far as I have ranged. But the Angels have smashed all those close to their valley, to drive the Jaenshi away. As they expand, and they *will* expand, they will smash others."

Ryther nodded. She looked down into the valley again, and as she did the last sliver of the Heart of Bakkalon slid below the western rhountains and the city lights began to come on. The Jaenshi children swung in pools of

soft blue illumination, and just above the city gates two stick figures could be seen working. Shortly they heaved something outward, a rope uncoiled, and then another small dark shadow jerked and twitched against the wall. "Why?" Ryther said, in a cool voice, watching.

NeKrol was anything but cool. "The Jaenshi tried to defend one of their pyramids. Spears and knives and rocks against the Steel Angels with lasers and blasters and screechguns. But they caught them unaware, killed a man. The Proctor announced it would not happen again." He spat. "Evil. The children trust them, you see."

"Interesting," Ryther said.

"Can you do anything?" neKrol asked, his voice agitated. "You have your ship, your crew. The Jaenshi need a protector, Jannis. They are helpless before the Angels."

"I have four men in my crew," Ryther said evenly. "Perhaps four hunting lasers as well." That was all the answer she gave.

NeKrol looked at her helplessly. "*Nothing?*"

"Tomorrow, perhaps, the Proctor will call on us. He has surely seen the *Lights* descend. Perhaps the Angels wish to trade." She glanced again into the valley. "Come, Arik, we must go back to your base. The trade goods must be loaded."

Wyatt, Proctor of the Children of Bakkalon on the World of Corlos, was tall and red and skeletal, and the muscles stood out clearly on his bare arms. His blue-black hair was cropped very short, his carriage was stiff and erect. Like all the Steel Angels, he wore a uniform of chameleon cloth (a pale brown now, as he stood in the full light of day on the edge of the small, crude spacefield), a mesh-steel belt with hand-laser and communicator and screechgun, and a stiff red Roman collar. The tiny figurine that hung on a chain about his neck—the pale child Bakkalon, nude and innocent and bright-eyed, but holding a great black sword in one small fist—was the only sign of Wyatt's rank.

Four other Angels stood behind him: two men, two women, all dressed identically. There was a sameness about their faces, too; the hair always cropped tightly, whether it was blond or red or brown, the eyes alert and cold and a little fanatic, the upright posture that seemed to characterize members of the military-religious sect, the bodies hard and fit. NeKrol, who was soft and slouching and sloppy, disliked everything about the Angels.

Proctor Wyatt had arrived shortly after dawn, sending one of his squad to pound on the door of the small gray prefab bubble that was neKrol's trading base and home. Sleepy and angry, but with a guarded politeness, the trader had risen to greet the Angels, and had escorted them out to the center of the spacefield, where the scarred metal teardrop of the *Lights of Jolostar* squatted on three retractable legs.

The cargo ports were all sealed now; Ryther's crew had spent most of the evening unloading neKrol's trade goods and replacing them in the ship's hold with crates of Jaenshi artifacts that might bring good prices from collectors of extraterrestrial art. No way of knowing until a dealer looked over the goods; Ryther had dropped neKrol only a year ago, and this was the first pickup.

"I am an independent trader, and Arik is my agent on this world," Ryther told the Proctor when she met him on the edge of the field. "You must deal through him."

"I see," Proctor Wyatt said. He still held the list he had offered Ryther, of goods the Angels wanted from the industrialized colonies on Avalon and Jamison's World. "But neKrol will not deal with us."

Ryther looked at him blankly.



"With good reason," neKrol said. "I trade with the Jaenshi, you slaughter them."

The Proctor had spoken to neKrol often in the months since the Steel Angels had established their city-colony, and the talks had all ended in arguments; now he ignored him. "The steps we took were needed," Wyatt said to Ryther. "When an animal kills a man, the animal must be punished, and other animals must see and learn, so that beasts may know that man, the seed of Earth and child of Bakkalon, is the lord and master of them all."

NeKrol snorted. "The Jaenshi are not beasts, Proctor, they are an intelligent race, with their own religion and art and customs, and they ..."

Wyatt looked at him. "They have no soul. Only the children of Bakkalon have souls, only the seed of Earth. What mind they may have is relevant only to you, and perhaps them. Soulless, they are beasts."

"Arik has shown me the worship pyramids they build," Ryther said. "Surely creatures that build such shrines must have souls."

The Proctor shook his head. "You are in error in your belief. It is written clearly in the Book. We, the seed of Earth, are truly the children of Bakkalon, and no others. The rest are animals, and in Bakkalon's name we must assert our dominion over them."

"Very well," Ryther said. "But you will have to assert your dominion without aid from the *Lights of Jolostar*, I'm afraid. And I must inform you, Proctor, that I find your actions seriously disturbing, and intend to report them when I return to Jamison's World."

"I expected no less," Wyatt said. "Perhaps by next year you will burn with love of Bakkalon, and we may talk again. Until then, the world of Corlos will survive." He saluted her, and walked briskly from the field, followed by the four Steel Angels.

"What good will it do to report them?" neKrol said bitterly, after they had gone.

"None," Ryther said, looking off toward the forest. The wind was kicking up the dust around her, and her shoulders slumped, as if she were very tired. "The Jamies won't care, and if they did, what could they do?"

NeKrol remembered the heavy red-bound book that Wyatt had given him months ago. "And Bakkalon the pale child fashioned his children out of steel," he quoted, "for the stars will break those of softer flesh. And in the hand of each new-made infant He placed a beaten sword, telling them, 'This is the Truth and the Way.' " He spat in disgust. "That is their very creed. And we can do nothing?"

Her face was empty of expression now. "I will leave you two lasers. In a year, make sure the Jaenshi know how to use them. I believe I know what sort of trade goods I should bring."

The Jaenshi lived in clans (as neKrol thought of them) of twenty to thirty, each clan divided equally between adults and children, each having its own home-forest and worship pyramid. They did not build; they slept curled up in trees around their pyramid. For food, they foraged; juicy blue-black fruits grew everywhere, and there were three varieties of edible berries, a hallucinogenic leaf, and a soapy yellow root the Jaenshi dug for. NeKrol had found them to be hunters as well, though infrequently. A clan would go for months without meat, while the snuffling brown bushogs multiplied all around them, digging up roots and playing with the children.

Then suddenly, when the bushog population had reached some critical point, the Jaenshi spearmen would walk among them calmly, killing two out of every three, and that week great hog roasts would be held each night around the pyramid. Similar patterns could be discerned with the white-bodied tree slugs that sometimes covered the fruit trees like a plague, until the Jaenshi gathered them for a stew, and with the fruit-stealing pseudomonks that haunted the higher limbs.

So far as neKrol could tell, there were no predators in the forests of the Jaenshi. In his early months on their world, he had worn a long force-knife and a hand-laser as he walked from pyramid to pyramid on his trade route. But he had never encountered anything even remotely hostile, and now the knife lay broken in his kitchen, while the laser was long lost.

The day after the *Lights of Jolostar* departed, neKrol went armed into the forest again, with one of Ryther's hunting lasers slung over his shoulder.

Less than two kilometers from his base, neKrol found the camp of the Jaenshi he called the waterfall folk. They lived up against the side of a heavily-wooded hill, where a stream of tumbling blue-white water came sliding and bouncing down, dividing and rejoining itself over and over, so the whole hillside was an intricate glittering web of waterfalls and rapids and shallow pools and spraying wet curtains. The clan's worship pyramid sat in the bottommost pool, on a flat gray stone in the middle of the eddies; taller than most Jaenshi, coming up to neKrol's chin, looking infinitely heavy and solid and immovable, a three-sided block of dark, dark red.

NeKrol was not fooled: he had seen other pyramids sliced to pieces by the lasers of the Steel Angels and shattered by the flames of their blasters; whatever powers the pyramids might have in Jaenshi myth, whatever mysteries might lie behind their origin, it was not enough to stay the swords of Bakkalon.

The glade around the pyramid-pool was alive with sunlight when NeKrol entered, and the long grasses swayed in the light breeze, but most of the waterfall folk were elsewhere. In the trees perhaps, climbing and coupling and pulling down fruits, or ranging through the forests on their hill. The trader found only a few small children riding on a bushog in the clearing when he arrived. He sat down to wait, warm in the sunlight.

Soon the old talker appeared.

He sat down next to neKrol, a tiny shriveled Jaenshi with only a few patches of dirty gray-white fur left to hide the wrinkles in his skin. He was toothless, clawless, feeble; but his eyes, wide and golden and pupilless as those of any Jaenshi, were still alert, alive. He was the talker of the waterfall folk, the one in closest communion with the worship pyramid.

Every clan had a talker.

"I have something new to trade," neKrol said, in the soft slurred speech of the Jaenshi. He had learned the tongue before coming here, back on Avalon. Tomas Chung, the legendary Avalonian linguesp, had broken it centuries before, when the Kleronomas Survey brushed by this world. No other human had visited the Jaenshi since, but the maps of Kleronomas and Chung's language-pattern analysis both remained alive in the computers at the Avalon Institute for the Study of Non-Human Intelligence.

"We have made you more statues, have fashioned new woods," the old talker said. "What have you brought? Salt?"

NeKrol undid his knapsack, laid it out, and opened it. He took out one of the bricks of salt he carried, and laid it before the old talker. "Salt," he said. "And more." He laid the hunting rifle before the Jaenshi.

"What is this?" the old talker asked.

"Do you know of the Steel Angels?" neKrol asked.

The other nodded, a gesture neKrol had taught him. "The godless who run from the dead valley speak of them. They are the ones who make the gods grow silent, the pyramid breakers."

"This is a tool like the Steel Angels use to break your pyramids," neKrol said. "I am offering it to you in trade."

The old talker sat very still. "But we do not wish to break pyramids," he said.

"This tool can be used for other things," neKrol said. "In time, the Steel Angels may come here, to break the pyramid of the waterfall folk. If by then you have tools like this, you can stop them. The people of the pyramid in the ring-of-stone tried to stop the Steel Angels with spears and knives, and now they are scattered and wild and their children hang dead from the walls of the City of the Steel Angels. Other clans of the Jaenshi were unresisting, yet now they too are godless and landless. The time will come when the waterfall folk will need this tool, old talker."

The Jaenshi elder lifted the laser and turned it curiously in his small withered hands. "We must pray on this," he said. "Stay, Arik. Tonight we shall tell you, when the god looks down on us. Until then, we shall trade." He rose abruptly, gave a swift glance at the pyramid across the pool, and faded into the forest, still holding the laser.

NeKrol sighed. He had a long wait before him; the prayer assemblies never came until sundown. He moved to the edge of the pool and unlaced his heavy boots to soak his sweaty, calloused feet in the crisp cold waters.

When he looked up, the first of the carvers had arrived; a lithe young Jaenshi female with a touch of auburn in her body fur. Silent (they were all silent in neKrol's presence, all save the talker), she offered him her work.

It was a statuette no larger than his fist, a heavy-breasted fertility goddess fashioned out of the fragrant, thin-veined blue wood of the fruit trees. She sat cross-legged on a triangular base, and three thin slivers of bone rose from each corner of the triangle to meet above her head in a blob of clay.

NeKrol took the carving, turned it this way and that, and nodded his approval. The Jaenshi smiled and vanished, taking the salt brick with her. Long after she was gone, neKrol continued to admire his acquisition. He had traded all his life, spending ten years among the squid-faced gethsoids of Aath and four with the stick-thin Fyndii, traveling a trader's circuit to a half-dozen stone age planets that had once been slaveworlds of the broken Hrangan Empire; but nowhere had he found artists like the Jaenshi. Not for the first time, he wondered why neither Kleronomas nor Chung had mentioned the native carvings. He was glad they hadn't, though, and fairly certain that once the dealers saw the crates of wooden gods he had sent back with Ryther, the world would be overrun by traders. As it was, he had been sent here entirely on speculation, in hopes of finding a Jaenshi drug or herb or liquor that might move well in stellar trade. Instead he'd found the art, like an answer to a prayer.

Other workmen came and went as the morning turned to afternoon and the afternoon to dusk, setting their craft before him. He looked over each piece carefully, taking some and declining others, paying for what he took in salt. Before full darkness had descended, a small pile of goods sat by his right hand; a matched set of redstone knives, a gray deathcloth woven from the fur of an elderly Jaenshi by his widow and friends (with his face wrought upon it in the silky golden hairs of a pseudomonk), a bone spear with tracings that reminded neKrol of the runes of Old Earth legend; and statues. The statues were his favorites, always; so often alien art was alien beyond comprehension, but the Jaenshi workmen touched emotional chords in him. The gods they carved, each sitting in a bone pyramid, wore Jaenshi faces, yet at the same time seemed archetypically human: stern-faced war gods, things that looked oddly like satyrs, fertility goddesses like the one he had bought, almost-manlike warriors and nymphs. Often neKrol had wished that he had a formal education in extee anthropology, so that he might write a book on the universals of myth. The Jaenshi surely had a rich mythology, though the talkers never spoke

of it; nothing else could explain the carvings. Perhaps the old gods were no longer worshipped, but they were still remembered.

By the time the Heart of Bakkalon went down and the last reddish rays ceased to filter through the looming trees, neKrol had gathered as much as he could carry, and his salt was all but exhausted. He laced up his boots again, packed his acquisitions with painstaking care, and sat patiently in the poolside grass, waiting. One by one, the waterfall folk joined him.

Finally the old talker returned.

The prayers began.

The old talker, with the laser still in his hand, waded carefully across the night-dark waters, to squat by the black bulk of the pyramid. The others, adults and children together, now some forty strong, chose spots in the grass near the banks, behind neKrol and around him. Like him, they looked out over the pool, at the pyramid and the talker outlined clearly in the light of a new-risen, oversized moon. Setting the laser down on the stone, the old talker pressed both palms flat against the side of the pyramid, and his body seemed to go stiff, while all the other Jaenshi also tensed and grew very quiet.

NeKrol shifted restlessly and fought a yawn. It was not the first time he'd sat through a prayer ritual, and he knew the routine. A good hour of boredom lay before him; the Jaenshi did silent worship, and there was nothing to be heard but their steady breathing, nothing to be seen but forty impassive faces. Sighing, the trader tried to relax, closing his eyes and concentrating on the soft grass beneath him and the warm breeze that tossed his wild mane of hair. Here, briefly, he found peace. How long would it last, he mused, should the Steel Angels leave their valley . . .

The hour passed, but neKrol, lost in meditation, scarce felt the flow of time. Until suddenly he heard the rustlings and chatter around him, as the waterfall folk rose and went back into the forest. And then the old talker stood in front of him, and laid the laser at his feet.

"No," he said simply.

NeKrol started. "What? But you *must*. Let me show you what it can do..."

"I have had a vision, Arik. The god has shown me. But also he has shown me that it would not be a good thing to take this in trade."

"Old talker, the Steel Angels will come . . ."

"If they come, our god shall speak to them," the Jaenshi elder said, in his purring speech, but there was finality in the gentle voice, and no appeal in the vast liquid eyes.

"For our food, we thank ourselves, none other. It is ours because we worked for it, ours because we fought for it, ours by the only right that is: the right of the strong. But for that strength—for the might of our arms and the steel of our swords and the fire in our hearts—we thank Bakkalon, the pale child, who gave us life and taught us how to keep it."

The Proctor stood stiffly at the centermost of the five long wooden tables that stretched the length of the great mess hall, pronouncing each word of the grace with solemn dignity. His large veined hands pressed tightly together as he spoke, against the flat of the upward-jutting sword, and the dim lights had faded his uniform to an almost-black. Around him, the Steel Angels sat at attention, their food untouched before them; fat boiled tubers, steaming chunks of bushog meat, black bread, bowls of crunchy green neograss. Children below the fighting age of ten, in smocks of starchy white and the omnipresent mesh-steel belts, filled the two outermost tables beneath

the slit-like windows; toddlers struggled to sit still under the watchful eyes of stern nine-year-old houseparents with hardwood batons in their belts. Further in, the fighting brotherhood sat, fully armed, at two equally long tables, men and women alternating, leather-skinned veterans sitting next to ten-year-olds who had barely moved from the children's dorm to the barracks. All of them wore the same chameleon cloth as Wyatt, though without his collar, and a few had buttons of rank. The center table, less than half the length of the others, held the cadre of the Steel Angels; the squadfathers and squadmothers, the weaponsmasters, the healers, the four fieldbishops, all those who wore the high, stiff crimson collar. And the Proctor, at its head.

"Let us eat," Wyatt said at last. His sword moved above his table with a whoosh, describing the slash of blessing, and he sat to his meal. The Proctor, like all the others, had stood single-file in the line that wound past the kitchen to the mess hall, and his portions were no larger than the least of the brotherhood.

There was a clink of knives and forks, and the infrequent clatter of a plate, and from time to time the thwack of a baton, as a house-parent punished some transgression of discipline by one of his charges; other than that, the hall was silent. The Steel Angels did not speak at meals, but rather meditated on the lessons of the day as they consumed their spartan fare.

Afterwards, the children—still silent—marched out of the hall, back to their dormitory. The fighting brotherhood followed, some to chapel, most to the barracks, a few to guard duty on the walls. The men they were relieving would find late meals still warm in the kitchen.

The officer core remained; after the plates were cleared away, the meal became a staff meeting.

"At ease," Wyatt said, but the figures along the table relaxed little, if at all. Relaxation had been bred out of them by now. The Proctor found one of them with his eyes. "Dhallis," he said, "you have the report I requested?"

Fieldbishop Dhallis nodded. She was a husky middle-aged woman with thick muscles and skin the color of brown leather. On her collar was a small steel insignia, an ornamental memory-chip that meant Computer Services. "Yes, Proctor," she said, in a hard, precise voice. "Jamison's World is a fourth-generation colony, settled mostly from Old Poseidon. One large continent, almost entirely unexplored, and more than twelve thousand islands of various sizes. The human population is concentrated almost entirely on the islands, and makes its living by farming sea and land, aquatic husbandry, and heavy industry. The oceans are rich in food and metal. The total population is about seventy-nine million. There are two large cities, both with spaceports: Port Jamison and Jolostar." She looked down at the computer printout on the table. "Jamison's World was not even charted at the time of the Double War. It has never known military action, and the only Jamie armed forces are their planetary police. It has no colonial program and has never attempted to claim political jurisdiction beyond its own atmosphere."

The Proctor nodded. "Excellent. Then the trader's threat to report us is essentially an empty one. We can proceed. Squadfather Walman?"

"Four Jaenshi were taken today, Proctor, and are now on the walls," Walman reported. He was a ruddy young man with a blond crewcut and large ears. "If I might, sir, I would request discussion of possible termination of the campaign. Each day we search harder for less. We have virtually wiped out every Jaenshi youngling of the clans who originally inhabited Sword Valley."

Wyatt nodded. "Other opinions?"

Fieldbishop Lyon, blue-eyed and gaunt, indicated dissent. "The adults remain alive. The mature beast is more dangerous than the youngling, Squadfather."

"Not in this case," Weapons-master C'ara DaHan said. DaHan was a giant of a man, bald and bronze-colored, the chief of Psychological Weaponry and Enemy Intelligence. "Our studies show that, once the pyramid is destroyed, neither full-grown Jaenshi nor the immature pose any threat whatsoever to the children of Bakkalon. Their social structure virtually disintegrates. The adults either flee, hoping to join some other clan, or revert to near-animal savagery. They abandon the younglings, most of whom fend for themselves in a confused sort of way and offer no resistance when we take them. Considering the number of Jaenshi on our walls, and those reported slain by predators or each other, I strongly feel that Sword Valley is virtually clean of the animals. Winter is coming, Proctor, and much must be done. Squadfather Walman and his men should be set to other tasks."

There was more discussion, but the tone had been set; most of the speakers backed DaHan. Wyatt listened carefully, and all the while prayed to Bakkalon for guidance. Finally he motioned for quiet.

"Squadfather," he said to Walman, "tomorrow collect all the Jaenshi—both adults and children—that you can, but do not hang them if they are unresisting. Instead, take them to the city, and show them their clanmates on our walls. Then cast them from the valley, one in each direction of the compass." He bowed his head. "It is my hope that they will carry a message, to all the Jaenshi, of the price that must be paid when a beast raises hand or claw or blade against the seed of Earth. Then, when the spring comes and the children of Bakkalon move beyond Sword Valley, the Jaenshi will peacefully abandon their pyramids and quit whatever lands men may require, so the glory of the pale child might be spread."

Lyon and DaHan both nodded, among others. "Speak wisdom to us," Fieldbishop Dhallis said then.

Proctor Wyatt agreed. One of the lesser-ranking squadmothers brought him the Book, and he opened it to the Chapter of Teachings.

"In those days much evil had come upon the seed of Earth," the Proctor read, "for the children of Bakkalon had abandoned Him to bow to softer gods. So their skies grew dark and upon them from above came the Sons of Hranga with red eyes and demon teeth, and upon them from below came the vast Horde of Fyndii like a cloud of locusts that blotted out the stars. And the worlds flamed, and the children cried out, 'Save us! Save us!'"

"And the pale child came and stood before them, with His great sword in His hand, and in a voice like thunder He rebuked them. 'You have been weak children,' He told them, 'for you have disobeyed. Where are your swords? Did I not set swords in your hands?'"

"And the children cried out, 'We have beaten them into plowshares, oh Bakkalon!'"

"And He was sore angry. 'With plowshares, then, shall you face the Sons of Hranga! With plowshares shall you slay the Horde of Fyndii!' And He left them, and heard no more their weeping, for the Heart of Bakkalon is a Heart of Fire.

"But then one among the seed of Earth dried his tears, for the skies did burn so bright that they ran scalding on his cheeks. And the bloodlust rose in him and he beat his plowshare back into a sword, and charged the Sons of Hranga, slaying as he went. Then others saw, and followed, and a great battle-cry rang across the worlds.

"And the pale child heard, and came again, for the sound of battle is more pleasing to his ears than the sound of wails. And when He saw, He smiled. 'Now you are my children again,' He said to the seed of Earth. 'For you had turned against me to worship a god who calls himself a lamb, but did you not know that lambs go only to the slaughter? Yet now your eyes have cleared, and again you are the Wolves of God!'"

"And Bakkalon gave them all swords again, all His children and all the seed of Earth, and He lifted his great black blade, the Demon-Reaver that slays the soulless, and swung it. And the Sons of Hrange fell before His might, and the great Horde that was the Fyndii burned beneath His gaze. And the children of Bakkalon swept across the worlds."

The Proctor lifted his eyes. "Go, my brothers-in-arms, and think on the Teachings of Bakkalon as you sleep. May the pale child grant you visions!"

They were dismissed.

The trees on the hill were bare and glazed with ice, and the snow-unbroken except for their footsteps and the stirrings of the bitter-sharp north wind—gleamed a blinding white in the noon sun. In the valley beneath, the City of the Steel Angels looked preternaturally clean and still. Great snowdrifts had piled against the eastern walls, climbing halfway up the stark scarlet stone; the gates had not opened in months. Long ago, the children of Bakkalon had taken their harvest and fallen back inside the city, to huddle around their fires. But for the blue lights that burned late into the cold black night, and the occasional guard pacing atop the walls, neKrol would hardly have known that the Angels still lived.

The Jaenshi that neKrol had come to think of as the bitter speaker looked at him out of eyes curiously darker than the soft gold of her brothers. "Below the snow, the god lies broken," she said, and even the soothing tones of the Jaenshi tongue could not hide the hardness in her voice. They stood at the very spot where neKrol had once taken Ryther, the spot where the pyramid of the people of the ring-of-stone once stood.

NeKrol was sheathed head to foot in a white thermosuit that clung too tightly, accenting every unsightly bulge. He looked out on Sword Valley from behind a dark blue plastifilm in the suit's cowl. But the Jaenshi, the bitter speaker, was nude, covered only by the thick gray fur of her winter coat. The strap of the hunting laser ran down between her breasts.

"Other gods beside yours will break unless the Steel Angels are stopped," neKrol said, shivering despite his thermosuit.

The bitter speaker seemed hardly to hear. "I was a child when they came, Arik. If they had left our god, I might be a child still. Afterwards, when the light went out and the glow inside me died, I wandered far from the ring-of-stone, beyond our own home forest, knowing nothing, eating where I could. Things are not the same in the dark valley. Bushhogs honked at my passing, and charged me with their tusks, other Jaenshi threatened me and each other. I did not understand and I could not pray. Even when the Steel Angels found me, I did not understand, and I went with them to their city, knowing nothing of their speech. I remember the walls, and the children, many so much younger than me. Then I screamed and struggled; when I saw those on the ropes, something wild and godless stirred to life inside me." Her eyes regarded him, her eyes like burnished bronze. She shifted in the ankle-deep snow, curling a clawed hand around the strap of her laser.

NeKrol had taught her well since the day she had joined him, in the late summer when the Steel Angels had cast her from Sword Valley. The bitter speaker was by far the best shot of his six, the godless exiles he had gathered to him and trained. It was the only way; he had offered the lasers in trade to clan after clan, and each had refused. The Jaenshi were certain that their gods would protect them.

Only the godless listened, and not all of them; many—the young children, the quiet ones, the first to flee—many had been accepted into other clans. But others, like the bitter speaker, had grown too savage, had seen too much; they fit no longer. She had been the first to take the weapon, after the old talker had sent her away from the waterfall folk.

"It is often better to be without gods," neKrol told her. "Those below us have a god, and it has made them what they are. And so the Jaenshi have gods, and because they trust, they die. You godless are their only hope."

The bitter speaker did not answer. She only looked down on the silent city, besieged by snow, and her eyes smoldered.

And neKrol watched her, and wondered. He and his six were the hope of the Jaenshi, he had said; if so, was there hope at all? The bitter speaker, and all his exiles, had a madness about them, a rage that made him tremble. Even if Ryther came with the lasers, even if so small a group could stop the Angels' march, even if all that came to pass—what then? Should all the Angels die tomorrow, where would his godless find a place?

They stood, all quiet, while the snow stirred under their feet and the north wind bit at them.

The chapel was dark and quiet. Flameglobes burned a dim, eerie red in either corner, and the rows of plain wooden benches were empty. Above the heavy altar, a slab of rough black stone, Bakkalon stood in holograph, so real he almost breathed; a boy, a mere boy, naked and milky white, with the wide eyes and blond hair of innocent youth. In his hand, half again taller than himself, was the great black sword.

Wyatt knelt before the projection, head bowed and very still. All through the winter his dreams had been dark and troubled, so each day he would kneel and pray for guidance. There was none else to seek but Bakkalon; he, Wyatt, was the Proctor, who led in battle and in faith. He alone must riddle his visions.

So daily he wrestled with his thoughts, until the snows began to melt and the knees of his uniform had nearly worn through from long scraping on the floor. Finally, he had decided, and this day he had called upon the senior collars to join him in the chapel.

Alone they entered, while the Proctor knelt unmoving, and chose seats on the benches behind him, each apart from his fellows. Wyatt took no notice; he prayed only that his words would be correct, his vision true. When they were all there, he stood and turned to face them.

"Many are the worlds on which the children of Bakkalon have lived," he told them, "but none so blessed as this, our Corlos. A great time is on us, my brothers-in-arms. The pale child has come to me in my sleep, as once he came to the first Proctors in the years when the brotherhood was forged. He has given me visions."

They were quiet, all of them, their eyes humble and obedient; he was their Proctor, after all. There could be no questioning when one of higher rank spoke wisdom or gave orders. That was one of the precepts of Bakkalon, that the chain of command was sacred and never to be doubted. So all of them kept silence.

"Bakkalon Himself has walked upon this world. He has walked among the soulless and the beasts of the field and told them our dominion, and this he has said to me: that when the spring comes and the seed of Earth moves from Sword Valley to take new land, all the animals shall know their place and retire before us. This I do prophesy!

"More, we shall see miracles. That too the pale child has promised me, signs by which we will know His truth, signs that shall bolster our faith with new revelation. But so too shall our faith be tested, for it will be a time of sacrifices, and Bakkalon will call upon us more than once to show our trust in Him. We must remember His Teachings and be true, and each of us must obey Him as a child obeys the parent and a fighting man his officer: that is, swiftly and without question. For the pale child knows best.

"These are the visions He has granted me, these are the dreams that I have dreamed. Brothers, pray with me."



And Wyatt turned again and knelt, and the rest knelt with him, and all the heads were bowed in prayer save one. In the shadows at the rear of the chapel where the flameglobes flickered but dimly, C'ara DaHan stared at his Proctor from beneath a heavy beetled brow.

That night, after a silent meal in the mess hall and a short staff meeting, the Weaponsmaster called upon Wyatt to go walking on the walls. "Proctor, my soul is troubled," he told him. "I must have counsel from he who is closest to Bakkalon." Wyatt nodded, and both donned heavy nightcloaks of black fur and oil-dark metal cloth, and together they walked the red-stone parapets beneath the stars.

Near the guardhouse that stood above the city gates, DaHan paused and leaned out over the ledge, his eyes searching the slow-melting snow for long moments before he turned them on the Proctor. "Wyatt," he said at last, "my faith is weak."

The Proctor said nothing, merely watched the other, his face concealed by the hood of his night-cloak. Confession was not a part of the rites of the Steel Angels; Bakkalon had said that a fighting man's faith ought never to waver.

"In the old days," C'ara DaHan was saying, "many weapons were used against the children of Bakkalon. Some, today, exist only in tales. Perhaps they never existed. Perhaps they are empty things, like the gods the soft men worship. I am only a Weaponsmaster; such knowledge is not mine.

"Yet there is a tale, my Proctor—one that troubles me. Once, it is said, in the long centuries of war, the Sons of Hrange loosed upon the seed of Earth foul vampires of the mind, the creatures men called soul-feeds. Their touch was invisible, but it crept across kilometers, farther than a man could see, farther than a laser could fire, and it brought madness. Visions, my Proctor, visions! False gods and foolish plans were put in the minds of men, and . . ."

"Silence," Wyatt said. His voice was hard, as cold as the night air that crackled around them and turned his breath to steam.

There was a long pause. Then, in a softer voice, the Proctor continued. "All winter I have prayed, DaHan, and struggled with my visions. I am the Proctor of the Children of Bakkalon on the World of Corlos, not some new-armed child to be lied to by false gods. I spoke only after I was sure. I spoke as your Proctor, as your father in faith and your commanding officer. That you would question me, Weaponsmaster, that you would doubt— this disturbs me greatly. Next will you stop to argue with me on the field of battle, to dispute some fine point of my orders?"

"Never, Proctor," DaHan said, kneeling in penance in the packed snow atop the walkway.

"I hope not. But, before I dismiss you, because you are my brother in Bakkalon, I will answer you, though I need not and it was wrong of you to expect it. I will tell you this; the Proctor Wyatt is a good officer as well as a devout man. The pale child has made prophecies to me, and has predicted that miracles will come to pass. All these things we shall see with our very eyes. But if the prophecies should fail us, and if no signs appear, well, our eyes will see that too. And then I will know that it was not Bakkalon who sent the visions, but only a false god, perhaps a soul-feed of Hrange. Or do you think a Hrange can work miracles?"

No." DaHan said, still on his knees, his great bald head downcast. "That would be heresy."

"Indeed," said Wyatt. The Proctor glanced briefly beyond the walls. The night was crisp and cold and there was no moon. He felt transfigured, and even the stars seemed to cry the glory of the pale child, for the constellation of the Sword was high upon the zenith, the Soldier reaching up toward it from where he stood on the horizon.

"Tonight you will walk guard without your cloak," the Proctor told DaHan when he looked down again. "And should the north wind blow and the cold bite at you, you will rejoice in the pain, for it will be a sign that you submit to your Proctor and your god. As your flesh grows bitter numb, the flame in your heart must burn hotter."

"Yes, my Proctor," DaHan said. He stood and removed his night-cloak, handing it to the other. Wyatt gave him the slash of blessing.

On the wallscreen in his darkened living quarters the taped drama went through its familiar measured paces, but neKrol, slouched in a large cushioned recliner with his eyes half-closed, hardly noticed. The bitter speaker and two of the other Jaenshi exiles sat on the floor, golden eyes rapt on the spectacle of humans chasing and shooting each other amid the vaulting tower cities of ai-Emerel; increasingly they had begun to grow curious about other worlds and other ways of life. It was all very strange, neKrol thought; the waterfall folk and the other chinned Jaenshi had never shown any such interest. He remembered the early days, before the coming of the Steel Angels in their ancient and soon-to-be-dismantled warship, when he had set all kinds of trade goods before the Jaenshi talkers; bright bolts of glittersilk from Avalon, glowstone jewelry from High Kavalaan, duralloy knives and solar generators and steel powerbows, books from a dozen worlds, medicines and wines—he had come with a little of everything. The talkers took some of it, from time to time, but never with any enthusiasm; the only offering that excited them was salt.

It was not until the spring rains came and the bitter speaker began to question him that neKrol realized, with a start, how seldom any of the Jaenshi clans had ever asked him *anything*. Perhaps their social structure and their religion stifled their natural intellectual curiosity. The exiles were certainly eager enough, especially the bitter speaker. NeKrol could answer only a small portion of her questions of late, and even then she always had new ones to puzzle him with. He had begun to grow appalled with the extent of his own ignorance.

But then, so had the bitter speaker; unlike the clanned Jaenshi—did the religion make *that* much difference?—she would answer questions as well, and neKrol had tried quizzing her on many things that he'd wondered at. But most of the time she would only blink in bafflement, and begin to question herself.

"There are no stories about our gods," she said to him once, when he'd tried to learn a little of Jaenshi myth.

"What sort of stories could there be? The gods live in the worship pyramids, Arik, and we pray to them and they watch over us and light our lives. They do not bounce around and fight and break each other like your gods seem to do."

"But you had other gods once, before you came to worship the pyramids," neKrol objected. "The very ones your carvers did for me." He had even gone so far as to unpack a crate and show her, though surely she remembered, since the people of the pyramid in the ring-of-stone had been among the finest craftsmen.

Yet the bitter speaker only smoothed her fur, and shook her head. "I was too young to be a carver, so perhaps I was not told," she said. "We all know that which we need to know, but only the carvers need to do these things, so perhaps only they know the stories of these old gods."

Another time he had asked her about the pyramids, and had gotten even less. "Build them?" she had said. "We did not build them, Arik. They have always been, like the rocks and the trees." But then she blinked. "But they are *not* like the rocks and the trees, are they?" And puzzled, she went away to talk to the others.

But if the godless Jaenshi were more thoughtful than their brothers in the clans, they were also more difficult, and each day neKrol realized more and more the futility of their enterprise. He had eight of the exiles with him now—they had found two more, half dead from starvation, in the height of winter— and they all took turns training with the two lasers and spying on the Angels. But even should Ryther return with the weaponry, their force was a joke against the might the Proctor could put in the field. The *Lights of Jolostar* would be carrying a full arms shipment in the expectation that every clan for a hundred kilometers would now be roused and angry, ready to resist the Steel Angels and overwhelm them by sheer force of numbers; Jannis would be blank-faced when only neKrol and his ragged band appeared to greet her.

*If* in fact they did. Even that was problematical; he was having much difficulty keeping his guerrillas together. Their hatred of the Steel Angels still bordered madness, but they were far from a cohesive unit. None of them liked to take orders very well, and they fought constantly, going at each other with bared claws in struggles for social dominance. If neKrol had not warned them, he suspected they might even duel with the lasers. As for staying in good fighting shape, that too was a joke. Of the three females in the band, the bitter speaker was the only one who had not allowed herself to be impregnated. Since the Jaenshi usually gave birth in litters of four to eight, neKrol calculated that late summer would present them with an exile population explosion. And there would be more after that, he knew; the godless seemed to copulate almost hourly, and there was no such thing as Jaenshi birth control. He wondered how the clans kept their population so stable, but his charges didn't know that either.

"I suppose we sexed less," the bitter speaker said when he asked her, "but I was a child, so I would not really know. Before I came here, there was never the urge. I was just young, I would think." But when she said it, she scratched herself and seemed very unsure.

Sighing, neKrol eased himself back in the recliner and tried to shut out the noise of the wall-screen. It was all going to be very difficult. Already the Steel Angels had emerged from behind their walls, and the powerwagons rolled up and down Sword Valley turning forest into farmland. He had gone up into the hills himself, and it was easy to see that the spring planting would soon be done. Then, he suspected, the children of Bakkalon would try to expand. Just last week one of them—a giant "with no head fur," as his scout had described him—was seen up in the ring-of-stone, gathering shards from the broken pyramid. Whatever that meant, it could not be for the good.

Sometimes he felt sick at the forces he had set in motion, and almost wished that Ryther would forget the lasers. The bitter speaker was determined to strike as soon as they were armed, no matter what the odds. Frightened, neKrol reminded her of the hard Angel lesson the last time a Jaenshi had killed a man; in his dreams he still saw children on the walls.

But she only looked at him, with the bronze tinge of madness in her eyes, and said, "Yes, Arik. I remember."

Silent and efficient, the white-smocked kitchen boys cleared away the last of the evening's dishes and vanished. "At ease," Wyatt said to his officers. Then: "The time of miracles is upon us, as the pale child foretold.

"This morning I sent three squads into the hills to the southeast of Sward Valley, to disperse the Jaenshi clans on lands that we require. They reported back to me in early afternoon, and now I wish to share their reports with you. Squadmother Jolip, will you relate the events that transpired when you carried out your orders?"

"Yes, Proctor." Jolip stood, a white-skinned blond with a pinched face, her uniform hanging slightly loose on a lean body. "I was assigned a squad of ten to clear out the so-called cliff clan, whose pyramid lies near the foot of a low granite cliff in the wilder part of the hills. The information provided by our intelligence indicated that they were one of the smaller clans, with only twenty-odd adults, so I dispensed with heavy armor. We did take a class

five blastcannon, since the destruction of the Jaenshi pyramids is slow work with side-arms alone, but other than that our armament was strictly standard issue.

"We expected no resistance, but recalling the incident at the ring-of-stone, I was cautious. After a march of some twelve kilometers through the hills to the vicinity of the cliff, we fanned out in a semicircle and moved in slowly, with screechguns drawn. A few Jaenshi were encountered in the forest, and these we took prisoner and marched before us, for use as shields in the event of an ambush or attack. That, of course, proved unnecessary.

"When we reached the pyramid by the cliff, they were waiting for us. At least twelve of the beasts, sir. One of them sat near the base of the pyramid with his hands pressed against its side, while the others surrounded him in a sort of a circle. They all looked up at us, but made no other move."

She paused a minute, and rubbed a thoughtful finger up against the side of her nose. "As I told the Proctor, it was all very odd from that point forward. Last summer, I twice led squads against the Jaenshi clans. The first time, having no idea of our intentions, none of the soulless were there; we simply destroyed the artifact and left. The second time, a crowd of the creatures milled around, hampering us with their bodies while not being actively hostile. They did not disperse until I had one of them screeched down. And, of course, I studied the reports of Squadfather Allor's difficulties at the ring-of-stone.

"This time, it was all quite different. I ordered two of my men to set the blastcannon on its tripod, and gave the beasts to understand that they must get out of the way. With hand signals, of course, since I know none of their ungodly tongue. They complied at once, splitting into two groups and, well, lining up, on either side of the line-of-fire. We kept them covered with our screechguns, of course, but everything seemed very peaceful.

"And so it was. The blaster took the pyramid out neatly, a big ball of flame and then sort of a thunder as the thing exploded. A few shards were scattered, but no one was injured, as we had all taken cover and the Jaenshi seemed unconcerned. After the pyramid broke, there was a sharp ozone smell, and for an instant a lingering bluish fire—perhaps an afterimage. I hardly had time to notice them, however, since that was when the Jaenshi all fell to their knees before us. All at once, sirs. And then they pressed their heads against the ground, prostrating themselves. I thought for a moment that they were trying to hail us as gods, because we had shattered their god, and I tried to tell them that we wanted none of their animal worship, and required only that they leave these lands at once. But then I saw that I had misunderstood, because that was when the other four clan members came forward from the trees atop the cliff, and climbed down, and gave us the statue. Then the rest got up. The last I saw, the entire clan was walking due east, away from Sword Valley and the outlying hills. I took the statue and brought it back to the Proctor." She fell silent but remained standing, waiting for questions.

"I have the statuette here," Wyatt said. He reached down beside his chair and set it on the table, then pulled off the white cloth covering he had wrapped around it.

The base was a triangle of rock-hard blackbark, and three long splinters of bone rose from the corners to make a pyramid-frame. Within, exquisitely carved in every detail from soft blue wood, Bakkalon the pale child stood, holding a painted sword.

"What does this mean?" Fieldbishop Lyon asked, obviously startled. "Sacrilege!" Fieldbishop Dhallis said.

"Nothing so serious," said Gorman, Fieldbishop for Heavy Armor. "The beasts are simply trying to ingratiate themselves, perhaps in the hope that we will stay our swords."

"None but the seed of Earth may bow to Bakkalon," Dhallis said. "It is written in the Book! The pale child will not look with favor on the soulless!"

"Silence, my brothers-in-arms!" the Proctor said, and the long table abruptly grew quiet again. Wyatt smiled a thin smile. "This is the first of the miracles of which I spoke this winter in the chapel, the first of the strange happenings that Bakkalon told to me. For truly he has walked this world, our Corlos, so even the beasts of the fields know his likeness! Think on it, my brothers. Think on this carving. Ask yourselves a few simple questions. Have any of the Jaenshi animals ever been permitted to set foot in this holy city?"

"No, of course not." someone said.

"Then clearly none of them have seen the holograph that stands above our altar. Nor have I often walked among the beasts, as my duties keep me here within the walls. So none could have seen the pale child's likeness on the chain of office that I wear, for the few Jaenshi who have seen my visage have not lived to speak of it—they were those I judged, who hung upon our city walls. The animals do not speak the language of the Earthseed, nor have any among us learned their simple beastly tongue. Lastly, they have not read the Book. Remember all this, and wonder; how did their carvers know what face and form to carve?"

Quiet; the leaders of the children of Bakkalon looked back and forth among themselves in wonderment.

Wyatt quietly folded his hands. "A miracle. We shall have no more trouble with the Jaenshi, for the pale child has come to them."

To the Proctor's right, Fieldbishop Dhallis sat rigidly. "My Proctor, my leader in faith," she said, with some difficulty, each word coming slowly, "surely, *surely*, you do not mean to tell us that these, these *animals*—that they can worship the pale child, that he accepts their worship!"

Wyatt seemed calm, benevolent; he only smiled. "You need not trouble your soul, Dhallis. You wonder whether I commit the First Fallacy, remembering perhaps the Sacrilege of G'hra when a captive Hrangon bowed to Bakkalon to save himself from an animal's death, and the False Proctor Gibrone proclaimed that all who worship the pale child must have souls." He shook his head. "You see, I read the Book. But no, Fieldbishop, no sacrilege has transpired. Bakkalon *has* walked among the Jaenshi, but surely has given them only truth. They have seen him in all his armed dark glory, and heard him proclaim that they are animals, without souls, as surely he would proclaim. Accordingly, they accept their place in the order of the universe, and retire before us. They will never kill a man again. Recall that they did not bow to the statue they carved, but rather gave the statue to *us*, the seed of Earth, who alone can rightfully worship it. When they did prostrate themselves, it was at *our* feet, as animals to men, and that is as it should be. You see? They have been given truth."

Dhallis was nodding. "Yes, my Proctor. I am enlightened. Forgive my moment of weakness." But halfway down the table, C'ara DaHan leaned forward and knotted his great knuckled hands, frowning all the while. "My Proctor," he said heavily.

"Weaponsmaster?" Wyatt returned. His face grew stern.

"Like the Fieldbishop, my soul has flickered briefly with worry, and I too would be enlightened, if I might?"

Wyatt smiled. "Proceed," he said, in a voice without humor.

"A miracle this thing may be indeed," DaHan said, "but first we must question ourselves, to ascertain that it is not the trick of a soulless enemy. I do not fathom their stratagem, or their reasons for acting as they have, but I do know of one way that the Jaenshi might have learned the features of our Bakkalon."

"Oh?"

"I speak of the Jamish trading base, and the red-haired trader Arik neKrol. He is an Earthseed, an Emereli by his looks, and we have given him the Book. But he remains without a burning love of Bakkalon, and goes without arms like a godless man. Since our landing he has opposed us, and he grew most hostile after the lesson we were forced to give the Jaenshi. Perhaps he put the cliff clan up to it, told them to do the carving, to some strange ends of his own. I believe that he *did* trade with them."

"I believe you speak truth, Weaponsmaster. In the early months after landing, I tried hard to convert neKrol. To no avail, but I did learn much of the Jaenshi beasts and of the trading he did with them." The Proctor still smiled. "He traded with one of the clans here in Sword Valley, with the people of ring-of-stone, with the cliff clan and that of the far fruit tangle, with the waterfall folk, and sundry clans further east."

"Then it is his doing," DaHan said. "A trick!"

All eyes moved to Wyatt. "I did not say that. NeKrol, whatever intentions he might have, is but a single man. He did not trade with all the Jaenshi, nor even know them all." The Proctor's smile grew briefly wider. "Those of you who have seen the Emereli know him for a man of flab and weakness; he could hardly walk as far as might be required, and he has neither air-car nor power sled."

"But he *did* have contact with the cliff clan," DaHan said. The deep-graven lines on his bronze forehead were set stubbornly.

"Yes, he did," Wyatt answered. "But Squadmother Jolip did not go forth alone this morning. I also sent out Squadfather Walman and Squadfather Allor, to cross the waters of the White Knife. The land there is dark and fertile, better than that to the east. The cliff clan, who are southeast, were between Sword Valley and the White Knife, so they had to go. But the other pyramids we moved against belonged to far-river clans, more than thirty kilometers south. They have never seen the trader Arik neKrol, unless he has grown wings this winter."

Then Wyatt bent again, and set two more statues on the table, and pulled away their coverings. One was set on a base of slate, and the figure was carved in a clumsy broad manner; the other was finely detailed soaproot, even to the struts of the pyramid. But except for the materials and the workmanship, the later statues were identical to the first.

"Do you see a trick, Weaponsmaster?" Wyatt asked.

DaHan looked, and said nothing, for Fieldbishop Lyon rose suddenly and said, "I see a miracle," and others echoed him. After the hubbub had finally quieted, the brawny Weaponsmaster lowered his head and said, very softly, "My Proctor. Read wisdom to us."

"The lasers, speaker, the *lasers!*" There was a tinge of hysterical desperation in neKrol's tone. "Ryther is not back yet, and that is the very point. We must wait."

He stood outside the bubble of the trading base, bare-chested and sweating in the hot morning sun, with the thick wind tugging at his tangled hair. The clamor had pulled him from a troubled sleep. He had stopped them just on the edge of the forest, and now the bitter speaker had turned to face him, looking fierce and hard and most unJaenshi-like with the laser slung across her shoulders, a bright blue glittersilk scarf knotted around her neck, and fat glowstone rings on all eight of her fingers. The other exiles, but for the two that were heavy with child, stood around her. One of them held the other laser, the rest carried quivers and powerbows. That had been the speaker's idea. Her newly-chosen mate was down on one knee, panting; he had run all the way from the ring-of-stone.

"No, Arik," the speaker said, eyes bronze-angry. "Your lasers are now a month overdue, by your own count of time. Each day we wait, and the Steel Angels smash more pyramids. Soon they may hang children again."

"Very soon," neKrol said. "Very soon, if you attack them. Where is your very hope of victory? Your watcher says they go with two squads and a powerwagon—can you stop them with a pair of lasers and four powerbows? Have you learned to think here, or not?"

"Yes," the speaker said, but she bared her teeth at him as she said it. "Yes, but that cannot matter. The clans do not resist, so we must."

From one knee, her mate looked up at neKrol. "They . . . they march on the waterfall," he said, still breathing heavily.

"The waterfall!" the bitter speaker repeated. "Since the death of winter, they have broken more than twenty pyramids, Arik, and their powerwagons have crushed the forest and now a great dusty road scars the soil from their valley to the riverlands. But they had hurt no Jaenshi yet this season, they had let them go. And all those clans-without-a-god have gone to the waterfall, until the home forest of the waterfall folk is bare and eaten clean. Their talkers sit with the old talker and perhaps the waterfall god takes them in, perhaps he is a very great god. I do not know these things. But I *do* know that now the bald Angel has learned of the twenty clans together, of a grouping of half-a-thousand Jaenshi adults, and he leads a powerwagon against them. Will he let them go so easy this time, happy with a carved statue? Will *they* go, Arik, will they give up a second god as easily as a first?" The speaker blinked. "I fear they will resist with their silly claws. I fear the bald Angel will hang them even if they do not resist, because so many in union throws suspicion in him. I fear many things and know little, but I know *we* must be there. You will not stop us, Arik, and we cannot wait for your long-late lasers."

And she turned to the others and said, "Come, we must run," and they had faded into the forest before neKrol could even shout for them to stay. Swearing, he turned back to the bubble.

The two female exiles were leaving just as he entered. Both were close to the end of their term, but they had powerbows in their hands. NeKrol stopped short. "You too!" he said furiously, glaring at them. "Madness, it is the very stuff of madness!" They only looked at him with silent golden eyes, and moved past him toward the trees.

Inside, he swiftly braided his long red hair so it would not catch on the branches, slipped into a shirt, and darted toward the door. Then he stopped. A weapon, he must have a weapon! He glanced around frantically and ran heavily for his storeroom. The powerbows were all gone, he saw. What then, what? He began to rummage, and finally settled for a duralloy machete. It felt strange in his hand and he must have looked most un-martial and ridiculous, but somehow he felt he must take something.

Then he was off, toward the place of the waterfall folk.

NeKrol was overweight and soft, hardly used to running, and the way was nearly two kilometers through lush summer forest. He had to stop three times to rest, and quiet the pains in his chest, and it seemed an eternity before he arrived. But still he beat the Steel Angels; a powerwagon is ponderous and slow, and the road from Sword Valley was longer and more hilly.

Jaenshi were everywhere. The glade was bare of grass and twice as large as neKrol remembered it from his last trading trip, early that spring. Still the Jaenshi filled all of it, sitting on the ground, staring at the pool and the waterfall, all silent, packed together so there was scarcely room to walk among them. More sat above, a dozen in every fruit tree, some of the children even ascending to the higher limbs where the pseudomonks usually ruled alone.

On the rock at the center of the pool, with the waterfall behind them as a backdrop, the talkers pressed around the pyramid of the waterfall folk. They were closer together than even those in the grass, and each had his palms flat against the sides. One, thin and frail, sat on the shoulders of another so that he too might touch. NeKrol tried to count them and gave up; the group was too dense, a blurred mass of gray-furred arms and golden eyes, the pyramid at their center, dark and unmovable as ever.

The bitter speaker stood in the pool, the waters ankle-deep around her. She was facing the crowd and screeching at them, her voice strangely unlike the usual Jaenshi purr; in her scarf and rings, she looked absurdly out of place. As she talked, she waved the laser rifle she was holding in one hand. Wildly, passionately, hysterically, she was telling the gathered Jaenshi that the Steel Angels were coming, that they must leave at once, that they should break up and go into the forest and regroup at the trading base. Over and over again she said it.

But the clans were stiff and silent. No one answered, no one listened, no one heard. In full daylight, they were praying.

NeKrol pushed his way through them, stepping on a hand here and a foot there, hardly able to set down a boot without crunching Jaenshi flesh. He was standing next to the bitter speaker, who still gestured wildly, before her bronze eyes seemed to see him. Then she stopped. "Arik," she said, "the Angels are coming, and *they will not listen.*"

"The others," he panted, still short on breath. "Where are they?" "The trees," the bitter speaker replied, with a vague gesture. "I sent them up in the trees. Snipers, Arik, such as we saw upon your wall."

"Please," he said. "Come back with me. Leave them, leave them. You told them. I told them. Whatever happens, it is their doing, it is the fault of their fool religion."

"I cannot leave," the bitter speaker said. She seemed confused, as so often when neKrol had questioned her back at the base. "It seems I should, but somehow I know I must stay here. And the others will *never* go, even if I did. They feel it much more strongly. We must be here. To fight, to talk." She blinked. "I do not know *why*, Arik, but we must."

And before the trader could reply, the Steel Angels came out of the forest. There were five of them at first, widely spaced; then shortly five more. All afoot, in uniforms whose mottled dark greens blended with the leaves, so that only the glitter of the mesh-steel belts and matching battle helmets stood out. One of them, a gaunt pale woman, wore a high red collar; all of them had hand-lasers drawn.

"You!" the blond woman shouted, her eyes finding Arik at once, as he stood with his braid flying in the wind and the machete dangling uselessly in his hand. "Speak to these animals! Tell them they must leave! Tell them that no Jaenshi gathering of this size is permitted east of the mountains, by order of the Proctor Wyatt, and the pale child Bakkalon. Tell them!" And then she saw the bitter speaker, and started. "And take the laser from the hand of that animal before we burn both of you down!"

Trembling, neKrol dropped the machete from limp fingers into the water. "Speaker, drop the gun," he said in Jaenshi, "*please*. If you ever hope to see the far stars. Let loose the laser, my friend, my child, this very now. And I will take you when Ryther comes, with me to ai-Emerel and further places." The trader's voice was full of fear; the Steel Angels held their lasers steady, and not for a moment did he think the speaker would obey him.

But strangely, meekly, she threw the laser rifle into the pool. NeKrol could not see to read her eyes. The Squadmother relaxed visibly. "Good," she said. "Now, talk to them in their beastly talk, tell them to leave. If not, we shall crush them. A powerwagon is on its way!" And now, over the roar and tumble of the nearby waters,



neKrol could hear it: a heavy crunching as it rolled over trees, rending them into splinters beneath wide duramesh treads. Perhaps they were using the blastcannon and the turret lasers to clear away boulders and other obstacles.

"We have told them," neKrol said desperately. "Many times we have told them, but they do not hear!" He gestured all about him; the glade was still hot and close with Jaenshi bodies and none among the clans had taken the slightest notice of the Steel Angels or the confrontation. Behind him, the clustered talkers still pressed small hands against their god.

"Then we shall bare the sword of Bakkalon to them." the Squadmother said, "and perhaps they will hear their own wailing!" She holstered her laser and drew a screechgun, and neKrol, shuddering, knew her intent.

The screechers used concentrated high-intensity sound to break down cell walls and liquefy flesh. Its effects were psychological as much as anything; there was no more horrible death.

But then a second squad of the Angels were among them, and there was a creak of wood straining and snapping, and from behind a final grove of fruit trees, dimly, neKrol could see the black flanks of the powerwagon, its blastcannon seemingly trained right at him. Two of the newcomers wore the scarlet collar—a red-faced youth with large ears who barked orders to his squad, and a huge, muscular man with a bald head and lined bronze skin. NeKrol recognized him: the Weaponsmaster C'ara DaHan. It was DaHan who laid a heavy hand on the Squadmother's arm as she raised her screechgun. "No," he said. "It is not the way."

She holstered the weapon at once. "I hear and obey."

DaHan looked at neKrol. "Trader," he boomed, "is this your doing?"

"No," neKrol said.

"They will not disperse," the Squadmother added.

"It would take us a day and a night to screech them down," DaHan said, his eyes sweeping over the glade and the trees, and following the rocky twisted path of the waterwall up to its summit. "There is an easier way.

Break the pyramid and they go at once." He stopped then, about to say something else; his eyes were on the bitter speaker.

"A Jaenshi in rings and cloth," he said. "They have woven nothing but deathcloth up to now. This alarms me."

"She is one of the people of the ring-of-stone," neKrol said quickly. "She has lived with me."

DaHan nodded. "I understand. You are truly a godless man, neKrol, to consort so with soulless animals, to teach them to ape the ways of the seed of Earth. But it does not matter." He raised his arm in signal; behind him, among the trees, the blastcannon of the powerwagon moved slightly to the right. "You and your pet should move at once." DaHan told neKrol. "When I lower my arm, the Jaenshi god will burn and if you stand in the way, you will never move again."

"The *talkers!*" neKrol protested, "the blast will—" and he started to turn to show them. But the talkers were crawling away from the pyramid, one by one.

Behind him, the Angels were muttering. "A miracle!" one said hoarsely. "Our child! Our Lord!" cried another.

NeKrol stood paralyzed. The pyramid on the rock was no longer a reddish slab. Now it sparkled in the sunlight, a canopy of transparent crystal. And below that canopy, perfect in every detail, the pale child Bakkalon stood smiling, with his Demon-Reaver in his hand.

The Jaenshi talkers were scrambling from it now, tripping in the water in their haste to be away. NeKrol glimpsed the old talker, running faster than any despite his age. Even he seemed not to understand. The bitter speaker stood open-mouthed.

The trader turned. Half of the Steel Angels were on their knees, the rest had absent-mindedly lowered their arms and they froze in gaping wonder. The Squadmother turned to DaHan. "It is a miracle," she said. "As Proctor Wyatt has foreseen. The pale child walks upon this world."

But the Weaponsmaster was unmoved. "The Proctor is not here and this is no miracle," he said in a steely voice. "It is a trick of some enemy, and I will not be tricked. We will burn the blasphemous thing from the soil of Corlos." His arm flashed down.

The Angels in the powerwagon must have been lax with awe; the blastcannon did not fire. DaHan turned in irritation. "It is no miracle!" he shouted. He began to raise his arm again.

Next to neKrol, the bitter speaker suddenly cried out. He looked over with alarm, and saw her eyes flash a brilliant yellow-gold. "The god!" she muttered softly. "The light returns to me!"

And the whine of powerbows sounded from the trees around them, and two long bolts shuddered almost simultaneously in the broad back of C'ara DaHan. The force of the shots drove the Weaponsmaster to his knees, smashed him against the ground.

"**RUN!**" neKrol screamed, and he shoved the bitter speaker with all his strength, and she stumbled and looked back at him briefly, her eyes dark bronze again and flickering with fear. Then, swiftly, she was running, her scarf aflutter behind her as she dodged toward the nearest green.

"Kill her!" the Squadmother shouted. "Kill them all!" And her words woke Jaenshi and Steel Angels both; the children of Bakkalon lifted their lasers against the suddenly-surgings crowd, and the slaughter began.

NeKrol knelt and scrabbled on the moss-slick rocks until he had the laser rifle in his hands, then brought it to his shoulder and commenced to fire. Light stabbed out in angry bursts; once, twice, a third time. He held the trigger down and the bursts became a beam, and he sheared through the waist of a silver-helmeted Angel before the fire flared in his stomach and he fell heavily into the pool.

For a long time he saw nothing; there was only pain and noise, the water gently slapping against his face, the sounds of high-pitched Jaenshi screaming, running all around him. Twice he heard the roar and crackle of the blastcannon, and more than twice he was stepped on. It all seemed unimportant. He struggled to keep his head on the rocks, half out of the water, but even that seemed none too vital after a while. The only thing that counted was the burning in his gut.

Then, somehow, the pain went away, and there was a lot of smoke and horrible smells but not so much noise, and neKrol lay quietly and listened to the voices.

"The pyramid, Squadmother?" someone asked.

"It is a miracle," a woman's voice replied. "Look, Bakkalon stands there yet. And see how he smiles! We have done right here today!"

"What should we do with it?"

"Lift it aboard the powerwagon. We shall bring it back to Proctor Wyatt."

Soon after the voices went away, and neKrol heard only the sound of the water, rushing down endlessly, falling and tumbling. It was a very restful sound. He decided he would sleep.

The crewman shoved the crowbar down between the slats and lifted. The thin wood hardly protested at all before it gave. "More statues, Jannis," he reported, after reaching inside the crate and tugging loose some of the packing material.

"Worthless." Ryther said, with a brief sigh. She stood in the broken ruins of neKrol's trading base. The Angels had ransacked it searching for armed Jaenshi, and debris lay everywhere. But they had not touched the crates.

The crewman took his crowbar and moved on to the next stack of crated artifacts. Ryther looked wistfully at the three Jaenshi who clustered around her, wishing they could communicate a little better. One of them, a sleek female who wore a trailing scarf and a lot of jewelry and seemed always to be leaning on a powerbow, knew a smattering of Terran. but hardly enough. She picked up things quickly, but so far the only thing of substance she had said was, "Jamson' World. Arik take us. Angels kill." That she had repeated endlessly until Ryther had finally made her understand that, yes, they would take them. The other two Jaenshi, the pregnant female and the male with the laser, never seemed to talk at all.

"Statues again." the crewman said, having pulled a crate from atop the stack in the ruptured storeroom and pried it open.

Ryther shrugged; the crewman moved on. She turned her back on him and wandered slowly outside, to the edge of the spacefield where the *Lights of Jolostar* rested, its open ports bright with yellow light in the gathering gloom of dusk. The Jaenshi followed her, as they had followed her since she arrived; afraid, no doubt, that she would go away and leave them if they took their great bronze eyes off her for an instant.

"Statues," Ryther muttered, half to herself and half to the Jaenshi. She shook her head. "Why did he do it?" she asked them, knowing they could not understand. "A trader of his experience? You could tell me, maybe, if you knew what I was saying. Instead of concentrating on deathcloths and such, on real Jaenshi art, why did Arik train you people to carve alien versions of human gods? He should have known no dealer would accept such obvious frauds. Alien art is *alien*." She sighed. "My fault, I suppose. We should have opened the crates." She laughed.

The bitter speaker stared at her. "Arik deathcloth. Gave."

Ryther nodded, abstractly. She had it now, hanging just above her bunk; a strange small thing, woven partly from Jaenshi fur and mostly from long silken strands of flame red hair. On it, gray against the red, was a crude but recognizable caricature of Arik neKrol. She had wondered at that, too. The tribute of a widow? A child? Or just a friend? What *had* happened to Arik during the year the *Lights* had been away? If only she had been back on time, then . . . but she'd lost three months on Jamison's World, checking dealer after dealer in an effort to unload the worthless statuettes. It had been middle autumn before the *Lights of Jolostar* returned to Corlos, to find neKrol's base in ruins, the Angels already gathering in their harvests.

And the Angels—when she'd gone to them, offering the hold of unwanted lasers, offering to trade, the sight on those blood-red city walls had sickened even her. She had thought she'd gone prepared, but the obscenity she encountered was beyond any preparation. A squad of Steel Angels found her vomiting, beyond the tall rusty gates, and had escorted her inside, before the Proctor.

Wyatt was twice as skeletal as she remembered him. He had been standing outdoors, near the foot of a huge platform-altar that had been erected in the middle of the city. A startlingly lifelike statue of Bakkalon, encased in a glass pyramid and set atop a high redstone plinth, threw a long shadow over the wooden altar. Beneath it, the squads of Angels were piling the newly-harvested neograss and wheat and the frozen carcasses of bushogs.

"We do not need your trade," the Proctor told her. "The World of Corlos is many-times-blessed, my child, and Bakkalon lives among us now. He has worked vast miracles, and shall work more. Our faith is in Him." Wyatt gestured toward the altar with a thin hand. "See? In tribute we burn our winter stores, for the pale child has promised that this year winter will not come. And He has taught us to cull ourselves in peace as once we were culled in war, so the seed of Earth grows ever stronger. It is a time of great new revelation!" His eyes had burned as he spoke to her; eyes darting and fanatic, vast and dark, yet strangely flecked with gold.

As quickly as she could, Ryther had left the City of the Steel Angels, trying hard not to look back at the walls. But when she had climbed the hills, back toward the trading base, she had come to the ring-of-stone, to the broken pyramid where Arik had taken her. Then Ryther found that she could not resist, and powerless she had turned for a final glance out over Sword Valley. The sight had stayed with her.

Outside the walls the Angel children hung, a row of small white-smocked bodies still and motionless at the end of long ropes. They had gone peacefully, all of them, but death is seldom peaceful; the older ones, at least, died quickly, necks broken with a sudden snap. But the small pale infants had the nooses round their waists, and it had seemed clear to Ryther that most of them had simply hung there till they starved.

As she stood, remembering, the crewman came from inside neKrol's broken bubble. "Nothing," he reported. "All statues."

Ryther nodded.

"Go?" the bitter speaker said. "Jamson' World?"

"Yes," she replied, her eyes staring past the waiting *Lights of Jolostar*, out toward the black primal forest. The Heart of Bakkalon was sunk forever. In a thousand thousand woods and a single city, the clans had begun to pray.