

The Harrison Chapters

TRAVELLER TALES

*Science-Fiction Adventure
Novel set in the Far Future*

James Vassilakos

THE HARRISON CHAPTERS

by James Vassilakos

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Prelude

An Interview with Michael Harrison

Memory: *"Okay, Mr. Harrison..."*

Harrison: *"Is that thing on?"*

Memory: *"Yes. As you are no doubt aware, Memory is an Outworld Publication dedicated to the gathering of biographical information regarding popular figures of our time for the purpose of constructing..."*

Harrison: *"Is this you're standard spiel?"*

Memory: *"Yes... for the purpose of constructing more accurate historical pictures for generations to come. As such..."*

Harrison: *"...nothing I say will be released for at least ten standard years after my official demise..."*

Memory: *"You're stealing me lines?"*

Harrison: *"You wanna do this interview or not?"*

Memory: *"Fair enough. Let's start off with the basics. Self description. What is your name?"*

Harrison: *"You tell me."*

Memory: *"Please Mister Harrison..."*

Harrison: *"Call me Mike. For the record, I was christened Michael James Harrison. Imperial bureaucracy recognizes only the first and last name, however."*

Memory: *"Christened?"*

Harrison: *"Y'know, baptized? It had to do with some religion my parents subscribed to."*

Memory: *"Do you?"*

Harrison: *"No..."*

Memory: *"You're height?"*

Harrison: *"Average."*

Memory: *"Could you please be more precise."*

Harrison: *"Probably."*

Memory: *"Well?"*

Harrison: *"I'm 180 centimeters."*

Memory: *"Weight?"*

Harrison: *"Seventy-five kilograms."*

Memory: *"Hair color?"*

Harrison: *"Brown, tending toward auburn or so I've been told."*

Memory: *"Eye color?"*

Harrison: *"Y'know, I can just give you a picture if it would help."*

Memory: *"Eye color?"*

Harrison: *"Brown."*

Memory: *"How old are you?"*

Harrison: *"Thirty-seven standards."*

Memory: *"Your birthdate is 218-619?"*

Harrison: *"I believe that's right."*

Memory: *"And your place of birth being Eden, Poseidon subsector, Ares sector, Hercules centrant, the Empire."*

Harrison: *"Yes."*

Memory: *"Tell me about it."*

Harrison: *"I don't really know what there's to tell. Most people already know about what happened."*

Memory: *"From Shattered Eden. We'd like to hear the short of it again."*

Harrison: *"Okay, well... Eden is just a little satellite orbiting Nod, the system's main gas giant. The core is so dense, however, that its gravitational influence is strong enough to attract a descent atmosphere which supports a terra-norm ecosystem. The planet's anarchist state was founded by a rebellion within the Imperial military during the second civil war. It seems that in the thick of the struggle, Constantine wanted to test a top secret war device capable of imploding gas giants. That's the rumor anyway. The population rebelled, taking control of the naval facility orbiting the gas giant. After the war, the archduke tried reconsolidation, effectively killing off 99% of the population with a biological agent popularly known as the Death Bug. However, he was forced to shift his attention with the Siri rebellion and didn't get back to us until there was already a big stink in the TNS."*

"The sparse population that remains doesn't have much more of a government than you'd expect for a small town. Further, they're all spread out far enough all over the world that nobody is really capable of dictating rules to anybody else. There are certain standards over what's proper and what's not, but that's about all."

Memory: *"Will you ever go back there?"*

Harrison: *"I'm a little scared of the place to be honest, not that I don't want to go back, mind you. My parents got me off planet before they died of an emerging strain of the bug. We were of the very few who were uninfected. Most of the folks left still carry various strains. Our medical technology is good enough to effectively quarantine and occasionally to stop its progression, but not so good as a cure. In 628 my parents found out they had the bug. Luckily it wasn't contagious enough to overcome my immunizations. They knew I'd get it sooner or later if I stuck around, so they got rid of me ASAP."*

Memory: *"Where were you educated?"*

Harrison: *"I was shipped off to Tyber, a yucky-foo place I never got used to. I studied foreign languages, some history, and journalism. The university offered vacation packages to Tizar since it was so close, so that's how I got here."*

Memory: *"What have you learned since then?"*

Harrison: *"I've learned quite a bit about various cultures and religions since I've taken this job, not much about them very appealing. Some interstellar law in there. I've learned to ride a flycycle. You can't do that very well on Tyber. Air's to dirty and acidic. I learned more about operating computers than I expected to. I've had to shoot a gun from time to time, not that I'd call myself a marksman or anything. I've picked up more bits and pieces of various languages. It's funny how they begin to fit together; astrographically. You see how dialects tend to evolve, how environment dictates vocabulary; it's really more interesting than it sounds."*

Memory: *"I'm sure..."*

Harrison: *"Fine... be that way."*

Memory: *"What were you doing a year ago?"*

Harrison: *"I was on Telmar last year. There was a civil war in the brewing. Long story. I got paid very well. Bill went with me. We almost got shot a couple times. I also visited Tyber and Calanna before that. Routine jobs to make ends meet. I was having trouble financing the house. Pissed me off, because here I was with this big house and I couldn't even live in it."*

Memory: *"What were you doing a month ago?"*

Harrison: *"Recuperating from a hangover probably. The festivities after Telmar never seemed to cease. Me and Bill had a lot to celebrate besides the money. I never did find out what he did with his half."*

Memory: *"Do you work?"*

Harrison: *"I thought it was my so-called work that led to this interview."*

Memory: *"We're just sucking the air out. In you honest opinion, do you work? "*

Harrison: *"Well, I like to pretend I do; on occasion at least. My job allows me to take the role of the independently wealthy eccentric from time to time, only I'm not old enough to play the part very well. I tend to just sit around and sniff for something interesting mostly. Niki helps with that."*

Memory: *"Doing what?"*

Harrison: *"The job title is independent gatherer. In the news business, that means I'm a cross between a hired gun and a snoop house guest. Instead of being put on such and such a story, I go out and find stories. If that means breaking the law, I can always plead freedom of the press. You get good at it after awhile."*

Memory: *"How do you like to spend your spare time?"*

Harrison: *"How do I like to spend my spare time or how do I usually end up spending my spare time. That's the difference between taking nice long walks on the beach and curling up half-drunk hoping the waves don't drown you before morning. I'm lazy. I like to relax. Occasionally I get into a social mood, but that usually passes like most other modern insanities."*

Memory: *"What do you like most?"*

Harrison: *"Well, I'm not sure it's printable... okay, everything's printable... but barring anything entirely uncivilized, I like being with friends such as they are; I like to watch the sun set on the ocean's horizon; I like picnics and riding my flycycle over the flat sands on the coast. I like my job. That surprises most folks. Something about busting the big people always makes my day, particularly if they're Imperials. I guess it doesn't take much imagination to figure out why."*

Memory: *"What do you like least?"*

Harrison: *"Nightmares are never fun. Drunken nightmares are worse. Having to do grunt work isn't much fun either. My first job as a gatherer, I was watching people walk out of a subway exit, counting heads for some statistician because he didn't trust the transit board figures. That was before Shattered Eden came out. Being an unknown was generally a drag. Being well known has its own problems, but they're completely opposite and can often be turned to an advantage, so I don't have too much to complain about. I think the thing I like least about my job is that it takes me and my friends into situations that are downright lethal at times. Clandestine drops are the worst. That whole episode on Telmar was extremely stupid. That fact that our team took only one fatality, albeit the team leader, is something we like to pretend we're proud over. The truth is that luck plays a larger part than people will usually admit."*

Memory: What makes you angry?

Harrison: *"Losing a good friend. When I lost Kitara, that really blew my day. Maybe because of my parents, those things don't affect me like they'd get to most people. Maybe. For day to day things I like to maintain an even keel. Knowing someone is lying to me gets me mad, but as a professional gatherer you learn to channel those sort of emotions into some constructive... usually that is."*

Memory: *"What makes you happy?"*

Harrison: *"Being with friends. I guess I'm easy to please."*

Memory: *"What makes you laugh?"*

Harrison: *"Niki makes me laugh. Some of the local headlines in the Galactican are designed for humor's sake. When you're into news as a business, entertainment tends to take precedence over information content."*

Memory: *"What experience has made the strongest mark on you?"*

Harrison: *"Probably losing my parents. No surprises there. Losing Kitara also. They had a lot in common. They all knew it was coming. When I go, I hope its quick. I'd rather not deal with the anticipation."*

Memory: *"What person has made the strongest mark on you?"*

Harrison: *"My parents shaped me into who I am. After they died, I'd have to give the trophy to Tara. It wasn't just her execution on Calanna, although that had a lot to do with it. She was just special."*

Memory: *"In what way?"*

Harrison: *"In many ways. I'd rather not get into it."*

Memory: *"What have you done that you are most proud of?"*

Harrison: *"My first book, Shattered Eden. Only after getting it out, published, talked about, was I ever really able to come to terms with what the Imps did there. The Galactican ran lengthy excerpts. It wasn't the money or even the fact that it put me on the map. Believe it or not, I didn't make all that much from it. First time writers rarely do. Tyberian Publications reaped billions off me, or so I've been told, but being new in the business, I had to swallow a lot of their shit. They stuck me out on a ten year contract. Everything I wrote. Since I already had ties to the Galactican, they basically rented me out. It wasn't until the renegotiation that I could even buy this house."*

Memory: *"What have you done that you are most ashamed of?"*

Harrison: *"Leaving my parents when they were sick. I went willingly. It was the only way it would have worked. Since I was a minor, I couldn't even be prosecuted. I basically let them take all the risks. A better son would've stayed."*

"There are other things. Taking pics of salamen on Aiwelk wasn't the best thing I ever did. I didn't have much of a choice, of course; I was still being rented out by Tyberian Pub. And it wasn't like I was pulling the trigger. But..."

"And then there's Tara. That never sleeps. I keep thinking of other things I could have tried to do. There's Davin. There wasn't too much I could've done about that, but then again you never know. The guilt is spread pretty thick in this business."

Memory: *"Do you have a philosophy of life?"*

Harrison: *"I keep thinking I've heard every one there is or could possibly be until another comes sprinting along. No, I don't keep any favorites."*

Memory: *"Do you have a religion?"*

Harrison: *"If I pray, it'll probably be to the moon dogs of space or Bill's mama. I've never been taken in by that stuff. About all I can say, belief-wise, is that I think there's more out there than what we realize. What it is, I dunno."*

Memory: *"Could you be more specific?"*

Harrison: *"I once had a philosophy prof who said God is the identity function on the universe, whatever that's supposed to mean. Umm, can you strike that last statement?"*

Memory: *"Many people see the life of an IG as... well, adventuresome. And it has been for you by nearly all accounts. How would you characterize it."*

Harrison: *"I dunno. It's a living."*

Memory: *"Okay.. How about the money."*

Harrison: *"I like to spend it. Strike that, I like... being able to live comfortably, the way you wanna live... it's nice. I'm not saying I grew up impoverished or anything. Eden was a fairly rich world, and people adapted to the disaster. Labor was replaced by robots, there was practically no service sector except what you could do long distance. But living on Tizar, on the beach, with a nice house, and not having to worry about money... I have to say me and money have generally gotten along rather well."*

Memory: *"How about the knowledge access that comes with the job?"*

Harrison: *"For a gatherer, knowledge and money are interchangeable commodities. Knowledge for knowledge's sake I'll leave to scholars."*

Memory: *"How about the power it can afford?"*

Harrison: *"It comes in handy to know that you can rip waves through other peoples lives and to know that they know it too. Being an well known gatherer affords that privilege, and I do use it from time to time. Again, its all a matter of leverage and what you're trying to achieve by using it. Having power simply to have power has never made much sense to me. That sort of thing doesn't give me a charge."*

Memory: *"Sometimes you work takes you into physical conflict. Any words to share with us on that topic?"*

Harrison: *"To be honest, I'd rather run. Sometimes you feel you have to fight, or that you have some advantage and can afford to be cocky. If you wanna interview a fighter, interview Bill. He enjoys that sort a thing."*

Memory: *"How does killing make you feel?"*

Harrison: *"Lousy. I'm not a psycho. I'll do it. I have done it. I'm not a total pacifist, but if it has to be done then there's no choice.... I don't feel as bad as I should probably, but there you have it."*

Memory: *"I take it, it's a facet of your work you don't like to think about too much."*

Harrison: *"To put words in my mouth... yes."*

Memory: *"Okay. Name something naughty you did when you were about twelve years old that you got away with?"*

Harrison: *"Twelve? When I was nine I became contraband. You know that story already, and it's not something I feel was particularly naughty anyway since they never sent me back. How could they? I was on Tyber when I was twelve. Probably attending middle school. I remember me and some friends inverted the images on the school monitors while the principal was addressing the student body. We messed with the colors too. Never got caught. That's pretty lame stuff through. I think I do more naughty things now that I'm an adult."*

Memory: *"Such as?"*

Harrison: *"Ummm... can we move to something lighter?"*

Memory: *"What is your favorite color?"*

Harrison: *"Umm... blue. Sea blue."*

Memory: *"What are your hobbies?"*

Harrison: *"Hobbies? Swimming. Kayaking. Boating. Occasional fishing. Taking pictures of my friends when they aren't expecting it. That last one's the most fun. I guess I'm a gatherer at heart."*

Memory: *"What sort of scars or handicaps do you retain, either physical, mental or emotional?"*

Harrison: *"That's light? Nothing physical..."*

Memory: *"Tell me about your work experience?"*

Harrison: *"How much do you want to hear?"*

Memory: *"As much as you feel free to tell. Just... what you've done work-wise over the course of your life?"*

Harrison: *"Well, this is gonna take some time... I wrote Shattered Eden during college. It started out as a hobby and grew into a job I couldn't have quit if you put a gun to my head. I did layout and photo designs for various school periodicals and transferred the experience to a part time job with the Galactican during break periods. Eventually somebody saw the book still in progress and figured out I could write. I got moved out of photo & layouts and up to the floor. I worked with this training group. We had three advisors and I worked under this guy, Kalla was his name. He's the one who made me count heads, and I went on a few photo shoots after that. Mostly grunt stuff."*

"By the time I graduated, the book was finished. I waltzed into Tyberian Pub, meeting this big-wig Kalla set me up with. She got me to sign on for ten years. Turned out to be a big mistake. The first thing they did was get me out of the region. Eden was selling like flimsies, and the TNS was closing in for a personal interview... to help promote the book, or so it was argued."

"Tizar Pub had me by the balls and said if I interviewed it would be a breach of contract. They started using public relations people to handle it, using their own in-house "statements from the author" to keep people interested and clinging to the story. They kept drawing it out, trying to capitalize on the media value. I finally got frustrated and went to TNS. It made Tizar Pub look very bad, and I got sued, of course."

Memory: *"Tell me more about that."*

Harrison: *"Well, it was strange working for the people who were suing me. I was already on the inside where I could make lots of waves. They realized their mistake rather quickly and compromised by shipping me outside Imperial borders in exchange for dropping the suit which was costing them public sentiment anyway. I worked in the*

Yahhen district and Pansentient Alliance, finally coming back by way of the Siri worlds. Most of it was photo work. There were several political essays regarding events in the region. I was invited to attend a conference on Draconia but never managed to make it. Because all this stuff was outside Imperial Space, Tizar Pub could never collect on me. The sad part was that I couldn't convert my liquid assets into credits upon re-entering Imperial space. In the end, I managed to do some speculation with the remainder and made it back to Tyber in reasonable comfort."

"They stuck me back on Tizar, but by that time renegotiations were in order. I got to speak my own terms, and although my fame had largely dwindled during the long absence, I managed to get a job doing independent work. That sort of position is usually handed only to those who brown nose or are born lucky. I'd earned it, so there was an immediate respect not usually accorded with the job title."

"However, the disadvantage was that my stories had to be better than everyone else's because I was getting paid more. By this time the Galactican was already splitting with Tizar Pub, and there was a certain amount of animosity on both sides, so I went to Tizar and played monkey with their bureaucracy. With Tara's help, we managed to make a good many people look rather bad. It was dirty laundry, but it did sell, and I needed the money."

"The series was said to be, and I quote, "the most successful of its kind," this being said by the Tizar's public affairs department. It must have been, because it touched off a whole tidalwave of similar stories, not a few being directed at myself. It convinced me to get out of town for awhile. As an interesting side-note, the readership for both sides steadily improved for several standard months before finally slopping off at a new equilibrium."

"By this time I was taking a long cruise with the Royal Fleet, ending up somewhere in the Hepaestus sector, trailing end. I was running out of money, so me and Tara started taking the seedier freighters, and we ended up getting grounded on Mithras. It's an Imperial prison world, also doubled as a medical research lab. Interdicted and the whole bit, but then our jump drive didn't know that. They sent a prisoner detail to help us get back on our feet, and Tara started picking up all sorts of interesting things. Turned into a real adventure. The short of it was that the Imps were using prisoners in genetic research. War research. It cut me to the core, because I'd seen what that sort of thing could do first hand when I was a kid. TNS offered to carry it, but I figured it would get me back in the good with my so-called colleges if I took it to the Galactican and let them run the first copies. That's eventually what happened. TNS and the Platform both picked it up on commission and had a field day, and I was making more money, so all in all, most everyone was happy."

"It was about this time I began taking a break from gathering. I wrote some more essays on biotechnology and its horrific applications as a weapon of war. There were a few others concerning worlds which had successfully broken ties with the Imperium and the why and how of it. The various means they used. Chuck was my editor this time, and he kept me constrained to the subsector, wanting to keep the commentaries locally based. Thus, the two candidates which fell into place were Calanna and Telmar."

"I visited Calanna legally, but ran into a sort of trouble I'd rather not get into. Well, it concerned contraband. Not slaves or anything like that, but technology. It was rather messy and I had to keep myself confined to the embassy for quite some time. Luckily for me, I wasn't there during the bombing. Strangely, there was no statement from any terrorist groups regarding the why of it. I got paranoid and went undercover. Tara came over once she heard about it, and we decided to do a little investigating on our own. To make a long story short, it never panned out. There didn't seem to be any terrorist or state involvement that we could find, and Tara was executed for assisting me in a rather poorly conducted break-in of government offices. I got away.. lucky me, but she was caught. She warned me of an upcoming assassination plot before she died. Other than being inconsequential, it did earn me a friend in the government and got me off planet. Calanna's like that. Politics by the bullet."

"Davin heard about my interest in Telmar about a month later, and being rather cocky by this point or not much caring whether I'd live another day.. never did figure out which... I decided to accept the offer. We dropped in, Davin got killed, and me and Bill got to run around in the snow for several days, dodging bullets and hand grenades. We were captured by the rebels, of course, but as soon as they realized what we were doing, they helped us put our story together, took us on a few of their operations, and got us off planet. I was completely insane, but then front page material usually is."

"That whole experience took my mind off Tara long enough to contemplate getting myself another research assistant. Sure enough, I was back in the Siri institute in no time flat. Niki was better at the parties than she was on the job, but then I wasn't doing very much either. By the time she found Fork, I was thinking of Tara every time I looked at her. We got closer because of it."

Memory: *"During all that time, who would you say your best friend was?"*

Harrison: *"Tara. What can I say? I guess we were closer than I had ever wanted to admit. Niki helped fill in the gap after she died."*

Memory: *"Other friends?"*

Harrison: *"Bill's a friend. Davin was. Chuck rates pretty high up there. Niki's a very good friend. Then there's the party crowd. Y'know how it is."*

Memory: *"I do?"*

Harrison: *"Course you do."*

Memory: *"How about the opposite? Enemies."*

Harrison: *"Enemies? I pissed a lot of people off on Tyber. There was that shitty contract and then the muckraking. I've been told that the whole episode triggered the Tyber Corporation's divestment out of Galactic Press, killing a virtual monopoly in the making. The way I see it, the split was bound to happen sooner or later, but I'm sure there's some truth that I helped it along."*

"The Blanco regime on Telmar would probably like to do me damage. My article made it politically infeasible for the Grand Duke to turn the rebellion into a police action."

"Then there's the Imperium at large. I busted that research lab on Mithras and made the navy look very bad for what they did to Eden."

"All in all, I've got more than any man's share of enemies. Of course, its not like they're just gonna come out and murder me. Well, I hope not anyway."

Memory: *"Tell me about your family."*

Harrison: *"That was a long time ago."*

Memory: *"Indulge me."*

Harrison: *"My dad's name was James Harrison. My mom's name was Lissa Ninque. They both worked at Eden's primary clinic, my mom doing viral-genetic research and containment and my dad operating a shuttle. Nothing too fancy for people trying to survive."*

Memory: *"No siblings?"*

Harrison: *"None that matter."*

Memory: *"You don't want to talk about it."*

Harrison: *"I try to forget most of the past."*

Memory: *"Okay. What would you say your main problem is in the present."*

Harrison: *"I'm interested in finding out what happened to Fork. After that whole episode on Mithras, I know what technology can do in Imperial hands. Maybe he's another victim. Maybe it'll tie in. Who knows?"*

Memory: *"Do you think you'll have much luck?"*

Harrison: *"All sorts of things could go wrong. He could fall into a coma because of some errant drug dispenser. I don't know."*

Memory: *"What do you think your strongest and weakest traits are?"*

Harrison: *"Mine? I'm persistent. I also know when to turn tail. I'm not sure how to answer this."*

Memory: *"Well, how do you see yourself?"*

Harrison: *"I'm a gatherer."*

Memory: *"Not much good. How do you think others see you?"*

Harrison: *"Probably a crusader. Or a troublemaker. Is there ever a difference?"*

Memory: *"Let me get more specific. Do you have a sense of humor?"*

Harrison: *"I like to think I have one."*

Memory: *"What kind?"*

Harrison: *"I laugh where I hear something funny. Look, I'm not as twisted as people say I am. Almost, but not quite...."*

Memory: *"I guess I'm fishing for something."*

Harrison: *"Fishing? I'm lazy until I hook on to something. Then I'm obsessed."*

Memory: *"Still you generalize. What are your ambitions?"*

Harrison: *"To smack a few more Imperial faces before I die. I shouldn't say that, because I've had all the revenge I'm probably entitled. Certainly more than most people reap. But then again, I'm not burned out yet. It's not like I need the money that badly. One more front pagers and I'll be set for retirement. Well, maybe two more."*

Memory: *"What sort of art... music... reading material do you like?"*

Harrison: *"Classics, historical novels. The music varies depending on my mood. Bi-dimensional imaging is my forte when it comes to art, even though its not the in-thing."*

Memory: *"How do you characterize the way you dress?"*

Harrison: *"Simple equals better."*

Memory: *"How would you characterize your home? It's atmosphere?"*

Harrison: *"Quiet. Peaceful. My house is white, has lots of rooms, and is on the beachfront. You know that, of course, because you're in it."*

Memory: *"Expand on that."*

Harrison: *"Ummm..... It's not packed in like those others on the cliffs. And its walking distance from a subway terminal. We're talking prime location. It's a nice place. I don't mean to brag... well, I guess I do, but most people don't realize just what real estate is worth on Tizar. We're talking about a world that has dedicated itself to tourism and the natural environment. Sure, you've got a local planetside population of twenty some-odd billion, but they're all scrunched up into these acrologies... contained living environments with everything you could ever need except privacy and freedom. Over 95% of the people occupy less than a hundredth of one percent of the surface area. If you make sure you're not in that 95%, you know you're doing okay."*

Memory: *"That's pretty good. What else beside that and your background differentiates you from other, successful gatherers such as Bryce, Nabours..."*

Harrison: *"My methods, probably. To put it in economic terms, I fill a production niche."*

Memory: *"What's that supposed to mean?"*

Harrison: *"I hire telepaths as personnel assistants. Somewhat of a no-no. Unlike Bryce, I don't use controllers. Unlike Nabours, I don't use runners. It's all a question of style. The way you look for a story usually dictates more or less what you find, so we each have our niche."*

Memory: *"Ever consider branching out?"*

Harrison: *"What? Invade their territory?"*

Memory: *"It's been done before."*

Harrison: *"And often without success. It takes a certain, I dunno, a certain kind of person to control any method effectively. Running is illegal on Tizar and rather dangerous besides. And a controller can literally ruin your whole day if they're not careful. I don't like having to rely on another person like that."*

Memory: *"Then you'd consider yourself a solo?"*

Harrison: *"Not necessarily. It all depends on the situation, but I like to have the flexibility to go solo. Once you get into cyberspace or use a controller, the tendency is toward addiction. You can say the same thing about telepathy, but not to the same extent. The telepath makes the hook, sure, but unless you know how to reel in the line on your own, someday you'll be shit outta luck."*

Chapter One

The morning sun's golden rays glided peacefully along the quiet coast, sparkling across the ocean waves as the water's edge shifted randomly between sea and shore. A chilly breeze swept its way over the waters and along the damp beach, quietly winding its way through the little used barbecue pits past a long, wooden pier, and then withdrew back out to sea.

Bright beams of sunlight danced across the eastern horizon as the coastal palm trees cut the early summer winds into multiple streams of cool jet and spray and the light into stark showers of silver and scarlet.

Michael Harrison walked barefoot along the shifting earth that divides land and sea. The ankles of his patched work-trousers skidded into the cold waters as he made his way home. The thin blue fabric of a wet dress shirt stretched down his muscular frame to near his knees. His mind pulsed with an overflowing emptiness; thoughts doubled back upon themselves, twisting and turning with the cold waves, drifting against the overwhelming tide.

He slowly turned and walked up the whitish sands climbing a thin railed stairway in contest with gravity. The thick wooden doors were already open, and entering, he stumbled in between the white walls of his beach home searching for the null-tube. The entire structure seemed to wobble slowly around him. Squinting between the specks of salt and sand which stung his eyes, he grabbed one wall with his right hand, keeping the left stiffly extended in case he should find another. Suddenly, the room turned sharply, and an invisible foot kicked his legs out from under him. A pleasant softness enveloped his senses as he rolled up warm and passed out cold.

* * *

"Michael..."

He awoke to a calm feminine voice. Kitara? Still sleep-dazed, his bloodshot eyes roamed the room.

"Why am I on the floor?" he mumbled.

"Because that is where you retired for the..."

Mike groaned as he sat upright hearing the now familiar voice. "I was just talking to myself. You know Cindy, you don't have to..." Mike's voice drifted off as he slowly realized he was talking to his home's computer system. Her voice circuits paused momentarily waiting for him to continue as he massaged his numb arm.

"Talking to oneself is a sign of mental collapse.... Mr. Linden is on line one."

His boss. Mike slumped back on the floor and closed his eyes. "I'm too tired, tell him to fuck off."

Cindy paused for analysis. Mike heard a quiet buzz and a voice, "Hello... Mike?"

"No Mr. Linden. This is Cindy again. Mike said he was tired and he told me to tell you to..."

"Stop!" Mike's voice echoed around the entire house. Cindy's voice promptly cut off transmission. "Cut off the video unit and transfer the line... voice only... to this room."

Mr. Linden's voice broke over the speakers, "...there? Hello? Cindy, I didn't get that?"

Mike sat up again and rubbed his eyes, "Chuck, Mike here...."

"Hi, Mike? How's it going?"

"Great.... What's up?"

"Well, I've got a gentleman over here from the board who'd like to congratulate you on your last piece. I told him I didn't know whether or not you'd be in today, so he suggested I call. How'd you like to come over and lunch with us?"

Mike paused, "Sure, you two gonna be in the Gee-Pee?"

"Yeah, he's checking out our facilities, and he really wants to meet you."

It suddenly occurred to Mike that he should feel flattered. He rubbed the back of his neck and tilted his head sideways until the spine popped.

"Ok. I'll be over in... how's three cents sound?"

"Sounds great."

"Good."

"Okay, thanks. We'll see you then."

"Bye."

Line one closed with a short breaker. A computer a thousand kilometers away had already multiplied the duration of the call by its distance and tolled Chuck's fund. Mike wondered what the editor wanted.

* * *

The warm shower spray dissolved the dirt and sweat in no time, and Mike put on a blue mendwear dress shirt, white gelknicks, and a pair of light gravboots. He combed his long, thin, brown hair and tied it in the back. In a few minutes he was in the pantry searching for the standard grub. Picking up a flimsy and light pen he headed back to the living room and straightening his shirt stepped down the stairs into the street.

The sun was at high-noon, and the short walk to the subway entrance proved uneventful. There was the usual strain of gravcars and flycycles lined along the beachway, and the hundreds of floaters sailing above the coast made a moving pokadot design of shadows along the sands, but there was nothing unusual in the way the tourists eyed Mike over as if he were a specimen at an alien exhibit. Being the only decently dressed person within several kilometers he walked with a pretended importance, as if he owned the entire beach and could toss them all off at the snap of a finger. He grinned at the thought as he coasted down the escalator at the subway entrance.

Showing his all-month pass, he headed past security and straight to the terminal. The gravbuses entered and left the port in perfect succession; and within two minutes his bus had arrived. He boarded and easily found a seat. An old lady eyed him from across the car, and a handsome couple with kids quarreled over where to eat. He sat back and looked out the window. His hangover was nearly unnoticeable, and he rubbed his arm where Cindy had indubitably injected him with the get-well juice.

The train rose above the surface and fell again to catch another station more inland, the sudden shift from daylight to fluorescence leaving the passengers momentarily blind as their eyes adjusted to the rhythmic tempo of the passing cold lanterns. Two young men entered as the doors opened, their faces twisted in consternation as each tried to make his point more loudly than the other. They fell silent as they headed toward the back of the car, the second's long, bony finger still pointed in exaggerated certainty.

The train started rolling again, and this time quickened its pace for some time before eventually rising to the surface. Out the window Silver-Tri-Towers stood as a testament to the might of man. Its arms branching from the main structure reached near the clouds, and the top of the structure blurred with the refraction of light against the atmosphere. The couple's children rushed to the window and pressed their noses against its surface leaving little spots of dense fog on the layered plastic.

The train lost speed and dipped under the surface to stop. The old lady got off and the two young men quietly resumed their discussion. The couple sat quietly, and one of their children asked when they would get to eat.

Soon the train was off again, and as it rose above the surface the kids resumed their former positions at the window, panting puppy dogs with eyes bent skyward. The train turned toward the structure, dipped below the surface, and accelerated. It pulled into a large underground station. Mike quickly exited as a car load of people pressed in.

He made his way through the crowds to a lift. Dozens of people entered as the doors closed against the

stragglers. The lift stopped on several floors, picking up and dropping off people along the way, until it reached public floor 872, and Mike stepped off. A short walk through the busy halls led him to the Gee-Pee. Mike peeked between the columns and spotted Linden talking with an elderly gentleman and a young woman over three highbowls of zardocha.

Mike held his position and studied the trio. His boss, the section's copy-editor, was putting on a smiley-face for his administrative counterparts. His small body wrapped itself into a tangled web of false composure, as a dim fluorescent beam caught his olive brown face, receding hairline, and large brown eyes at just the right angle to make Mike wish he'd been carrying his trusty camera.

The gentleman sitting across from the editor was well known to many in the press office. He had a reputation as somebody who could pull stings, and his white hair and often brittle manner did little to detract from his prestige. Just the opposite, they served to make him appear more distinguished. Mike had seen his picture a dozen times and fit together a dozen odd facts in his mind about the man, but he couldn't connect a name to the face.

The lady caught Mike's attention. She seemed strangely familiar. Aside from being simply a woman, her long blonde hair, tan skin, and lithe figure made her appearance incredibly attractive. She sipped her drink carefully, letting the ice flakes clink against the inside of her highbowl as she watched the two men talk.

The chatter from the rest of the room blurred together with their own conversation so well that Mike had trouble picking out specific words. He watched Linden's face. The editor looked like he was geared into brag-mode. The other two listened with fascinated expressions.

Mike slipped his consumer card through the scanner as he entered the room. Linden noticed him immediately and motioned him over.

"Well speak of the devil; Michael, this is Mr. John Clay from the company board, and his niece Miss Robin Clay."

"It's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Harrison. Charles has just been telling us a great deal about your work."

"Does that mean I get a raise?"

They all laughed, especially Robin. She seemed to have a special twinkle in her eyes as if there were a secret she wanted to tell him. Her eyes captivated Mike. They were deep sea blue, or maybe sky blue; he couldn't decide. They weren't too dark or too light. Must be implants, Mike thought as he shook off the fascination.

Then Robin extended her golden tanned arm as if she wanted it to be either kissed from pinky to armpit or broken in half at the elbow. Deciding on the third alternative, Mike extended his own arm in response, and with a smile he shook her hand. It was an archaic gesture to be sure, but one still used among gatherers.

Michael sat in the empty chair across from Robin. A fourth highbowl filled with zardocha dropped from overhead and floated in front of Mike. He tested it and sent it aside with a gentle nudge. The dark licorice cafe stung his taste with its frigid strength.

"We were actually thinking along the lines of a different sort of compensation."

"Mr. Clay, I was joking."

"Within every joke, there must be an element of truth. Without it, the joke isn't funny."

Mike smiled, "Okay, get to the point."

"Michael, we at the Board of Galactic Press & Publications have been watching this division for a number of years. Your rapid progress and personal achievements have not gone unnoticed by the administration. Granted, there have been pieces of your research, some quite extraordinary pieces of information gathering, which were never published... with good reason."

"I'm sure." Mike echoed.

"You, perhaps more than any other gatherer within the sector, understands that we are much more than a news source, and that our gatherers are much more than reporters. They're investigators, they're a form of police, they go into situations where they often risk life and limb."

"The point."

"Well, it's actually somewhat stale. I hope you're not offended, but we'd like to hold an awards' banquet for the division as a whole. Just something to boost morale, and to recognize a job well done."

Mike sipped the zardocha and glanced sideways at Linden. The editor smiled back; his cajoling face Mike thought.

"Go ahead."

"Well, as one of the key figures... as the key figure in your division's success I should say, we'd like you to speak at the ceremony."

Linden beamed, "You have become somewhat of a celebrity Mike."

Mike floated the highbowl in front of his chin, spinning in with one finger to quicken the fluid.

"I'm honored... but I wouldn't know what to say."

"What, with all your experience, with all the various worlds you've visited, not to mention those you've

infiltrated," Clay laughed at his own joke, "I'm sure you could think of something to say."

"I really doubt it, sir."

Clay smiled, but Mike sensed something in the older man's eyes that told him to reconsider.

"Michael, Charles here has already hinted to me that you might feel this way, and in your shoes, I might feel the same. After all, a gatherer needs a certain amount of anonymity in order to be effective... and just considering what a high profile you have been earning lately... how long do you really think you can keep it up?"

"I really haven't thought about it, sir," he lied.

"Well, perhaps you should really think about it. This banquet isn't just to fill space and give our people something to do and be happy about. It's opportunity time. An opportunity for us to examine our talent, to redefine our direction, to recruit new prospects into the hierarchy... Charles tells me that you dislike social functions. Is that true, Michael."

"That would depend."

"On what?"

"On what's in it for me."

Clay paused dumbfounded and then suddenly burst out laughing. Charles and Robin chimed in as if on cue, but Mike was sure he felt someone kick him under the table.

"Shy, Mr. Harrison, you're not."

Linden set the floating highbowl down on the table. He looked a little tired and annoyed.

"Mike, what Mr. Clay is saying is that you've done a good job, but that with the success you're losing your value as a gatherer. It's time to step up the ladder."

"You mean behind a desk."

"Mr. Harrison," Robin spoke for the first time in the conversation, "if you were more valuable behind a desk than in the field, where would you rather be?"

"I'm still pulling my own weight."

"You and who's army?"

"What's that suppose to mean?"

"Okay, ask yourself this. How much of your gathering in the field is physically carried out by a third party? If your answer is more than half, then you already over the hill, and half way down the other side."

Clay coughed, "Take care with the metaphors, my dear. Mr. Harrison, forgive my niece, but we understand you've been training a number of research assistants?"

"I'm not going to take a job training gatherers. I've got enough of that already."

"We're not asking for that. We are simply proving a point, that your useful life is swiftly coming to a close unless you change your field of endeavor."

"I couldn't be an administrator, and I know I couldn't edit."

Clay smiled, this time genuinely Mike thought.

"You'll be surprised at what you can do when opportunity beckons. Isn't that right Charles. Why, we ourselves are living examples. You think, Mr. Harrison, that your editor was born behind the desk, flimsy in hand? He started just like you. But we all must move on. The banquet is in three days, yes, it's honoring the anniversary of the founding. It will be at the Lion's Den in Greenflower. Everything has already been set-up, the promotion has already been released in this morning's update, and all you have to do is be there and say a few words to entertain the masses, rub a few noses, and... and pretend that you're having fun."

Mr. Clay stood up and grimaced at the inside of his wrist. The timepiece implant seemed to tell him he was late. He shot Mike a departing glance, "Then we'll see you at the Banquet, Mr. Harrison... Mr. Linden."

Mike stood up, "Will your niece be there?"

"Of course."

"Then I won't," Mike felt like saying.

Miss Clay shook his hand in a comfortable contrast to the trial run. For the second time during the encounter she spoke, "Will you sit by me at the banquet, Mr. Harrison? I am very much interested in your work."

Mike grinned, "I really don't have a choice about this, do I?"

"Not if you know what's good for you."

Mike paused and tried to recall the question. He decided later that it was her blue eyes that made him give in so easily.

"I'd be delighted, Miss Clay. If you would like, stop by my house, and I can show you a few items of the trade."

She smiled, or perhaps blushed. "I might take you up on that. Where do you live?"

Mr. Clay conveniently interrupted, "Come now dear, we must be off."

Mike defused the interception, "Sector E-12, 81152 Beach Boulevard."

She smiled apologetically as her uncle grabbed her arm and led her out the door.
When Mike turned around Linden was looking a little angry.
"What?" Mike asked defensively.
Linden turned away and then tried to keep from laughing. "Nothing. Just..."
"Just what?"
"Just don't blow it, Harrison." Linden was smiling.
Mike smiled back, and they laughed. Everything was still okay.

* * *

Mike returned to the house. He recalled that he hadn't seen the morning update, but then he had no will to hear, see, smell, or otherwise comprehend what one dull reporter considered news. He entered the bathroom and relieved himself of the last night's merrymaking. The medical scanner's blue light twirled about until it found and homed in on Mike. He knew Cindy was conducting an analysis. Just as long as she kept to herself about it.

He strolled into his room and sat back on the circular bed. The entire chamber glimmered with an eerie, dim blue light. An opaque window on the wall farthest from the door kept out sunlight and the bothersome noises of modern civilization. He relaxed a bit on the edge of the bed and gathered his senses. A shimmering multicolored light on the controller wall betrayed Cindy's presence.

"What is it?"

It blinked and moved to the center of the wall. "What is what, Michael?"

He frowned. Computers weren't supposed to answer questions with questions. "What are you doing in my room?"

The light blinked a few times. "I work here." Her feminine voice was as matter-of-fact as ever he knew it to be.

He decided to beat her at her own game rather than simply getting frustrated. "Obviously you work here. Please allow me to rephrase myself. Why don't you switch off?"

"Would you like me to switch off?"

She did it again. He contemplated servicing the system by hand with a laser rifle but quickly decided against it.

"No. You're too hard to deal with right now. Switch to lower brain mode."

"Done," the response was instantaneous.

From there he decided to do a little learning as long as Cindy's logic circuits were switched off. "Access. File. Information. Library. Galactic Press. Person. John Clay. Personal history.

"...Insufficient person specification. Please re-specify at person."

"John Clay, Boardmember of Galactic Press. Personal History.

"...File accessed."

"Write Picture."

"...Insufficient picture specification. Please specify picture type."

"Facial, forward, most recent."

The light at the controller wall danced about for a moment, and suddenly the entire wall surface lighted up with a picture of Mr. Clay. Next to him was another man and a woman. They were all walking down a flight of stairs. The others looked vaguely familiar to Mike, but he couldn't place their names.

"Read picture from wall. Identify. Persons. All."

"...Persons identified."

"Say identifications."

"...Specify data format."

"Left to right. Name and official occupation."

"...Mrs. Helen Jaden, Galactic Press, Tizarian Division, Boardmember. Mr. Edmund Sandair, Galactic Press, Tizarian Division, Chairman of the Board of Directors. Mr. John Clay, Galactic Press, Tizarian Division, Boardmember."

Mike jotted down notes on a flimsy. "Clear wall." When he turned back toward the controller wall, the entire surface was black.

"Say personal history, format brief."

The light at the center of the wall reappeared and began to flicker on and off. "...Personal history, Mr. John Clay in memory. Loading format brief.... Mr. John Clay. Born two-hundred and twelve standard days into the Imperial year five-hundred and ninety-one. Attended University of Arcadia majoring in interstellar corporate business. Highest degree received, Master's, at age of twenty-four standard years. Joined with Galactic Press Arcadian Division as marketing advisor in Imperial year six-hundred and sixteen. Was promoted to chief marketing advisor..."

"Stop," Mike was getting bored, so he decided to zoom in on his real object of interest. "Access file. Information.

Library. Galactic Press. Person. Miss Robin Clay, niece of Mr. John Clay, Boardmember of Galactic Press. Personal History."

"...File Accessed."

"Write picture, Planetary Identification, Tizar, most current."

A mug shot of the girl he met that afternoon slowly rotated on the controller wall. Mike studied it quickly and then prepared to jot down more notes.

"Say name. Format first, middle, last."

"...Robin Athena Clay."

"Say official occupation."

"...Independent contractor, gatherer, Galactic Press, Tizarian Division."

Mike blinked in disbelief. "That's what I am."

"...Illegal command ignored."

He went to the kitchen, got an algae-cooler and some nutrichips, and returned to the bedroom. Sitting once again in front of the controller wall, he watched the flickering light at the center of the wall for nearly a minute before deciding on a course of action.

"Say list of accomplishments."

"...Illegal command ignored."

"Say list of articles where subject is mentioned."

The light at the center of the screen flickered for a while longer. With Cindy's interpretive processor shut down, the command would take time to be understood.

The light disappeared.

"Stop." Mike was becoming impatient.

"No process in effect. Command Ignored."

"What?"

"...Illegal command ignored."

"Is subject mentioned in any articles?"

"...Illegal command ignored."

Mike began to drink the cooler. He didn't stop until it was finished.

"Switch to higher brain mode."

"Hello Michael." The artistically feminine voice of the SNDI system, so often applauded by computer evaluators, had never sounded sweeter.

Mike got right down to business. "I assume you have all the data of my conversation with your lower brain."

"You assume correctly."

"Is Robin mentioned in any articles?"

"No."

"Has she written any articles?"

"No."

"What is her occupation?"

"She's a gatherer."

"...Who hasn't written anything."

"That is correct."

"She has to have been mentioned in at least one article."

"She isn't."

"Cindy, check for birth announcements."

"There are none."

"Is there a copy of her birth certificate on file?"

"Yes."

"When was she born?"

"On the ninety-first day of six thirty-three."

"Nearly a year before Niki."

"That is correct."

"Where was she born?"

"Greenflower, Silver-Tri county, Tizar."

"That's close."

Mike opened the package of nutrichips and began to munch. "Cindy, in all your experience, when have you ever

encountered a person who was born without the mandatory birth announcements?"

"Offhand, Michael, I know of no single instance."

"Cindy, randomly choose one thousand people from that county, all who were born in six thirty-three, and tell me how many of those people do not have corresponding birth announcements in the news on the day of their birth."

"...There are zero people who do not have birth announcements."

Mike popped a few chips into his mouth, "Check Tizarian Library files. See if her birth announcements are there."

"...There are birth announcements in the files of the Tri-Towers Library."

"Why don't we have them?"

"Because when the file was loaded into my banks, the birth announcements weren't in place." She changed her tone of voice as if a little annoyed at the obvious question.

"Check in our own files for her birth certificate. When was it loaded into your banks."

"The ninety-ninth day of this year, six fifty-six."

"Why wasn't her birth announcement also loaded in."

"News files are read-only after their initial loading. There are no editing features available with this system due to the inherent unlawfulness."

Mike munched on some more nutrichips. They tasted good for a change, and he wondered what the deal was about Robin.

"Mike, you have a visitor at the front door."

"Identify."

"The visitor is not identifiable from the people in your files."

"Describe"

"The visitor is female. She has blonde hair, blue eyes, her height..."

"Stop. Open the door." Mike headed out of the bedroom and toward the front door. Robin was dressed in the white summer dress she wore to lunch.

She smiled, "Hi."

Mike stepped outside. The sun was into its brilliant afternoon splendor, and the entire coast was lined with tanning bodies, just waiting to be sizzled to a crisp.

He smiled as if surprised, "Hi. Come on in. I wasn't expecting you so soon."

She stepped forward cautiously, a little embarrassed, and at the same time enjoying her predicament. "Well, I just happened to be cruising by... and when I remembered your address... and..."

They both laughed.

She stopped in front of him and smiled. The sunlight caught her bright blue eyes, but he was prepared for them this time.

"Well, since you're here... would you like something to drink?" He was careful not to talk into her. He didn't want to blow the second impression by the smell of munchies.

"Sure, if you have water."

He grinned, "Sorry, we're all out. No, just kidding... c'mon."

He led her to the living room. Getting two glasses and filling them with water was no major task, and soon he found himself sitting at the chair next to the sofa he had missed the night before. She nimbly seated herself on the couch and accepted the glass of water from his hand.

"So," he started, "Why ya really here?"

She paused and then smiled, "You said you'd show me some of the tools of the trade?"

"Oh, sure." Mike went to the bedroom and picked up his camera and workset. When he returned, Robin was in the kitchen looking for a place to drop the empty glass.

"Should I just put it here on the countertop."

"Yeah. That'd be fine."

She walked back into the living room while Mike hooked together the camera. "This is a Niko 700AR. The small lens in front here is an all-purpose zoom."

She walked over to him. "Can I?"

"Sure," he put it into her delicate fingers. "Careful, it's kind of heavy."

She looked through the lens and smiled, "Wow. Thirty all the way to a thousand millimeters... plus light intensification. No need for a flash."

"Yeah." Mike was pleased that she knew something about cameras. "That's not all, look." He showed her the storage drive, printer, viewer, and controller board. "Y'know what this is, too?"

She stared in wonder. "So this is top of the line."

He laughed. "For external stills, it's as close to as is practical to use. I mean, it low tech enough that it can fixed on

most worlds if it gets damaged, and, of course, it's replaceable. That's its best feature. This thing here is the storage drive. It can hold up to ten-thousand photos in color. More in black and white. I can plug this hundred picture cartridge into the camera, take pictures, and then transfer them to the drive. If I decide that I don't like them later, poof; I delete them. This thing lets me see 'em, and this printer makes a hard copy. With the controller board you can also edit the pictures in a number of different ways—splicing them, shooting color in, mixing them together, going in pixel by pixel and drawing. Like Niko says, 'It defies the imagination.' So what'd'ya think?"

"Pretty wild," She smiled.

"By the way, I heard you were a gatherer with the company."

"Who told you that?"

"Linden said something about it."

She bit her lip, "I'm just kind of getting into it. Right now I do some research for my uncle."

"Oh," Mike was disappointed, but he was far from through.

"What kind of research," he smiled innocently.

She mimicked the smile, staring straight into his eyes, "Y'know, research."

He stopped the questioning. It was still too early.

"So," she continued, "do you really make money at this."

Mike theatrically looked around the house. She laughed.

"Of course I make money at this."

"But how can you? Information is so cheap these days."

Double meaning, Mike thought. "Yeah, it's cheap. But there are a lot of buying customers. Every two to four weeks the Tizarian Division puts out an issue of *The Galactican*. Every year, I get a good enough story to convince them to give me a large cut of the paper. That, plus front page stories three or four times a year keep me going nicely. We sell to almost a trillion people in this sector alone. Now even if I took only a millicredit off of every buyer every year, you start adding up the numbers and tell me how rich I'd be."

She grinned, "Very rich."

"Ridiculously rich. And I don't settle for any mere millicredit."

"Wow!" She was being obviously sarcastic.

"And that's only half the story."

She smiled, "What's the other half?"

"Through writing these articles people get to recognize my name; and when I turn around to sell other writings, they'll go ahead and load copies into their own terminals since the price of information, as you put it, is so cheap."

"What other writings do you do?" She seemed genuinely interested this time.

Mike shrugged, "Political stuff, argumentative essays, that sort of thing."

"You must be a fantastic writer." She looked serious.

Mike grinned, "Not really... Y'see, when it comes to writing, it's not the style or the syntax or anything like that. It's your subject. Most of the news people I've met are great writers, but they simply can't research a story. They fall flat on their faces when it comes to the subject simply because they start out with boring material."

Robin looked confused, "How can you say that? You're supposed to be a writer."

"No, I'm a gatherer, big difference. It's like your uncle said, the most important thing that I do right now is investigate. All the polishing can be left to the editor and staff, but researching the facts and getting them down is the most important thing for a gatherer. Hey, what're you doing?"

"I'm putting this thing together." Robin connected the storage drive and monitor. She began paging through the memory.

"You sound like you're already missing it. What's this?"

The picture was of a shallow sea. Sulfurous storm clouds loomed heavy over the horizon, and a still yellow mist shrouded the water. Far away, a number of humanoid creatures crouched in the steaming mud and pointed toward the camera.

"That's Aiwelk"

"Are those reptiles?"

"Amphibians. They're actually the descendants of mutated humans if you want to get technical."

"What are they doing there?"

Mike smiled, "They live there."

Robin rabbit-punched him in the ribs. "You know what I mean. What were you doing there?"

"I was taking pictures."

Mike braced his ribs for the second blow.

"Okay, they say one picture's worth a thousand words. I was working on a safari expedition at the time."

Robin gasped.

"It's not what you think. We were low on cash, so were hiring ourselves out as animal catchers. Aiwelk's a protectorate, so we couldn't catch there, but this science team hired us on to catch a few of these critters for 'scientific purposes.' They eventually set-up a base on-world, but at the time, they were working from a circular satellite. I took some picture, because the scientists wanted to know exactly where they came from, and what their physical and social environment was like. They already knew the physical pretty much, but they thought it was important to know who was standing next to who and how they were acting among themselves before we caught them. I don't know if that makes any sense."

Robin nodded, "So what'd you find out?"

"Okay, y'see this character here, in the middle. He's like their shaman. No, I'm not kidding. One thing you learn in this job is that everybody's got their own screwed-up religion. Now, before he was, 'examined' physically all-the-way, okay, the scientists were able to decipher a good portion of their language from him, and with it a good portion of their beliefs."

"Because every language is constructed of beliefs and values."

"That's right. I couldn't have said it better. Now, he wasn't the strong guy, but he was more or less their leader, and without these stills with him in the center, and without the moving pictures we caught of him giving instructions, he'd have never gotten the special attention such an important 'specimen' deserves."

"What'd he think about being a specimen?"

"I'm not sure he really thought about it at all."

Robin zoomed in on him and refocused. The dark scales showed well in the poor light of the dim red star.

"So how'd they examine him physically?"

"Oh, you know scientists." Mike looked away from the monitor.

"Yeah."

"Sometimes I just wish we let them be."

"Did they find anything unusual?"

"Would it matter if they did?"

Robin suddenly looked irritated, "Mind if I use the ladies room?"

"Through that door and to your left."

She got up from the couch and went through the hallway to the bathroom, leaving Mike to gather his wits and wonder what it was that he said.

He looked toward the speaker unit by the videophone. Its black shiny surface glittered in the blue fluorescent light.

"Cindy?"

"Yes Michael?"

"Use the medical scanner on Robin but keep its light off."

"What do you want to know about her?"

"Anything unusual."

"...She's taking her ear off."

Mike's heartbeat jumped. "She's what?"

"...She's taking her ear off, and she's not human."

"No shit.... What is she?"

"An android."

Chapter Two

Faint moonbeams caressed the dark ocean swells as they washed the damp beach with the gloomy remnants of memories past. Mike laid still along the water's edge, his bare feet slowly dipping in and out of the quiet tide. An empty flask rested at arm's length from his tired body as he dreamt about years past, and worlds far across the vast sea of space.

He remembered a gentle Sirian voice warning him of his own impending assassination just hours before her execution and recalled the words of a wealthy industrialist, "People are profits; individuals: losses." He dug out of the past a friend who committed suicide after having found freedom from an Imperial correctional institute and thought on the immoral techniques once practiced by a medical research lab on all assortments of non-volunteers. He remembered a gang of youths beating a elderly man to death because he was an off-worlder and fought back the

recollection of twisted arms and limbs as all the remains of a Tizarian Foreign Embassy staff after a terrorist bombing.

Suddenly, he woke. The familiar sickness was there, but the feeling of being forcibly thrust out of the warmth and safety of Sleep's benign womb was lost to an insidious fear, as if he had barely escaped from the black pit of an ancient nightmare.

"You okay?"

Mike jumped, his nerves swinging his head around nearly to the point of whiplash. It was only Niki, and she promptly began her little giggle at Mike's initial surprise.

He looked over his research assistant with considerable distaste, "What're ya doin' here?"

She drew her hands to her mouth trying to control the spasms of hysteria which only succeeded in making matters worse.

Mike regarded her with a grin, "Fine."

He groggily got to his feet as she rolled on the cold sands clenching her ribs in a coughing fit of laughter.

"C'mon, it wasn't that funny."

Out of breath, she began slowing down. Mike reached for under her shoulders and lifted her small frame off the ground. She put up a mock struggle, laughing all the while.

"Michael... No! Put me down!" He carried her over his shoulder towards the house as she whined, squealed, and laughed.

The house was dark and lonely when they finally arrived. Mike walked in and tumbled Niki on the couch. She rolled herself up around a large pillow and beamed up at him with a smile. He shook his head in disbelief and grinned.

"Aren't ya' gonna say hi?" She was in a playful mood.

"Hi."

They looked at each other for a moment before he continued.

"So, how's my psyche doin'?"

"Just fine... Boss."

"Don't call me that."

She laughed, "Why not? Is it a dirty word?"

He nodded, "Yes. And how's Mr. Fork doin'?"

"Okay-fine."

"Still locked up?"

"Yep, but he's gettin' better."

Mike laughed, "That's sayin' nothin'."

"No, Really. He's a lot better than he was. He's even beginning to talk now."

"What have you gotten out of him?"

"Nothin' much so far. It's still too scrambled to tell what he's thinkin'."

"Bet that makes for some interesting reading though. Look, I'm gonna get a beer, ya want one?"

Her smile faded. "Naw, ya' don't want beer."

"Yes I do," he headed for the kitchen.

"Drink some zardocha instead." She sounded hopeful.

Mike thought about it for half a moment, "Yuchi-foo."

"How 'bout milk?"

He mimicked, "How 'bout beer?"

"You'll get drunk."

He tapped the nozzle release, and twisted the setting knob down to Niki's favorite.

She smiled, "You're not gonna get drunk."

He looked at her, mock-seriousness molding his features into a neutral expression. "Do I ever?"

She started giggling, "Tee hee hee... you were so surprised."

"Was not."

"Hee hee... was too."

"Was not you little sneak. Besides, you never told me why you were there."

She stopped laughing, "Just came by to see how you were."

Mike glanced at the clock, "At ten after midnight? How'd you know where I was."

"And I thought ya' had intelligence. Where are ya' always when its dark outside and you're too lazy to answer the door?"

He gulped down half the glass, "Excuse the stupid question. I'm a little buzzed right now."

"Why do ya' sleep out there?"

Mike wondered whether she was requesting information or making small talk. "You've asked me that before."

"Ya' never answered me."

Mike paused. "To sleep... perchance to dream."

"Did ya dream?"

He thought a moment. "Yeah."

"What about?"

"I dunno."

She laughed, "Liar."

He sipped his milk. It was as cold as ice but felt strangely good going down.

"Well?"

"You didn't read me while I was out?"

"Nah. I saw your eyes goin' though. But I still 'member when you said not to read you."

"I wonder why..."

"Aw c'mon. Y'know you can tell me."

He replied laughing, "I do?"

"Yes." For once, her tone was convincing.

He paused, "Okay. You remember hearing about the Tizarian embassy on Calanna?"

"Yeah, I heard got blown up. Hey, that wasn't when you were a correspondent down there, was it?"

Mike nodded, "I was pulled shortly before that, but I was still... sightseeing."

"Of course," she was smiling.

"Now... I had nothing to do with..."

"Don't even try lying, Michael."

"Okay... well anyway, the short of it is that I was there just a cent before it happened. I went out to make this call... the embassy was a notoriously bad place to carry on a private conversation. While I was walking back... I heard the..." He stretched out his arms to form the visual image.

"Boom?"

"Boom," Mike agreed hesitantly. "I started running to see what happened."

Niki watched him sympathetically, "No one survived."

They fell silent for a time as Niki let her milk sit scarcely touched. Mike's dream had shattered her mood.

Her eyes slowly grew glossy in the blue fluorescent light. "I'm sorry."

Surprised, he looked up, "About that?"

"I'm just sorry."

"It's okay."

Mike looked into her eyes and then averted his gaze downward toward the floor. "Drink your milk."

* * *

"Mike...?"

Mike awoke stiffly on the floor. Niki sat over him, one hand on his shoulder, gently shaking him to consciousness.

He squinted groggily in the dim light. "What time is it?"

"Twenty. Mike, Fork's in trouble."

Mike was suddenly wide awake. "What is it?"

"I dunno. I think somebody woke him up in the middle of a nightmare."

"Enough to wake you?" Mike asked in hopeful disbelief.

"No. I was still up. I just happened to be open to it."

"Did he wake up by himself?"

"No. I'm pretty sure somethin's up."

"Ok, let's go." Mike picked himself off the floor grabbing his black camera bag on the way out the door and headed straight for the back terrace. He hopped on the fly-cycle, felt under the seat cushion for the key, and switched on the grav-plates while Niki hopped on behind him and held to his waist.

The vehicle raced over the shoreline using its natural flat surface to pick up speed. The crisp ocean waves, remarkably changed in the past few hours, lashed the coast and pounded the beach crag with an unrelenting fury as the bright full moon rose to its apex in an otherwise pitch black sky.

Within five minutes they landed just outside the nearby Tizarian medical center. Only a mile inland, the smell of salt carried by the chilly morning breeze floated through the air. A cargo shuttle rested on a pad under a hundred

meters from the complex, and two guards in dark night-uniforms stood outside the entrance in the bleak, morning cold.

Mike dismounted the vehicle and quickly trotted towards the guards.

Niki grabbed Mike's arm cutting short his advance. "I don't have my doctor I.D."

He shrugged, "Forget it. We'll play it straight."

Mike stopped short of the guards and drew out his press card. "Michael Harrison, Gatherer, Galactic Press, Tizarian Division. I need access to this facility to see one of the patients."

The guard in front laughed, "At twenty in the morning?"

"Yes. This may be an emergency."

The guard mocked seriousness, "Well, it must be a pretty big one. What do ya' think George? Do we let little Mikey in?"

The other guard was older. His gray eyes depicted a sternness not much impressed by his partner's attitude. He coughed before speaking, perhaps to be sure he had everyone's attention, "Nobody's allowed in the medical center, mister..."

"Harrison. I'm with the Tizarian Division. I have permanent press clearance to this center. See? It says so right here." Mike pointed toward the card, but neither guard paid any attention.

The first guard laughed again, "Hey, who's your psych?" Niki's dark, Sirian features hinted at her purpose.

Mike talked while getting out his flimsy. "Didn't you here what I said? I have clearance. By the way, I didn't get you guys' service numbers."

The older guard broke in, "Look, buddy. We have orders not to let anybody in. Anybody! Do you understand? Now why don't you just hop back on your play-scooter with your girly-friend and get your snot-nosed face off our turf!"

"Orders from who?"

"From our commanding officer. Who do you think?"

"Who is?"

The older guard shouted, "I just said who!"

"As in a name."

The guard paused, not quite sure how to phrase his response. "That's classified."

Mike looked up from the flimsy. The guard who spoke reinforced his position by standing in front of the door, his plain, black uniform blending nicely with the purple background.

"You guy's aren't even wearing Tizarian badges. Who the hell are you?"

"Starlaw." The answer came simultaneously from both.

Mike shot a wary glance at the pair, "You Imperial police have some sort of identification?"

They pulled badges from their pockets.

"Why aren't you guy's wearing these things?"

There was no answer. Mike was fairly certain they couldn't arrest him.

"Oh, I guess that's classified too. Look, I'd like to speak with your commanding officer!"

The young guard pushed Mike backward and began to draw his gun, but the other held him back, the older guard's stare belying a temptation to let his partner carry out the threat. Suddenly, Niki gasped as if shocked.

"What is it?"

She paused, regaining her breath. "He's gone."

"What?"

"No more signal."

Mike drew out his camera and backed away from the guards, pulling Niki back with one hand clenched around her shoulder.

"Smile dudes." Mike snapped the shot, and retreated quickly to the cycle.

* * *

The personal office of Charles Linden, copy editor for the Tizarian Division of *Galactican* Press, rested near the top of the center section of Silver Tri-Towers. It was, as Chuck liked to put it, a room with a view. Out the sky window, if the day was clear enough, the entire expanse of land all the way to the coast could be surveyed. From well over two kilometers high, it was a wondrous sight.

Mike sat at the edge of the editor's dark, mahogany desk staring blankly out the window as the clouds blew by. Niki, leaning against the close, white wall, quietly watched his profile, collecting his emotions, reading his worries.

The faint noise of footsteps approached the entrance, Niki turning to look as the antique, brass doorknob turned

clockwise. Linden, stood in the doorway smiling suspiciously while surveying the duo.

"Well! If it isn't Mik and Nik."

Mike intentionally suppressed his smile. "Hi Chuck."

"That's Mister Linden to you Harrison. So, how's it going?"

"It sucks." The voice was Niki's.

Linden turned his head toward her, leaning his body on the desk toward Mike.

"Does it really?"

"Yeah, it sure does."

Linden laughed, "You teaching her slang, buddy?"

Mike smiled, "Y'know Chuck, you really have a way of breaking the mood."

"Yeah. I saw your entry this morning; suggested headline: 'Imperial Police Seize Hospital.' Very catchy."

"You don't like it?"

"First off, it isn't a hospital. It's a medical center. Big difference. Secondly, they didn't seize it."

"They refused my clearance."

"I just got off the phone with a Lieutenant Robertson. He tells me you tried to assault one of his guards."

Mike held the smile, "He's lying."

Linden confidently continued, "He also told me you never showed your press I.D. to the guards."

"Chuck, He's lying."

Linden looked Mike in the eyes, "Prove it."

"I have a witness."

"Do you have the encounter on crystal?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"We were in a hurry when we left. I forgot the recorder."

"You forgot the recorder; no substantiation. The paper gets sued. I lose my job. And as for your so-called witness... who has been illegally posing as a psychotherapist at the medical center for the past doce so that you could get a story which was never registered with the paper! What the hell are you trying to pull, Mike!?"

"The last time I registered a story with the paper my research assistant got her brains blown out by a firing squad!"

"That's because all your, quote-unquote, research assistants are unregistered telepaths!!"

Niki winced. Mike shook his head in disbelief as his boss continued.

"Look buddy, it's not like I don't believe you. I do. But you're just doing everything the wrong way."

"I'm doin' my best."

"I know. That's 'cause you are the best... usually."

Mike looked up hopefully, "So what do I do now?"

"Lieutenant Robertson is coming over. He'll be here in a few minutes. I suggest you wait around 'til he gets here. Question him. If you can, trap him."

Linden reached into his vest pocket and pulled out a small, pocket recorder. He placed it on the desk in front of Mike. "You're still on Tizarian turf. Use the advantage."

By that last remark, Linden meant that there were several advantages press gatherers had on Tizar which weren't granted to them on many other worlds. The right to publish recorded statements without the approval of the speaker, the right to use registered telepaths to gather information, and the right to access the non-classified records of any subject were just a few examples.

Mike sat down at the computer terminal in the far corner. Linden, a lover of antiquities, rarely ever touched it, and the file on Robertson revealed nothing out of the ordinary. The twenty-seven year old, Starlaw officer entered the service after attending Duke Marc's College. He earned a degree in Enforcement of Justice, and served Starlaw in the public relations department. He'd been promoted during his first four-year hitch and was now working through his second.

Mike looked up from the file as Linden's secretary knocked at the door to announce the lieutenant's arrival.

"Send him in, Jo... and tell the floor that I'll be down in a few minutes."

"Alrighty Mr. Linden."

A tall man with short blond hair and smooth brown eyes entered the office. His practiced smile was as wide as it was non-deceiving.

Linden returned the smile, "Lieutenant, please come in."

"Mr. Linden? How good it is to finally meet you in person. I must confess, I didn't know who to greet at first."

"That's quite understandable."

"You should get a videophone. That's what everyone I know uses."

"Yes. Well, on an editor's salary, I think I'll just stick to the basics. This is Michael Harrison, the reporter who spoke with your guards; and this is Nikita Sen, a research assistant with the press."

Mike smiled at the lie as he shook hands with the Lieutenant.

Robertson also shook hands with Niki but avoided her eyes.

"Mr. Linden. You hire Sirians. I am surprised."

"Why?"

Robertson laughed uncomfortably, "Have you not heard the Imperial convention against psionic trespassing?"

"Lieutenant, the Psionics Suppression is a matter for historians. Besides, this is Tizar. We have been granted freedom in those areas by your Archduke's grandfather long ago."

Robertson seemed to physically squirm in his stance, "Still, editor. I must insist that my mind... not be... violated." He smiled shyly at Niki.

Mike wondered what kind of people the Imperials were hiring, "You've got something to hide, Lieutenant Robertson?"

"Of course not. There are just certain classified matters... Unrelated, you understand."

Mike smiled, "No problem. Niki's telepathy is very... weak." He decided to stretch the truth, "She can only read the answers to yes or no questions, feel surface emotions, and even for that she has to be looking at the subject in question."

"Still Mr. Harrison, I must insist that she at least leave the room."

Niki broke in, "I don't mind leaving, but I would like to hear what is said. After all, I am to a certain extent involved. If I turn around, I'll be largely unable to use my telepathy. Would that be all right Lieutenant?"

Robertson shrugged, "I guess that'll have to do. Sorry about the inconvenience."

Niki smiled, "That's okay. I'm used to it."

Robertson looked at Mike and began to grope for a place to begin. "So Mr. Harrison, the guards at the medical center told me they had a little trouble with you."

"I suppose they did, Lieutenant. I wanted entrance; they denied it."

"Well, did you tell them you were a gatherer?"

"Yeah, I showed them my press card."

"Well... that's not their story. What were you doing out there so early anyway?"

"Me and Niki suspected that something may be wrong with one of the patients."

"Which one was this?"

"John Doe, number eighteen."

Robertson looked surprised. "Hmmm... that's quite a coincidence. That patient died in his sleep at around midnight last night."

Mike's mouth fell open, "What?"

"There's nothing you could have done. He was well on his way to the golden arches when you arrived, or wherever it is that he went. Wasn't he the insane gentleman who murdered a guard with a carving fork and injured two civilians?"

Mike tried desperately to regain his wits.

Robertson continued, "So, Mr. Harrison, what made you suspect that there was something wrong with the patient."

Mike looked back up at the Lieutenant. "Niki, turn around."

Robertson instinctively withdrew a step.

Mike continued as Niki turned about to face the lieutenant, "Is he lying?"

She nodded yes; her eyes burning red with antipathy.

Robertson avoided both her's and Mike's stare and turned to Linden for support. "I doubt I'd be the first. Mr. Linden, I protest."

Mike stood directly in front of Robertson. "Lieutenant, what was Starlaw doing there?"

"That's confidential, Mr. Harrison."

"Can't you at least tell me the branch of personnel, the name of the commanding officer?"

Robertson shrunk under the direct questions. "Internal Counter-Insurgency. ISIS Division. That's all I can say."

"ISIS!?" Mike almost jumped back into Linden's lap. "The Imperial Secret Police?"

"Please Mr. Harrison. You have me at an awkward position. I'm only regular Starlaw."

"Then why are you lying!?"

Lieutenant Robertson withdrew to the door. "I won't stand to be interrogated in such a fashion," he weakly complained. "I'm leaving."

Robertson opened the door and quickly escaped from the hateful stares of the three people he was sent to pacify. Mike took the recorder out of his pocket and turned it off. "Can I publish it now?"

Linden sat down and crossed his legs, a twinkling of a smile lighting his otherwise sharp countenance. "No. You can go out there and get some more facts, and then come back with a real story. I've got a feeling this'll be a winner once you've got it fully researched, and I won't even make you register Niki."

Mike smiled gravely, "It's a little too late for that; they already know about her. But thanks anyway. We'll take the offer. We'll also try to get some more info. I'd also appreciate it if you'd keep quiet about the story."

"Okay. But I don't see how that's going to help you now either."

"Trust me, it will. Look, I'll catch you later. Thanks for the help."

"Ok, I'll see you two later."

Mike and Niki exited the office. Once in the outer hall, Niki tugged at the gatherer for attention. "Hey, ya' really know how to get people t' listen to ya'."

He looked her in the eyes, "I'm sorry."

She smiled, "About you or about Fork?"

"I'm just sorry."

She shrugged, "Let's get some milk."

* * *

The bar was cool and dimly lit. Several ceiling fans twirled silently above as Mike drank his milk on the rocks; Niki had hers straight.

"So," she began, cutting the solemn mood, "where do we start this time?"

Mike sipped thoughtfully, "I haven't the faintest idea."

"Liar." She was smiling.

He grinned back and took another sip.

She grew impatient, "Well?"

"Okay. I met this girl a while ago."

Niki laughed, "Is this one of your drunk maid stories?"

"No. This happened just yesterday. I don't know whether Chuck told you, but me and him met Mr. Clay and his daughter for lunch."

"Boardmember Clay?"

"Uh huh."

"And the girl's his daughter?"

"Yeah. Anyway, so we talked, and then they had to leave, but that afternoon she came over to my house."

"Alone?" Niki looked concerned.

"Uh huh."

"And you let her in?"

"Why not?"

She had no reply.

"So anyway, While she was in the bathroom, I found out she was an android."

"What were you doing in the bathroom with her?"

"I wasn't in the bathroom. I was in the living room."

"What was she doing?"

"Taking her ear off, or putting it on. I don't remember, but that's not important."

"You saw her take her ear off. Ooh gross."

"No, Cindy did."

Niki laughed, "What? You asked your computer what she was doing in the bathroom?"

Mike paused, "Yeah."

"Why?"

"I was curious?"

"Have you no shame? Guy, ya' won't be seeing me go to the bathroom at your place no more."

Mike laughed, "Oh, c'mon. Just one more time. I want to shoot some pictures."

She laughed, "No way, bud. So what happened then?"

"She had to take off, but I'm sure she was there to check me out."

Niki nodded, "I'm sure she was too."

"No. I mean for somebody else."

"Heck Mike, everybody's after you. Me, an android, your computer, now somebody else."

"Oh, c'mon."

"So where's Clay's real daughter?"

"He doesn't have one."

"You mean, Mrs. Clay gave birth to an android?"

They both laughed.

"Look, stop it. I want you to check up on her... and on Mr. Clay."

"I can't read an android."

"Read Mr. Clay then. No! wait a mil, it was his niece, not his daughter, his niece."

She laughed, "You've really got your facts straight."

"I was recovering from a hangover at the time."

"Excuses. Excuses."

They laughed and ordered some more milk.

She began again, "So what about Fork. I mean, this could be a dead end."

"I'm fairly sure his mind was shot by one of those Imperial mind scanners. They probably just decided to kill him."

"Why?"

"I dunno, and that's no lie."

"What do we do?"

"You do nothing."

"Aw, c'mon. I wanna help."

Mike refused, "No, they already know about you. I want you where you can do some good. Clay doesn't know about you, and I've got a suspicion he's tied up in this."

"How's that?"

"I think I remember seeing Robin, that's his niece's... I mean android's name... I swear I remember seeing her down at the medical center one of those times I visited Fork."

"Then she'd know me."

"Nope. You're not registered. I am. She wouldn't have any reason to remember your face unless you spoke to her or something, or unless you were registered with Galactic Press, and you're not..."

"Ya' don't think Mr. Linden would say anything about me?"

"Nah, Chuck doesn't talk to Boardmembers. You're in the clear."

"What about you?" She knew the answer to that without asking.

"I'll manage. Look, I'm gonna go home and grab a quick nap."

"Liar."

Mike smiled, "Look, I'll be okay. I promise. Come see me tonight."

"You mean next morning?"

"Whenever. I'll see ya' later." He got up and headed toward the exit.

Niki put down her milk, "Be careful."

"You too."

Niki stayed at the table as the highbowls slowly rose to the ceiling and coasted across the bar. From the opposite aisle a burly man in a heavy, tan coat rubbed a lather of foam from his mustache, his eyes scanning the morning headlines as they scrolled across the surface of his table. In the background, she heard a group of people laughing. Michael didn't want to be followed. She glanced toward the escalator ramp and watched a sprinkling of people zoom by, the cushion of propelled wind whining where its outskirts met the stop-off. The bar seemed warm and snug when compared with some of the other places she had been recently; it was a good place to stay and pout. But not as good as a boardmember's house. She smiled at the thought as she threw on her wrapper.

Chapter Three

"Are you family?" The nurse's eyebrows wrinkled in rehearsed concern as he scratched down Mike's name and Tizarian I.D. Number.

"No, but will this do?" Mike showed the nurse his *Galactican* press clearance. The shiny blue and silver card was nearly identical to his Tizarian personal identification or his Imperial consumer profile. The three were hard to tell apart at a glance.

The young man nodded in acknowledgment and hurriedly escorted Mike through the long white corridors of the medical center. The usually polished floor tiles showed dirty tread markings where a pair of wet, oversized starlaw boots had recently stomped. Mike grinned and snapped a picture though he doubted that analysis of the photo could tell much more than the boot size and service division of its wearer.

The air felt slightly colder as the nurse pushed aside a set of green double doors. The word "Freezers" was painted in icy blue across their surface. Mike followed closely.

"So what d'ya want with a 'corpsicle' anyway?" The nurse smiled at his own joke. He was being too smooth. Mike guessed that they were giving him loads of preferential treatment because they were scared silly of the bad press he could inflict.

"It's a long story." Mike bent over the computer and with a few quick keystrokes he scanned the registry of the dead. Niki had taught him how the system worked last month and the lesson came back to him as quickly as were it taught yesterday. Such were the benefits of being lectured by a Siri, Mike thought as the nurse approached the terminal.

"Hey, wait a second buddy." The nurse was visibly surprised, but he scanned the screen seeing Mike had found his way through the system.

"He's gone." Mike closed his eyes in the anticipated frustration. It was too much to expect that the Imperial police would leave his subject's body on site. That would make verification of the time of death too simple a matter.

"I thought you guys held a patient's body for autopsy."

"We do. I least we're supposed to." The nurse hit a few more keys and scanned the screen for more data.

"Here. The verdict was heart attack due to the stress medication. It happens occasionally. The body's been taken to Greenflower mortuary."

The news startled Mike momentarily, and he wondered what the Imp's motives could be. He pushed himself away from the console and straightened out, slowly perceiving the implications. The nurse gazed up from the computer and tried to read Mike's expression.

Mike finally smiled, "At least Fork's going out in style. Say, you got a spare hour?"

* * *

Surrounded by lush coastal woodlands and set around a wild flower garden, Greenflower easily rated as the prettiest community in Silver-Tri county. It was small, quiet, nearly perfect in every way. Mike would have lived there, but it lacked in one crucial respect: no beach.

Mike watched the passing trees and sighed as the nurse suddenly turned delivery boy drove the white grav-car along the highway. The med-center was being too kind but totally predictable, loaning him a nurse and a car, all to straighten out its reputation with one reporter from a very powerful news syndicate.

"I hope you're enjoying this." The nurse sounded slightly irritated.

"Sure am. Watch out for the cat."

Small rain droplets marched steadily up the windshield and swerved sideways with every curve in the road as the sun poked between the clouds with sporadic recess, its rays shattering into a kaleidoscope of colorful, dancing patterns.

Cruising at a hundred kilometers per hour, the grav-car sped over the highway at an approximate altitude of one meter. Mike thought that it felt like they were floating on a current of air though he knew that wasn't the case. They were floating on the force of gravity which was really the curvature of space. Mike's mind began to swim with equations learned in a series of undergraduate science courses he had been dragged into by a friend. Something about down-vectors and Higgs boson emissions. He couldn't quite remember who to hate for it. Mike had always liked science, but never enough to actually understand it.

The nurse pulled up to the mortuary and gently touched earth. Outside the deep gray building a small service seemed to be taking place. The dark gloomy afternoon made the mourners looked like an assembly of Draconian diplomats dressed in sleek black suits huddling together exchanging whispers. Their somber mood was catching.

Mike climbed from the car and headed warily for the mortuary. A pit of ashes was exposed to the rain about a hundred feet from the building's entrance, green clover petals curving in along its red brick walls. The nurse, genuinely fascinated, stopped to look down. It was archaic. Almost barbarian.

Mike entered the building's lobby while the nurse ran to catch up.

"What'd you see?"

"Nothing. It was too dark," the young man puffed catching his breath.

"May I help you gentlemen?" A middle aged woman with a pale complexion suddenly appeared as if from thin air. She was dressed in a long black gown and wore a black pearl necklace.

Mike took out his press clearance, "I hope so. I'm looking for a man, I mean a body of a man which was brought here this morning."

The women seemed strangely amused. "Does this body of a man have a name." Her words sang out like music.

"He was listed as a jay-dee eighteen from Silver-Tri coastal med-center."

"I see," She seemed absolutely enthralled.

Mike smiled, "Great," then consciously dropped his smile. "Where is he?"

She slipped between Mike and the nurse and crept to the lobby entrance, opening the large oaken doors and pointing her long slender arm toward the ash pit. Mike watched the rain fall in disappointment.

* * *

The setting sun's amber beams tanned the evening coast, streaming thoughtlessly past the white water's edge, scattering sullenly across Michael Harrison's tired features. He watched two gulls, wings outstretched, gliding peacefully over the shifting blue and crimson waves, hanging precariously onto the thin salty air. As if beckoning him forth, the sea approached within inches of his face and then receded into the distance while thoughts twisted about in his mind like delicate angels on their way to a darktime's meal.

But something was missing; something was overlooked. And for the life of him, he didn't know what it was. What to do when you're dead-ended? Go back and re-examine the facts. But there were no facts. Everything was hidden behind lies.

Unable to sleep in his only true home, he picked himself up and walked back toward the house. The huge wooden doors seemed even more menacing when sober, but he managed them open and headed to the kitchen for a brew.

His soft bed and cold beer summed up the perfect way to spend an evening, but as he sat on the edge of the covers the camera drew away his attention. Near the wall, it sat on the rug where he had dropped it less than an hour ago as if pleading like a child for a trip to the zoo, "take me a picturing, I want to have fun."

Mike smiled and stretched out on the floor beside his toy. He opened the workset and began to review the pictures in memory. He zipped past a Telmarian mountain range where strange animals carried supplies across a snow ridge to the local guerrilla faction, then floated along Tizarian waters as a shuttle from nearby Aquapolis darted from under the seascape in a beautifully chaotic conglomeration of white water spray and a rainbow of sunshine, then noticed a Calannaan temple where the alter priests sacrificed a political dissident with knives and a chainsaw, but only one picture grabbed his attention—that of two starlaw guards scowling outside a medical center entrance in the wee hours of morning.

Mike pivoted the picture into different corners of the screen and tried to decide where it would look best hanging from the wall. He reversed the colors, intensified the light, rotated the picture around, zoomed out for a wideangle, and suddenly noticed what was missing.

The small distorted numbers mocked him from the far corner of the screen. He manually zoomed in on them and refocused. How could he be so stupid? The medical center had no permanent cargo shuttle. The vessel must have belonged to the Imperials.

He looked toward the controller wall, "Cindy, load file from Silver-Tri. Find Imperial shuttle 8372919041."

She responded within the second, "That shuttle is found."

"Where is it now?"

"Docked onto the independent fast-merchant, Nissithiu, which has jumped out of system fifteen point two centims ago."

The idea itched like a hunch sent by the devil, "What was the cargo?"

"It was dropping off pharmaceuticals."

"Departure cargo?"

"None."

Mike leaned back on the bed, "That's pretty strange, leaving a world as wealthy as Tizar."

Cindy gave no reply.

"Where is the ship headed?"

"Flight orders don't state."

"They should."

"They don't."

"Then read topside nav-data and figure it out." Mike hated lazy computers.

Cindy came back to him after a few seconds, "This will take me twenty-four point seven centims to compute."

"Why so long?"

"I'm not a navigation computer."

He shrugged, "Fine, Take your time."

"Now computing," she responded as if more than a little annoyed.

Mike grinned. She'd be working until well past midnight. At least he now knew how to keep her busy.

As he stepped back outside, beer in paw, he shot the dying sun a victory smile and sat down on the damp sands under a chilly wind. Then, curling up next to the surf, Mike closed his eyes and tried not to dream. Songs of water and birds soothed him with a serenity beyond mere music as he drifted away to other seas.

* * *

Slowly, his soul floated about in black and empty space. Silently, a touch from above pulled him away from sleep's cherished womb. Sounds of music, songs from the sea, clustered around him like the players of an opera theater, sinking in and out of the void with a strange, perhaps arranged harmony.

She bore no expression as he opened his eyes. He felt himself gripped with a strange combination of confusion and fear as the black sky above cast a bold contrast around her disarranged golden blonde hair and deep blue eyes.

She smiled sweetly whispering, "Good morning."

For a moment, he felt as if he was dreaming, but the rush of questions was uncharacteristic of sleepthink. In dreams he could accept that life was death and good was evil, but on the surface of thought there was only the here and the now and many, many questions.

"Why are you here?"

"We found your psyche."

The cold tide washed the tips of Mike's toes as a cool, salty breeze lifted a few strands of Robin's hair.

"Drop the story, or you'll never see her again."

Robin walked slowly up the beach as Mike sat still in the sand watching the ocean horizon curve away into the distance.

* * *

Dawn was particularly brilliant along the coast, a primary reason for his choosing to live there. Mike watched the sunrise with a rueful stare as the dull, throbbing pain stuck like a stiff arrow in the base of his skull. Bitterly, he picked his sand encrusted self off the beach and headed wearily toward the house. Grains of earth fell off him with each dismal step.

The large livingroom reeked of a dreary gloom. Mike glanced toward the couch and the pillow where her head had rested two nights before. He walked sullenly into the bedroom. The far curtains remained closed, dimming the room. The chain locket she'd given him rested on his bed with the camera.

"Hello."

It beeped compulsively as a point of light danced around the controller screen.

"Yes?"

"The Nissithiu went to the Calanna star system."

"Oh."

Mike tumbled the junk off the bed, all except for the locket. It was in the shape of a heart with words inscribed along the front: "Go For It!"

"Place audio connection call to Linden."

The light danced around the screen.

"Done."

Mike gathered up his breath.

"Hi, What's up Mike?" It was Linden's voice.

"Morning editor."

"Yes, and a very nice one it is too. Is there anything I can do for you?"

Mike consciously tried collecting his spirit.

"Why did you tell Clay?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"I don't understand, Mike. What happened?"

"They've got Niki."

"...You think I told Clay about her?"

"I know you did, Chuck. I just wanna know why."

"Now don't start hurling accusations, buddy. I didn't say a thing to Clay or anybody else. Now, tell me exactly what happened. Did she screw up or something?"

"No."

"Well, how do you know?"

"She's not a screw-up! Okay?!"

"Well, I didn't say anything. Editor's honor, Mike."

"Bullshit."

"The honest truth."

"No, it had to be you."

"Nope."

"Chuck, if I find out later..."

"I'm clean."

"Chuck... stupid question coming up..."

Mike scratched his head with the locket searching for the right words.

"You ready?"

"I love dumb questions. Shoot."

"When's the last time you had your office checked for bugs?"

Silence.

"Chuck?!?"

The line was dead.

Chapter Four

Mike leaned over the mottled piece of metal which had fused itself beyond recognition. The analysis specialist scanned his expression.

"There's no way we can trace manufacture; it's just too far gone," she explained.

"Have you found anymore?"

"Nearly a dozen," Charles Linden broke in, somewhat heatedly. Mike could almost see his boss's anger steaming off the heavy overcoat he wore to protect himself from the lab's sub-zero temperature.

"I don't understand it at all," he continued. "Why would Clay go to all the trouble? And what's so important about this dead John Doe?"

Mike glanced at the specialist who seemed to be examining the editor with an unconcerned stare. He hoped she wasn't the type to blab.

"Look Chuck, there are warmer places to discuss this."

Linden was keen on the idea of getting out of the lab, not so much because of the third party with ears and a mouth as due to the chill. He and Mike took the lift down to the subways leaving the company security personnel to the unhappy clean-up their own incompetence had prompted.

The subway train to Greenflower was nearly empty, and the trip uneventful. Linden was, for once, totally unconcerned about what was happening on the floor. The scores of staff writers would just be sending him more meaningless trash which he would later strip to the bare facts and send back due to lack of content. It was always the same old story at the middle of the week.

Mike promised something far more interesting for the readers, and for the editor as well. Linden had suddenly taken a personal interest in the story, a big no-no in his business. But it was worth bending a few rules, and it felt right. It was even worth a trip to the pit of ashes.

The late morning air warmed Linden as sunshine broke through the white fluffy clouds and streamed down in long silver threads from the heavens. He hiked alongside Mike etching a trail through the dew-sodden expanse of grass. Birds were darting about in the brisk morning air. Their songs were like a child's laughter, almost mocking yet innocent.

The pit suddenly lay before them, its sides sinking into the earth without warning. A variety of religious symbols decorated the inner surfaces informing wayward souls to beware the footsteps of the dead as the familiar sweet scent of ash and apple resin hung heavy in the air. Linden sat down on the red brick lifting his chin and squinting at Mike through the bright beams of sunlight.

"Not what you expected," Mike cautiously broke the silence.

"No," Linden admitted. "It's too..." He couldn't pull off the words.

"Antique?"

"Old fashioned. It's too dated."

"I thought you were into that Chuck," Mike prodded smiling.

"I am, but there's a limit. This is so undignified. It's a mass burial."

"Just another screwed up religion." Mike stretched out his arm pointing down the pit approvingly, "But you have to admit, they did a great job."

"What? I don't follow."

"The Imps. They kill Fork, and get rid of his body so perfectly that there's no way I can get a confirmation on the time of death."

"Sure, but why the mass burial? Why not just cremate him and leave it at that?"

Mike kicked a stone into the pit, "Because he isn't dead."

"You just said they killed him," Linden countered.

Mike shrugged, "I lied. If they just wanted him dead and gone, they'd have done what you said."

Linden stood up. He glared at Mike in spontaneous disbelief but knew the reporter well enough to realize that doubting was useless and quite possibly counter-productive.

"Explain," Linden finally insisted.

"The Imps want to stage a fake death. They snatch Fork and put some poor fool in his place, kill the guy and send the body to the incinerators. But that still isn't good enough. They now have to get rid of the remains in a legal manner, but in such a way that these remains cannot be later analyzed to prove the guy who got burned wasn't Fork. Even ashes can be analyzed. Admittedly, it isn't something we often do, but it can be done. People don't often share identical body chemistry. A mere difference of as little as a gram in solid weight would be enough to..."

"Enough," Linden interrupted, "I've got the idea. The only legal way to dispose of the ashes in a manner in which they cannot be later analyzed is to mix them with other ashes. Thus, the ash pit."

"Exactly."

Linden laughed, "It's a really neat theory Mike. Now prove it."

Mike looked at the wet grass in front of his feet, "If I try, I lose Niki."

"What makes you so sure you haven't already?"

Mike considered the editor's question with antipathy.

"I know what you're thinking Harrison."

"Do you?"

"I've already sent for company personnel, off planet. They should be here in a few days."

"Chuck, if we had a few days we wouldn't be talking."

"Regardless of all other considerations, I won't use our current security staff to deal with this... situation."

Mike shot his boss a rueful grin, "You don't trust them."

"After what happened... would you?"

"We can always go to Tizar police. Even though she's unregistered, they've been supportive in such matters before."

Linden shook his head in flat refusal, "You know as well as I that the paper cannot risk this getting out."

"She a friend, Chuck."

"She's also a psyche. And Clay is a damn boardmember. There's no win here; we have no choice but to wait and let company people handle it."

"If we wait, it may be to late."

"She's already lost, buddy. If you think you'll ever see her again..." Linden cut himself off mid-sentence. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You're probably right."

"So what are you going to do?" The editor carefully enunciated each syllable with the utmost patience.

"What d'you think I should do?"

"If they're hiding, we must chase. I'll get one of the paper's private starships to take you to Calanna. I know you didn't have much fun last time you were there, but like they say, duty calls."

"Fine, but don't stick me in some ice box."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Linden pledged. He knew well Mike's distaste for low passage.

"And what about Niki? If there's any chance..."

Linden gazed back into the pit for some inspiration, but the same anger kept welling within him. Mike studied his boss as the sunlight shined off Linden's black boots and whisked the corners of his eyes.

"Whatever you do between now and the time you leave is your own business," he insisted. "You understand?"

* * *

Mike and Chuck took the escalator down to the floor from p872. As they entered the ten acre room all they could hear was the clicking of fingers on keyboards and the dull chatter of hundreds of gatherers. Linden's press office lay at dead center, and a small group of grouchy staff writers wandered about outside the entrance.

"Why the committee," Mike wondered allowed.

Linden explained, "There's been talk of a strike. Haven't you been reading the paper?"

"Must have missed it. Serious?"

"They just like making waves." It was one of Chuck's pet phrases. Staff writers and clericals were both labeled as replaceable by management. If they decided to strike, there would be no problem finding new recruits. For this reason, their union demands were generally ignored. But even so, they still liked to stomp around and threaten the editor every other year or so. Mike was glad he wasn't following it.

"I guess you read the news once and you've read it a thousand times," Mike quoted.

"Watch that kiddo."

They went their separate ways, and Mike felt the better of it. He didn't envy Linden's job in the least.

"Hey Harrison. Haven't seen you here in a while."

"Hi Mike."

"Hey buddy, where've you been?"

"Walker. Kim. Chris, I've been sick."

"I see the boss is catching it too. I hope you guys've been having safe sex."

"Chris, you're an asshole."

"Happy birthday to you too buddy."

Come to think of it, Mike didn't envy his own job either. Not that he didn't like gathering. He just didn't like many gatherers.

There also came those moments which he genuinely regretted. These he called mistakes. Being seen walking in late with the editor was but one example. He hoped he didn't just call too much attention to himself. Having a trail of story-starved gatherers tagging along could seriously jeopardize his chances of sneaking up on Clay.

Mike sat down at his desk and switched on his terminal scanning the latest breaking headlines.

"Staffwriters Prepare For Strike"

"Youth Locked In Freezer Eats Own Foot"

"Upcoming Press Banquet..."

"So what's up?" It was Bill Walker. He was another crack investigative gatherer. Not very successful, but crack all the same. His youth was his greatest advantage and his biggest stumbling block. Mike could remember what it was like.

"Not much. How 'bout you?"

"Nothin'. Did you see the one about the banquet? You're gonna be speaking." Bill knew how much Mike hated to read the paper and thus usually never got word about these things until it was too late to make reservations for an interstellar cruise.

"The one before it looked more interesting. You write it?" Mike accused in his most inquiring tone.

"Wish I did." It was something Bill would write. He had a flare for the gory.

"Where'd you get cut?" Mike just noticed Bill had a nasty slash under his left ear taking the whole length of cheek down to his dark sunburnt chin.

"Mama did it," he laid out. There was a glint of amusement in his gray-blue eyes. Otherwise he seemed deadly serious.

"Walker, you've got a sweet mama."

"She is."

"But you're a sick bastard."

"Do you really mean it?"

Mike turned back to his headlines pretending he had serious work to do.

"I really got into a fight with my neighbor's cat."

"That's really fascinating." Mike mimicked Walker's distinctive "really" without effort. It was a common part of their interaction on the rare occasion that both were on the floor.

Mike didn't mind the wasted time. He knew it would pay for itself eventually. Walker was young and often useful when he wanted to be. He and Mike worked together occasionally on the difficult parts of each others assignments. Mike sometimes thought of himself as a kind of mentor teaching a newcomer the tricks of the trade.

But as much as he liked working with Bill Walker, he knew the young man was also dangerous to be around. He

took too many unwarranted risks as far as Mike was concerned. He got himself into scrapes that he'd have to fight himself out of. But as the boss would often testify, it was all part of the job.

* * *

"So what's really going on?" Bill asked an hour later as he finished picking the seeds out of his xisimo core. His elbows rested on the clear surface of the table as he tossed slivers of the fruit cut by his laser knife high into the air and caught them smoking between his teeth. This was one reason the cafeteria staff insisted they sit in the corner, Mike thought.

"You're about to catch your tongue on fire."

"Only if I miss. C'mon Mike. I need a story. The well is dry buddy. I'm dying of thirst."

"So you want to steal mine?"

"I've shared with you," Bill acted hurt.

"Yeah, shared crap."

"C'mon Mike. Admit it. You need me."

"Like I need my penis to fall off," Mike agreed thoughtfully.

Bill ignored the comment, "Remember that time on Telmar? Who saved who? Huh?" He pointed the blade of his weapon at Mike, "You owe me one."

Mike gulped down the last of his beer and hoped nobody was listening.

"Hell, you owe me two. Remember..."

"I wasn't aware we were counting. But now that we are, how many do you think you owe me?"

Bill estimated a number in his head. Then finally gave in with a sheepish look, "Okay, I'll drop it."

* * *

Mike spent most of the afternoon on the computer running searches on Clay and beginning a journal for the story complete with facts, photos, and tapes of conversations. Everyone else was minding their own business which was nice for a change, though they didn't seem to have very much to do. Private reports kept coming in, forwarded from Linden, on new melted pieces of metal being found in Chuck's private residence and on his clothes. There was even one under the seat he sat in during lunch. Such is the life of an editor, Mike smiled.

He kept smiling until his searches started coming up negative. Clay seemed to have disappeared over the past two days except for one use of his corporate credit card at a shop in aquapolis just that morning. He bought an expensive tie.

Otherwise, zip. He hadn't signed any business or legal documents. He wasn't at his office. He wasn't at his flat in Silver-Tri. He hadn't been using the subway. He hadn't so much as peed in an executive toilet. Deadend, pure and simple. The only good thing Mike could tell was that he certainly hadn't left the planet. That would have made things a little too complicated.

"I can tell you where Clay is." Mike turned with alarming speed, almost giving himself the second near whiplash of the week.

"You've got to break that habit, Mike. Seriously." It was Bill again.

"What the hell do you want, Walker?"

"I can tell you where Clay is." This time it registered. Mike opened his eyes wide, then looked around to be sure nobody was listening.

"Where?"

"Snow Country. He's staying in a friend's cabin. Some sort of ski vacation."

"What friend?" Mike nearly growled it.

"Some sort of business associate with the paper. I don't remember the name, but I can find out."

"How do you know this?"

Bill shrugged, "If I told you... maybe it would rain for me." A smug grin crossed his lips, but his eyes remained laser sharp, like the knife he carried for "occupational emergencies".

"You want in on this one?" Mike hated to offer, but he had little choice.

"You don't have to let me in if you don't want to."

"In or out? I'm not saying please."

Bill considered it for all of two seconds, "Okay, I'm in."

* * *

The infrared goggles penetrated the icy pitch darkness, making the chimney top of the well insulated Solomon mansion seem like a beacon of light on an otherwise frozen landscape. Mike bit his upper lip as he lay prone in the snow, considering the fair possibility that Billy's grapevine might be wrong.

"Thank mama there's no wind," Bill whispered. Mike smiled as the phrase. Clay would have thanked the lord; Mike might have thanked the night, but Bill would thank his mama.

"Thank mama they've got a fire going," Mike countered. Bill quietly agreed. The house might have been doubly invisible without it.

"So get goin'," Bill prodded.

Mike dropped the goggles and crawled over the hard slippery ice away from his flycycle. He hoped the vehicle would carry three on the off chance they'd find Niki inside.

As Mike quickly reviewed the plan in his head, he began to wonder if the computer's information was up to date. It showed three entrances to the house; a front, a garage, and a servant's entrance. In fact, it gave him the entire floor plans including electrical access, water, and sewage piping which he and Bill studied most of the evening. Being a reporter on Tizar accorded some amazing privileges.

Mike reached the garage. The door had an hard polymer bolt fashioned to undermine the courage of any would be thieves. He couldn't see it, but he knew a fancy security alarm would be hidden behind. All the locks would be like this one if the computer told the truth. All would be difficult to saw. At least here he wouldn't be heard.

The borrowed laser knife switched on silently. The little bit of light that it shed was enough for Mike to see what he was doing, though he didn't need the luxury. He knew exactly where to make the initial incision killing the alarm as it were. The rest was grunt work as laser ground against polymer. Now it was only a question of time.

* * *

Mr. John Clay relaxed in a cushioned rocking chair as he warmed his feet by the fireplace. It was quaint but effective, he mused as he slowly rocked back and forth, like fire itself. He glanced at the wooden chessboard where he had defeated his host, Mr. Soloman; the two kings now stood alone face to face at center board. Not very happy was he, Clay almost giggled. The corporation did not encourage good losers. In that, he was somewhat of an outcast.

He knew he had failed, but at least he was finished. Now he would soon leave Tizar and return to the home of his childhood. He smiled faintly at the thought.

Suddenly a noise thrust him to full consciousness. Someone was yelling and slamming his fist against the front door.

"Who could it possibly be at such an ungodly hour?" Clay got to his feet, hoping the sound hadn't awakened his host.

"I'll get it, sir." Marley, the night guard took only few seconds to appear from the kitchen area. He seemed stiff and angry.

"Open up! Please hurry! Someone... Oh thank goodness. You've got to help. There's been a terrible accident. Do you have a vidiophone?!"

"Who are you?" The guard's face was stern as he looked over the young man. His long stringy black hair was wet from the snowfall, and he held a heavy steel flashlight in his right hand which he kept shining in the guard's eyes.

"Oh please! Let me in. It's a matter of life and death! I've got to use your videophone. There's been a terrible accident..." The young man was panting from exhaustion.

"Where?!"

"Out there," the young man, exasperated, waved his arm back into the darkness.

* * *

Mike quickly cut through the lock at the back of the garage leading into the storage hall. Hearing the commotion up front, he slipped into the hall and ran to the kitchen area. The polymer bolt had taken more time than he anticipated. He had to hurry. He reached the security office just a minute behind schedule.

The office was full of little television screens, and there was a desk with a control station. An eight-pack of fun-punch was set on the floor next to the largest screen where the highlights of a tourist hunting safari were being broadcast in via satellite from the far side of the planet by channel #117 sports. Mike scanned the other monitors and saw the recording light on one. He grinned when he saw Bill's face, desperate, nearly frantic. Bill was always good at diversions.

Mike took out the current disk being recorded and slipped it into his pocket. He grabbed a blank from the desk

and melted it down with the knife in one swift stroke. Then, by flipping a few red switches, he disconnected the batteries and shut off power to the entire mansion.

The guard turned around in surprise when the stairwell suddenly darkened. He didn't have time to feel the blow to the back of his skull. He was already unconscious.

Mike raced into the room. The fire and the knife blade were the only sources of light in the entire house. Clay stood motionless, hoping he wouldn't be noticed.

"Morning Mr. Clay."

"Good morning, Michael. You wanted to see me?"

"Well, yes sir. I was hoping to talk to you about how irresponsible the press has been acting lately. It's a damn disgrace."

Bill walked in, now competing for stage presence. "To think a few reporters could spoil a whole code of ethics through some gross dereliction of duty." He was shaking his head sadly and he homed in on Clay.

Mike continued, "Overzealous is perhaps more the word. Derelict implies neglect. What do you think Mr. Boardmember?" Mike held the blade to Clay's throat, igniting the bare traces of aftershave near his chin.

"What do you want?"

"Niki. You. Robin. Not necessarily in that order."

"Your research assistant is upstairs in the south guest room. You can go get her." Clay's breath was heavy with fear.

"Lend me the flashlight Billy."

"It broke."

Mike pivoted his glance, "You hit with the back."

"I know. I forgot."

Clay strained a smile, "If you two professionals don't mind being interrupted, I happened to notice that the guard was carrying..."

"Sit down and shut-up."

"Merely trying to be helpful." He sat back down in the rocking chair.

Mike stripped the flashlight off the guard's belt and picked up an automatic pistol and a pair of handcuffs to boot. He gave the knife to Bill and wrapped Clay's arms around the back of the chair, securing them with the handcuffs before he headed upstairs. Slowly, carefully, he measured each step as he neared the top of the plush stairwell searching for the barest reason to shoot someone. The south guest room was just down the hall. He found the door unlocked. Niki was inside, on the bed, heavily sedated. Mike picked her up gently, very much relieved to find her unharmed. Content with his prize, he climbed back down the stairs.

"Okay sport, where's Robin." Mike set Niki's limp body on the floor by the guard.

"Asleep, upstairs."

Bill rocked the chair roughly at the answer. "I wasn't aware androids slept."

"She likes to pretend."

"So she's heard everything."

Clay offered a smile, "No, she shuts her senses down, expect for touch."

Suddenly the stairwell light came back on. Mike whirled around to face the kitchen. He lifted the gun half expecting to see Robin running in to save her master. Clay had, of course, lied. Mike inwardly debated blowing the old man away right there. He could almost see the image of blood cascading through the air as the chair would rock backward plunging its occupant into the fireplace. Mike nearly smiled at the thought.

"Mike..."

"I know. Get Niki and get out of here." He tossed Bill the flashlight.

"What about you?!"

"I'll think of something. Go!"

Bill didn't argue. He dragged Niki out the front door as fast as his feet would carry him, leaving Mike with Clay to wonder how many bullets it would take shatter the circuits of a pissed off android.

"She's very cunning Mr. Harrison. You'd best be careful." Clay seemed amused. He's trying to distract me, Mike thought.

Ignoring Clay, Mike slinked quietly toward the kitchen entrance, wondering with each ill-fated step how good the android's hearing was. Exceptional, he supposed. The designers could make her as well as they wanted. He tried to make his breathing silent, but he only succeeded in noticing every small sound he made whether it was a footstep, a breath, or even a heartbeat.

Suddenly the door swung open. Miraculously, he squeezed off a shot in time. Her head snapped back from the impact, but it didn't stop her. She struck him with phenomenal force, and Mike felt as if his entire chest were caving

in. In another moment her hand darted up. That was all he remembered.

* * *

It was a little like watching the stars fall. The cold coastal breeze gripping and then letting go, the tan sands which seemed rather darker than tan, and that distant disoriented feeling would combine on rare occasion when the stars fell from the sky.

Mike saw the stars falling clearly enough. He could feel the chill. But it was the disorientation that stole the show. He made numerous attempts at standing, but he never quite managed it. The ground seemed to rock like a see-saw back and forth as he lay down, and whenever he tried to get on his feet he'd upset the balance and the entire room would turn upside-down and send him crashing to the ceiling and after a moment back to the floor again.

He heard voices far away almost shouting. They seemed to be very angry voices, but he couldn't understand the words. Suddenly he knew the language was foreign. Then he heard a girl giggling, but he couldn't place the laugh. It was a sweet innocent laughter which reminded him of the birds singing at Greenflower. But it was very near. Mike thought he could touch it if he reached out his arm just far enough, but suddenly it ceased. He knew she was close. His hand searched for her, but she wouldn't be found. He crawled toward her for a few feet, and then slumped down in despair.

He was too tired and she was too far away. Instead, he listened carefully for her laughter. But she was gone.

Chapter Five

The nose of the kayak climbed quickly over the tall wave, slicing the crest in half before plunging back down to meet the next. Its occupant paddled furiously against the wind, straining frantically to beat the next rise before the sea engulfed her vessel. Her long slender arms gleamed in the morning sunlight, their dark, Draconian tones accented by a rich, brazen glow. A sudden gust of air almost capsized the boat spraying a salty white foam against her long, black windswept hair. She breathed deeply in exhilaration and struggled to keep the kayak upright. Out in the open sea, several kilometers from any land, she was beginning to lose her personal battle of wills against the elements.

She noticed the brilliant silver frame of the hydrofoil from the corner of her eye as it approached. The craft sped over the water in front of her, only its three skinny legs touching the water. They barely seemed to connect at all. Agyris poked his dark smiling face out the window as the pilot crossed her path.

"Had enough yet?!!!" he shouted.

She turned her watch transmitter back on, knowing her weak voice wouldn't carry as far as his.

"Almost, give me another cent."

Her aide's voice broke over the transmitter, "Old Johnny's on the Coral. It looks like a situation has developed. It's urgent."

She cursed under her breath. "Okay. Bring the Coral in to get me." The next wave nearly rolled her over, and she turned the kayak around so that she wouldn't have to fight the wind or tide.

Agyris' hand flapped out the window as the hydrofoil sped away. She heard his voice over the transmitter, "Ambassador Uhambra is ready now. Coral steer fifteen degrees starboard and proceed at fifty knots. Pick-up at six-hundred and forty approximate. Over."

She leaned back letting the kayak drift with the tide while avoiding the brunt of the cold wind at her back. The sky was a pale blue without a cloud anywhere in sight. On the eastern horizon, Tizar's brilliant tangerine sun seemed to shimmer through the wide expanse of atmosphere. She saw purple-brown dots when she blinked and decided to refocus elsewhere.

"Ahoy there!" The first mate was waving from the deck. He wore a striped blue and white shirt with a sunny face. He tossed a hook, and smiled down at her as if expecting some reward. She hooked her kayak and climbed aboard, as he manually wheeled in the small craft.

"Where's mister problem?" she absentmindedly inquired, reaching for a towel. The first mate smiled through the pained and exhausted look he liked so much to wear in the company of superiors. She guessed it was his idea of looking busy.

"O'er there, ambassador." He nodded his head toward the cabin as he wrestled with the wheel.

"Don't strain yourself." She wrapped the white towel around her tall slender frame. It was a sharp contrast to her black swimsuit and dark, suntanned skin.

John Clay opened the cabin door and walked out onto the deck. Bags drooped under his usually alert, crystal-

blue eyes. He wore a white business suit. She remembered he had a number of them along with a collection of expensive ties. It was considered ancient custom with the corporation; but on Tizar, it was contemporary fashion.

She stared at him silently with her dark brown eyes. She would let him confess incompetence and beg for another chance before patting him unforgivingly on the head and sending him home. As usual, he waited for the first mate to leave the deck before beginning his report.

"Ambassador, it is good to see you vibrant and alive and as young as ever." She sensed the vague tone of disrespect, the way he said young. Was he envious?

"I'm older than you, Johnny."

"Yes, the miracle of anagathics. It never ceases to amaze me. So lucky it was for you that you became a diplomat and not a sleeper."

She bit her lip in aggravation. "Not luck. What brings you here this time?"

"I have bad news to report."

"Again?"

"The Solomon residence was broken into early this morning by that reporter. We captured him, but his accomplice escaped with the Siri. Together, they have enough evidence to support..."

"Let me guess... a police investigation."

"Or worse still, a full divisional security review. And that's far more likely." Clay's hands were wrung together, his knuckles white from lack of circulation.

He continued, "This could all have been avoided if we had simply killed Harrison and his Psyche as I advised..."

"How did they learn of your whereabouts?" She ignored Clay's complaint. They both knew it had holes.

"We're checking into that now."

"Did you redirect all your people to new controls?"

He nodded, "Yes, but..."

"Well, that's all that really matters then. After you leave, they can investigate all they want, it won't do them a bit of good. Do you have a list of your redirections?" He handed her the envelope.

"What was your method of communication?"

"Non-electronic, of course."

"That leaves quite a lot of room."

"Sealed paper envelope. Like this one but with coded orders."

"In person?"

He hesitated, "Yes. It was safer and fairly quick. And I used private transport."

"Where?"

"Where what?"

She bit her lip again, "Where was contact made?"

"A few at their residencies. They spread the word, and the rest came to receive orders at Solomon's..."

"Right in the middle of Snowcountry?"

"It's fairly out of the way."

"What about the security disk for that day?"

"It was destroyed by Harrison. He had to protect his accomplice."

"You're sure? We can't have that thing floating around."

"Would you like to see its remains?"

"Not particularly." She wondered if he was trying to be funny. "When you leave tonight, take Solomon with you."

"Of course."

She smiled for the first time since seeing him. "Is that all then?"

"Not quite. I'd like to know what we're supposed to do with Harrison."

"Have you interrogated him?"

"Not yet."

"Wake him and do it. Report back if he has anything interesting on his mind."

"If not, can I kill him?"

She laughed, "Would it give you great pleasure?"

"On the contrary. I'd like to keep him alive for torture. He's only ruined everything."

"Alright. You can do with him whatever your little heart desires. I emphasize little heart, because I know you very well. That's if and only if he refuses to cooperate. However, if he has something interesting to offer, see if there's a way to avoid murder. He's quite possibly the top gatherer on Tizar, maybe even in the entire sector. There will be a storm in the press if he just disappears. See if there isn't a way we can use him to our advantage. He must have some sort of connections. And find out how much he knows. It'll give us a good idea where we stand."

Clay nodded, trying consciously to make a mental note of every order. He knew he wouldn't try hard to make Harrison talk. It would be fun getting rid of him.

* * *

Mike awakened slowly, his body stretched like a slab of meat along a tightly strewn grav-field, its invisible coils suspending him horizontally, tugging his arms and legs in separate directions. He glanced about the large, dimly lit room, its sharp, jutting contours and lack of furnishing serving a dull reminder of his helpless position. A large window along the far wall overlooked a blue-green seascape, gaeyave and shallowfish swimming slowly past the plastic brace, while another creature with long clear tentacles attached itself to the smooth surface. Mike peered between its suctioning arms wondering if he was dreaming. He could barely make out the blurry lights of Aquapolis in the far distance.

Robin leaned with her back against the glass and watched Mike while the drugs slowly lost their grip. As his eyes focused on her dark outline they seemed to close on the neat puncture wound in the center of her forehead. His legs began kicking in a pathetic sort of dance as he tried to physically squirm out of the gravity cell.

"We had to put you in there. You kept on hurting yourself." She approached him cautiously.

"You didn't have to dope me up. How long has it been?"

"Not long."

Mike stopped fighting the field. He tried to relax and think of a way out, but he was out of ideas.

He looked her over. Robin wore a pair of blue coveralls. A headband hung limply from her front pocket.

"Sorry about shooting you." He tried to make it sound genuine.

"Quite all right Mr. Harrison. I understand your motives."

He wondered how much an android could understand.

"Besides," she continued, "it was about the best place you could have aimed."

"No brains, huh."

She patted her chest.

"Well, it doesn't look good."

She seemed to laugh inwardly as Mr. Clay glibly strolled in, "No, but it will heal." He looked very self-assured, even a little cocky. "Robin is very hard-headed Michael. May I call you Michael? The bullet you fired simply bounced off. The skin which was torn is constructed with a biochemical agent not unlike that found in mendwear. Bed off."

The grav-field slowly rotated Mike into a standing position. He looked at Robin. She smiled as if on display.

"Why are you telling me this?" Mike tried not to sound too irritated.

Clay pondered the question for a moment, his thin, white brows furrowed in self-restraint. "Because I like you..." he managed with a sarcastic twist to his voice.

Mike let a smile creep across his face before plunging, arms outstretched. He felt his body sheathed in fire, burning alive even as brushed by the old man and hit the floor, his inflamed arms crackling and spitting like dry driftwood over an open barbecue.

"What you are now experiencing Michael... is our cooperation inducing system. It consists of a series of electrical implants in your brain... which are capable of constructing a wide array of phantom sensations... when properly instructed." His booming voice slowly slipped to its usual volume as the flaring pain evaporated.

Mike felt his head, naked flesh and electrodes.

"You bastard."

Clay smiled at the remark.

"Why the hell are you doing this?"

"I'd like to get to know you... get to know your work?"

"Why should I tell you jack-sh..." Mike hit the floor as the electricity scathed through his mind, his head throbbing in illusory explosion.

"I believe you will find our methods quite convincing."

Mike tried to talk, but the pain forced his mouth shut, his neck curling backward in agony. Gasping for breath, he refocused his eyes. Robin stood over him, her foot resting softly on his chest.

"I don't know... you want..."

"Now we're getting somewhere aren't we..."

Robin blurred into the ceiling, its dark surface pressing on him, pushing him deeper into the floor.

"We want to know... how we can help... do we?"

"Ye..."

"What's that Michael?"

"Yes...."

The pain faded slowly, the pressure falling away like storm clouds over the coast, raining then leaving in gentle succession. Clay regarded the young man with antipathy, the body tangled in grotesque torment, and without a single scratch. He much preferred real torture, the sort that you could see and have respect for; but that could wait for later.

Robin picked Mike's head off the floor and let it drop. "He's unconscious. Automatic depressants registering in the forward cranium."

"That's no fun... let us wake him."

"Are you sure?"

"Do it."

Dark brown eyes burst open as the chemicals neutralized in wave after wave of mind splitting torment. Clay's smiling face loomed above like a bobbing floater.

"Tizar to Michael... are you still with us? I hope that was as good for you as it was for me Michael. Because, to be absolutely honest, it doesn't get much better; but we will try, won't we." He winked toward the silhouette sitting quietly against the window.

"Go ahead..."

"What's that Michael? Are you actually cognizant? Have you a thought to share?"

Mike felt Clay's glaring eyes upon his face even as he closed his own.

"...before it dies of loneliness? Go ahead... what?"

"Kill me..."

A long silence passed before Mike opened his eyes. Clay looked astonished and insulted.

"Kill you??? Why in heaven's name should I do a nasty thing like that? I want to be your friend. We are friends... aren't we Michael?"

"What the hell do you want from me?"

"You mustn't be difficult Michael... it's a naughty thing."

Burning sensations tore through Mike's body for a fraction of a second as he turned to look again at Robin.

"She controls it Michael... she could kill you on a whim... except, of course, for the obvious fact that androids don't have whims. Lucky for you... isn't it?"

Mike griped bare floor as the pain coursed through his veins. He twisted about, vulnerably, clawing toward her with floundering motions.

"But since you've been such a good sport, we're going to keep you company for a while longer. Are you feeling cooperative yet?"

"Tell me what you want."

Clay acquiesced, "Very well, let us start at the common ground, just to see what we both know. Tell me who killed our esteemed friend, Mr. John Doe number seventeen."

Mike stopped and thought as the pain released its hold.

"Who... Fork? You want to know who killed Fork?"

"I believe I have made myself abundantly lucid, Michael. You were aware of them. We know you visited the pit."

Clay first heard a chuckle, then a snort, then a laugh, then a sound he couldn't place in any interrogation he had ever participated in or heard of. He looked down at the billowing figure in amazement and then back toward Robin.

"What are you doing?"

She nodded her head, nothing.

"Michael, either we've pushed you completely over the edge, or..."

"Fork isn't dead." Mike tumbled himself into a sitting position, holding his side with one hand and wiping away tears with the other.

"You are insane."

Mike beamed up, the laughter leaving him as the memory of pain crept back into his mind.

"You don't believe me, Clay... flush me out the torpedo tubes."

The old man smiled at the suggestion.

Clay wasn't convinced, "If he's alive, then where is he?"

Mike rubbed the metal connections on his head.

"Where is he!?"

The dim flicker of pain approached his senses and veered away as he steadied his gaze on the dark outline against the wall.

"I'll do it, Michael."

The moment hung open like a sputtering ocean swell refusing to die.

"In transit to Calanna."

"And how do you know this to be true?"

"A little birdie told me. Look Mr. Clay, I'm a gatherer. I've got ways of finding things out."

"Connections?" Clay seemed intrigued; whether out of playfulness or genuine belief, Mike couldn't tell.

"That, investigation, and sometimes just a little intuitive reasoning."

"What did your little break-in this morning constitute. Investigation or intuitive reasoning?"

Robin told the truth; he hadn't been out very long. Mike wondered how far it was to the surface.

"Mr. Harrison," Clay skipped to the surname as if he were beginning a long lecture, "It seems as if we have fallen into a double-checkmate. Do you play chess?"

"On occasion."

"Double-checkmate is the game's one fault; it is shall we say, the impossible outcome. Yet, in reality, it is all too common. Rarely instead of there being a winner and a loser, both parties lose."

"There's always stalemate..." Mike involuntarily slid backward an inch as Clay glared at the interruption.

"Not the same, Mr. Harrison. One is more a tie than the other."

"I see."

"We have forced each other into unacceptable losses, and foolishly. We are not enemies. If anything, we both want to see this Mr. Fork as you call him returned to Tizar, alive and well."

"Then why did you kidnap Niki?"

"You were interfering with my work. You were investigating me. And furthermore, you were drawing attention to Mr. Fork. I am convinced that if he were not the subject of your obtuse scrutinies, Imperial attentions would never have been attracted."

"ISIS."

Clay smiled and folded his hands over his belt.

"What part in this do you play, Mr. Clay?"

The old man's skin tightened involuntarily, "Again you probe me, Michael."

Mike looked at Robin. Her outline seemed to shimmer against the dim, blue light of the seascape.

"Fine. I'll forget you. I'll forget I ever met you. But just what are you proposing?"

"That you go to Calanna in search of this Mr. Fork. I would like you to find him and bring him back here to Tizar."

"And what will you do? Linden already knows that you planted those bugs."

"What I will do is unimportant."

Mike smiled in disbelief, "I know Chuck. He doesn't take security lightly. I really doubt that he'd just put this to rest."

"He has no choice. You have no choice. Or would you rather be fed to the fish?"

"Look, I'm just saying..."

"Mr. Harrison, you are not in a position to debate me. Will you do as I bid? A simple yes or no will suffice."

Mike considered it, even though he knew Clay was right. He had no choice. They had no choice. That was the beauty of double-checkmate, or mutual assured destruction as most folks called it. It was a lesson history had invariably taught every culture. And in each culture it had a different name.

"Okay. I guess you've got me. I'll convince Chuck to stay cool, and I'll go to Calanna." He didn't mention that the latter was already decided.

"And you'll take Robin."

"And I'll... now hold it just a minute." Mike raised his hands in protest.

"And you'll take Robin." Clay held all the cards, and he knew it. Mike realized it was pointless to debate.

"Fine. I'll take her."

Chapter Six

Mike leaned against the wall and squinted into the cool, scented spray as it stung his face and shoulders and dissolved into a fine, white mist, pools gathering in clusters and slipping down his aching body to the hexagonal tiles below. He vaguely wondered what he would tell Linden, trying to rehearse the words in his mind. "Oh, remember that guy with the android who kidnapped Niki and bugged your offices and home? Yeah, he's really an okay guy. I was just talking to him this morning. He decided not to jettison me out his torpedo tubes. Isn't that the nicest thing?"

Robin was in the next room prying about, trying to glean information about him from every facet of his life. Boss's orders, she explained, but she approached the assignment with a curiosity beyond mere orders. He hardly knew her and she was already getting on his nerves.

"Okay. Dry now." The spray shut off and short blasts of warm air jetted from the sides of the stall. A clear bowl-shaped device lowered itself from the ceiling until it surrounded his head. He shut his eyes as hot air jets whipped around his ears. In a few moments Mike stepped out of the stall and looked for the threads. Robin had laid a black three piece suit out for him. He hated formal wear, but he knew the occasion warranted it. Quickly dressing, he grabbed a comb and then set it back down as it scratched bare flesh. He found a formal hat beside the imager.

Robin, dressed in a long white evening dress, sat on the couch bent over the Niko camera system with its various parts sprawled across the living room floor. She had been sifting through pictures in storage and apparently one had caught her fancy.

"What're you up to?" Mike approached cautiously remembering the last night's incident and the pain she could inflict.

"I didn't know you had another Siri. Who's this one?"

Mike glanced at the picture on the screen. A young Siri woman, perhaps five years older than Niki, stood facing a large triangular lake finished in polished black stone centered around three fountains outlined by the dim amber light of Calanna's dying red sun. Her eyes, dark and bitter, seemed to cast a shadow across the black stone tiles upon which naked symbols were etched like tortured spirits, bonded to the stone for all eternity. Mike remembered the sacrificial alter for all its beauty and pain; and as if by reflex, he reached to the monitor and the screen went black.

Robin looked up startled, "I was just looking."

"She was an old friend. You wanna go?"

"There's still another hour. What's your hurry?" She stood up and walked into the bedroom.

"Nothin'. What's your's?" Mike packed the camera into its case and continued to ponder what he would tell Chuck. He walked to the bedroom, pausing before the door, reflecting what Robin might be doing. He tried to take into account the fact that she was an android, but with everything that happened, it still seemed impossible.

"I always did like a girl who was straight-forward." He smiled at the poor taste of his comment.

"Excuse me?"

Mike entered the room to see Robin hooked up to the computer system via a thin clear cord leading into the comm-socket from her ear. Suddenly he found it not so hard to think of her as an android.

"What are you doing to Cindy?"

"Talking," she smiled. "You have everything locked up real tight. No access to private files."

Mike felt relieved. For a moment he debated inwardly between snapping her cord or just yanking it out of her ear. The thought made him grin.

"Cindy, give Robin all the information you have on the Nissithiu."

"It is done, Michael."

Robin unplugged and the thin cord automatically retracted into her head. Mike felt generous, as if he had a choice in the matter.

Robin stared at him for a moment before speaking. "What makes you so sure?"

Mike shrugged, "The facts fit. C'mon, let's go see Linden."

* * *

The subway to Greenflower was slower than most since it traveled above the surface for much of the ride. Mike imagined that its architect preferred monorails with their visual entertainment of clearings, cropland, and rolling hills speeding quickly by the windows to the functional subways which moved a person tens of kilometers in a matter of a few minutes without anything to look at except bare earth along the way. True, the subway to Greenflower was more pleasant than most, but it wasn't really a subway.

Robin didn't seem particularly impressed, however. She kept studying Mike and the other passengers, and when she caught Mike watching she even faked a yawn. It didn't bother Mike, but he didn't like it either. If she was going to fake a human characteristic, better that she should fake being delighted to see the trees dashing by or the rushing sound the wind made whenever the tracks would turn. That was what he liked so much about Niki. She was always so happy just to experience and be alive. That was what he envied most about her ever since the day he met her at the Psi Institute on Tizar after his last return from Calanna. He liked her so much he didn't even bother checking out the full range of her talents, and when he had found out how limited they were, Mike still decided to keep her on.

Niki was not nearly as talented as her predecessor in the picture, but she was happier all the same, though even that could become irritating sometimes. Robin on the other hand was either dead or cruel. Mike smiled at the thought, because he knew he was being too judgmental, but it seemed true all the same. Robin had her excuse, however; she was an android. Her makers wouldn't program her so she could have a good time. Anything as state of the art as herself would have some purpose. Mike, on the other hand, was human. He wondered what his excuse

might be.

The train pulled into the Greenflower station. The Lion's Den was only on the neighboring hillside looking down over a bluff onto the inland town. It was perhaps a twenty minute walk, fifteen if they hurried, two or three if they took a taxi. Mike felt like walking but realized he wouldn't have a choice as two men in green uniforms entered the compartment.

"*Galactican* security," one dryly announced, "Please come with us."

* * *

Every MegaCorporation was like a nation state; they all had their own private police, whether the company specialized in cargo transport, starship construction, agricultural production, or news gathering and dissemination. The *Galactican* was no exception, and on every world under its scope it recruited from the ranks of the planetary ground command. The people they invariably got were low quality mercenaries who couldn't cut it in an interstellar outfit. That knowledge kept the ground cop humble in comparison with his starlaw counterpart. It was a quality Mike appreciated.

The two security officers led Mike and Robin to a grav-car outside the subway. The cool evening air enveloped them as the taller of the men fiddled with the electronic keypad-lock. The other rested his hand on his holster, his rough fingers lightly touching the handle of his automatic, while his eyes stared at the back of Robin's neck. The gun looked like army ordinance. Mike guessed that the short clip contained armor piercing bullets.

Once inside the car, they sped up the hillside toward the Lion's Den. With variable altitude control, the ride was non-stop; and cars on cross-aisles sped above or below at intersections. Within two minutes they had settled outside the banquet hall, the tall statue pillars of the building suggested a certain elegance of manner which Mike knew would be lacking within. The tall officer motioned for Mike to follow as he withdrew from the car toward the white stone building.

Mike looked over his shoulder as the shorter guard stood blocking the door, "What about her?"

"She stays here," the tall one answered.

Mike followed the security officer into the building, noticing familiar faces smiling and nodding in every direction. Linden sat at the front table flanked by the departmental heads. Mike approached cautiously, catching Linden's eye as he walked toward the table.

"Mike!" It was Niki. Bill stood behind her, his long dark hair combed back and knotted. Several heads turned suddenly from the crowd.

"We thought you might not..."

"I know," He cut her short. "What did you tell Chuck?"

"Everything," Bill responded first. "When you didn't come back... what happened?"

Mike scowled, "Things are screwed up. I've gotta see Chuck."

"Hold on a sec..."

Mike cut through the crowd toward the editor. Linden wore a blue suit and a confident smile. He stood up as Mike reached the table, and several of the department heads followed the editor's example, offering their hands to Mike as the guard took an unobtrusive position in the background.

"Gentlemen, you know Mr. Harrison."

"Good to see you again young man, you're doing a great job for the paper."

"I hear you will be speaking tonight, Mr. Harrison."

"That was a brilliant piece on Telmar."

Mike shook their hands and exchanged pleasantries before pulling Linden aside.

"Chuck, we have to talk"

Linden kept smiling, "You bet."

"Now."

Once they were outside, Linden dropped his show smile, "Okay, what happened."

Mike let out a long breath, taking his hat off as an opener. Linden blinked with astonishment at the shaven head and short metal barbs.

"...what the... you okay?"

"For starters, I've got to wear these until I get away from our psychotic, android friend. Clay wants me to take Robin to Calanna to find Fork, and I don't think he's an Imp."

"He's not," Linden stopped staring when the hat went back on. "We checked over that disk you stole from the Solomon estate. The one you planted on Niki for us to find."

Mike nodded, "Anything juicy?"

"It seems a lot of people were visiting Mr. Solomon that day. Many are listed as tourists. Other's as diplomats. We think they may be spies."

"Azazi?"

"Draconian Corporation. You stumbled onto something very big."

Mike tried to puzzle everything together in his head, but none of the pieces matched.

"Have you informed the government."

Linden shook his head, "And blow the story? No way."

Mike gulped down wondering how long he could go to prison for concealing information about Draconian spies. He finally looked up, "What do I do?"

"Take her to Calanna. Get into her programming over there."

"We can do that better over here."

"No," Linden stared into the reporter's eyes. "Mike, we've already agreed that somebody had to get into my office and home to plant those bugs, and that somebody was probably in security. If they have an agent in security, they could just as easily have ten in technical. Get the job done on Calanna. It'll be more quiet that way."

Mike looked down to the grassy turf below his feet, "Okay. Get me a ship and I'm off."

* * *

"Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for that more than generous introduction. It is certainly a pleasure to be here, and to speak to such a distinguished assemblage of colleagues, employers, and guests."

There was a titter from the audience as Michael Harrison surveyed the banquet hall. There were easily over a hundred people present and none who knew what he was about to say, himself included. Mike tried to concentrate on what they wanted to hear, but his head was still dizzy from the events of the day, and he felt a cold sweat beneath the hat as the metal implants began to itch.

"As Mr. Jaden pointed out, I've been working for the *Galactican* for a very short time, and my work experience often borders on the fantastic, so whatever advice I have to share with my colleagues, whatever incriminations I have to send to my employers, and whatever insights I have to give to our guests tonight, should all be taken with a granule of sodium-chloride.

"Investigative gathering is a very individualistic effort; everybody in the business has their own style and way of tackling a case, so be forewarned that what works fine for me will probably fail miserably for you."

This time there was laughter from the audience. Mike began to relax and let the words flow. His trick was just to keep speaking and never really think about what he was saying. As long as his mouth kept moving, shoveling out the meaningless phrases stuck together with the pointless glue that was public speaking, he'd be though his obligation in no time.

But underneath the cool exterior his mind began to wander away from the speech. Being an engaged speaker was what they taught in oral communications. He remembered the class well enough. He remembered two of his instructor's pet phrases: "Reach out to your audience;" "speak with them, not at them." Mike inwardly smiled remembering how he had passed the class: by being disengaged. Speaking was frightening enough, let alone engaged speaking. Mike always had an alternate method, for almost everything. He liked to experiment until he found out for himself what worked best.

The same was true with investigative reporting. Some guys would read the morning updates until they found something interesting, and then they'd go and research a spin-off. Others would carry a team of news-hounds, usually young people just entering the workforce who were looking for a few extra credits. Mike decided to rent-a-psyche.

He could have found John Doe #17 any of the other ways, but the fact was that Niki found him the day she visited the med-center for a psi-rating test. She had contacted the institute on Tizar and they referred her to Dr. Albertus. After the test she was still keyed-up and open to psi-emissions as they were called. That was the day they brought Fork into D-ward.

"D" was for Disaster. He had been apprehended in a cafeteria at the starport with a bloody fork in his hand. It was the real kind, not like the grab-utensils which couldn't hurt a flea. He must have been from off-world. There was no record of him anywhere in the planetary directory. And to top it off, he had no identification what-so-ever. Niki just happened to sense his total confusion while walking by the two nurses who were transporting a wacko to solitary, bound in a straight-jacket and tied to a stretcher. It had been in the updates, any nurse news-hound could have called somebody on the floor, but as it happened, Niki spotted the opportunity and took it. That's the way the dice fell, and Mike couldn't say he was any happier for it.

Fork was messed up, that anyone could tell, but what nobody had known was that the damage had been the result of a mind-scanner. It took a trained "psyche" to know that. Even sophisticated medical equipment could miss it. It

was that little bit of knowledge which everyone else had carelessly avoided that gave Mike a story. To each, his own.

The mind-scanner was an expensive piece of technology far more advanced than the sensatizer Mike had so recently experienced. It attempted to do what any well-trained Siri could do, read the mind of its victim. Victim was the word to use, because mental damage was often associated with over-zealous use of the equipment. If someone was well trained at hiding a secret inside their mind, all that there was to do was kill a few brain cells until such training departed. And then, sometimes, the scanner wasn't used to get secrets. On rare occasions, it was used to maim. Mike believed that Fork's was such a case; and he believed that the Imps were the responsible party.

But how did the Draconians enter into it? That was the piece of the puzzle Mike couldn't place. It hinted at something much larger in scope, something which dwarfed both Mike and Fork and all of Tizar. It was the real itch that he couldn't yet scratch, until he got to Calanna.

"Being a reporter for an interstellar news syndicate also has certain fringe benefits, not entirely immaterial. For starters, nobody wants to piss you off."

Mike looked around. Everywhere he saw people laughing. He hoped they were laughing with him and not at his obvious lies.

"Another, and this one is just as critical as it sounds, is that often if there is an important public figure you need to interview, that person will generally take time out of their busy schedule to get some good press, whereas if you were working for some two-bit firm out of Arcadia..." he stopped for a wide if sheepish grin, "I hope there's nobody here from Arcadia tonight...." The audience was loving it.

Except for one person. She sat in a corner near the back. Her dark features were not so stern as they were indifferent, but her eyes were as sharp and cold as steel. She seemed vaguely unimpressed, and Mike felt his heart skip a beat as she stared directly through him.

"The last fringe benefit I can bring to mind, tonight, is that after the story is written and published and read by the masses, the reporter gets to speak to a distinguished assemblage of his colleagues, employers, and guests. That's always a lot of fun."

The entire audience tilted on the edges of their seats, hands poised in clapping-position.

"And with that I'd like to return control of this honors banquet to one of my most esteemed employers, your friend and mine, Mr. Ray Jaden. Mr. Chairman."

Mike hurried away from the lectern amidst raucous applause from a mostly standing audience, and took his seat next to Niki and Bill. They both congratulated him with pats on the back, and Mike guessed that the speech went okay, though he still hadn't the faintest inkling to know what it was that he said.

"Nice speech buddy."

"Thanks Bill."

"...cept, next time I'd leave out that part about taking a dump outside the Cubbyhole."

Mike turned around, "What?"

"You 'member. When we came back from Telmar and got..."

"I didn't." Mike felt his mouth drop open.

Bill's face broke into a grin, "Just kidding, Mike."

Mike sighed with relief as Walker laughed, "You have to admit, I had you goin'!"

Bill Walker was one of the few people who really knew how Mike worked. Mike tried to teach him everything, and in the end he'd taught Bill too much. Now he'd do his best just to hide things from the younger gatherer.

Mike looked over his shoulder and saw the woman in the corner. She was still focused on him. He turned around but could feel her stare boring into the back of his skull. Her face was familiar, but he couldn't place it. Some foreign official, he decided.

"Bill, who's the woman in that corner in the white dress, nothing over the shoulders. She keeps looking over here."

Bill took a half turn using the full extent of his peripheral vision, which was far better than most people's. Mike figured that he had lots of practice.

"She's turned around."

"Well, she was..."

"Wait. It's Draconian Ambassador Kato. Don't you read the paper? Oh, of course. Look who I'm talking to. Forget I asked."

"Don't let it happen again," Mike used his best Draconian accent. It sounded absurdly frustrated, and Bill laughed.

"I think she likes you."

"Shut-up."

Natasia Uhambra Kato was the permanent Draconian envoy to Tizar. It was uncommon for her to attend social gatherings unless she was required to do so by her office. Mike figured that drastic circumstances had called for drastic measures. But what did she hope to accomplish?

"Here comes the booty, mate." Bill looked pleased with himself as Jaden placed a tray of wall plaques on the table beside the lectern. He had a list of "winners" in his left hand and a glass of water in his right.

"This could take awhile."

Bill smiled back, "Should we pick up the yawn patrol."

"But that would be rude," Mike countered as he began his first glorious yawn of the evening. Bill attended with voluminous seconds.

"Our first award goes to one of our speakers tonight, a gatherer who has done a splendid job for the *Galactican*, and a close personal friend of mine."

"I wish he hadn't said that," Bill slowly began to struggle up from his seat.

Mike placed a hand on his shoulder, "Sit down."

"This gentleman has preserved the sacred trust our paper holds with the public, that of reporting the truth as it is, without reservation and without dramatization."

"At least we know it can't be you."

"Shushhh..."

"He headed the best-selling issue of the *Galactican* this year with his front page article headlined, 'Telmar Prepares For Civil War' which I might add, was quite accurate if we are to have any faith in the current news.

"His articles and essays are insightful and are a fine example of the very best in journalism. With that, it gives me great pleasure and pride to award this plaque to Michael J. Harrison, for his contributions to the *Galactican*."

As Mike accepted the award there were resounding cries for another speech, all of which died down as he resumed his seat. It took an act of will to not sneak a glance toward the corner of the hall. There was something different about her.

"I hope you're not reading me."

Niki turned, startled, "Somethin' the matter?"

"I'll tell you about it later."

The plaque wasn't especially impressive. Mike wondered if they imported the silver ore from Telmar. Jaden continued to hand out various other plaques to various other people for various other accomplishments while company photographers stood around snapping images.

"I wish I had one," Bill interrupted Mike's thoughts with his most sullen voice. He looked like a four-year-old who lost his lollipop.

Mike stuffed the plaque in Bill's jacket pocket.

"Hey..."

"You can change the name."

Bill laughed, "Hey, thanks dude."

"Anytime."

As the tray grew empty, Mike noticed that he and Bill weren't the only one's yawning. However, nobody had the guts to make for the door. Mike knew that the first person to break open the doors and leave would cause a tidal-wave of people to follow, but nobody dared start the congestion.

Finally, Jaden congratulated the readership, everyone who came, and everyone who didn't get an award but thought they deserved one all the same. With the final laugh, he declared the ceremony complete and adjourned the congregation. The rabble, anticipating the clap of the gavel, were already on their feet with more raucous applause, but this time with constipated steps as they tried to squirm outside and preform their relative duties to nature. Mike laughed remembering the Cubbyhole.

"Are we having fun yet?"

Mike gave Niki a hug, "We're about to."

"Michael..."

Linden approached from behind Niki, "I got that ship."

Mike looked over her shoulder, "How soon?"

"It's at the starport in pre-flight. Hanger 183."

"Accommodations?"

"Four."

"Okay, thanks Chuck."

Niki tugged Mike's arm, "What's goin' on?"

"Get your stuff packed, you too Bill, we're going to Calanna."

"Now?"

"Yeah."

Bill headed toward the doors muttering something about his mother. Niki followed, and then suddenly turned.

"What about you?"

"I've got everything I need."

She turned and ran out after Bill.

"Mike," Linden turned back to face the reporter. The multitudes were still bumping their way outside amidst the congestion at the Hall's entrance.

"What is it, Chuck?"

The editor's hands were wrung into a knot as he tried to lean casually against the lectern. He smiled his real smile for the first time in the night.

"Nothing... Good luck."

Mike nodded, "Thanks."

Outside the air was cold, not at all like the balmy summer nights on most of Calanna. Mike saw the dark figures recede into the distance, climbing into their chauffeured limousines, a sign of their decadent elegance. The security officer stood beside the company gravcar. He was looking for Mike amidst the approaching crowd. Mike guessed that Robin was still tucked away inside. It would have been a long wait for a human.

"Mr. Harrison."

"Mike swung around abruptly, barely catching his head in time to keep the hat from falling off."

The Ambassador smiled and tried unsuccessfully to stifle a giggle, "I'm sorry if I surprised you. My name is Natasia."

"I know." He reached out his hand to shake hers. He wondered if there was some other sort of protocol.

"But my friends call me Nuke. Don't worry," she withdrew her hand abruptly, "you don't have to kiss it or anything. I'm not Imperial royalty."

Her long dark hair shined in the moonlight. She was a tall as him, but very slim. She suppressed another giggle rather poorly and her face glittered with amusement, but her eyes told a different story.

"Can I help you Ambassador?"

"No." She waited for her reply to sink as she smiled seductively, "I wanted to commend you on a brilliant speech."

Mike wondered if she was being sarcastic or giddy.

"Thank you."

"You are welcome."

Her eyes glimmered with icy bemusement as the reply sank deeper into his mind. Something within them toyed about an idea, as if she were sifting through his memories for an occasional... stolen disk.

"What do you want? You want to know something."

She studied him for a moment, "I already have what I want. You've told me everything."

Mike clenched his fist, knowing he'd given away his thoughts.

She put her hands on his shoulders and rubbed her thumbs into the fabric of his collar while staring into his eyes with a message of sympathy.

"Yes, you have. Now I want you to have a safe and happy trip. And be sure to find Mr. Fork. He's very, very important."

Chapter Seven

A dim, filtered luminescence clung to the cold air as Christina Quatalis re-checked her flight instructions for the fourth and final time, shaking her head with a now comfortable disbelief. The recycler hummed in a shaded corner of the bridge as the computer silently reconfigured her upper boards to account for the installation of turbo-fan chemical jets into the IFM *Vista's* tertiary ports. Hazel eyes scanned its progress, reading the textures of data with a mixture of apathy and distrust. Over the bridge IC she heard Rrkal's husky voice shouting obscenities amidst the dull background chatter of ground techs.

She opened her line, "Some sorta prob engineering?"

"Captain?" It was Victor. His York accent was easily discernible over any transmitter. "Com-beta on the third tube is right out. If we had another day we could make repairs, but not in space."

"Typical ISS surplus. Don't sweat it. We can still route navcom through manual."

"Only if we tear open your panel. And then we'll probably have to reconfigure the whole system from scratch. Is it really worth it?"

"We haven't any choice. We're taking-off in five hours."

There was a growl from the other end.

"What's that?"

"Nevermind. It's not repeatable."

Chris smiled, "Tell Rrkal to watch his lip. I want you back up here to chart our course."

"I thought our course was already registered."

"Just get up here; there's been a slight change in plans."

"On my way."

The bridge lights flickered as local batteries kicked in. It was one of Rrkal's ways of letting everyone know when he was annoyed. Chris punched up another channel.

"Gunnery, are you ready for the Jane's files on Wasps."

"Ready Freddy," Rita's voice crackled over the IC.

"Sending now..."

* * *

Mike cautiously stepped onto the maintenance grav-plate. The congested workspace of Hanger 183 made him feel conspicuously overdressed. Robin dangled her legs over the edge of the plate as it slowly lifted to the spacecraft above. Large spotlights attached to the wall illuminated the aft of the vessel as water vapor condensed and frosted along the fuel hoses and quickly sublimated back into the air a few meters down the line. A large Vargr, his coveralls stained with lubrication fluid, barked directions to the starport maintenance personnel from a small engine port. An expression of distaste seemed to cross his black, furry snout as he sniffed the pair's scented formals.

"Y'da pass'ngerz?"

Mike stepped onto the cold, steel hull extending his hand, "That's right. My name's Mike."

"Rrkal," the Vargr shot Mike a toothy grin and turned toward the airlock. "Da stat'rhoomz don'da lif'tund beinty stups sdhar'burd. Blu dhoorz."

"Thanks," Mike winced as the engineer's breath steamed into his face. "We can find our way around."

The airlock's iris valves rotated open as Mike and Robin approached the outer hatchway. A youngish woman with short, sandy-blonde hair stood in the short passage. Her khaki uniform showed command rank.

"Ms. Clay, Mr. Harrison, it's a pleasure to welcome you aboard the Imperial Free Merchant *Vista*. I'm Captain Quatalis. If you'll follow me, I'll be happy to show you to your cabin. Our other two passengers have not yet arrived. Will you be staying together?"

Mike and Robin followed the Captain through the airlock's double iris valves and into a hexagonal passage with railings and iron grating floors.

"No. What are the accommodations?"

The Captain glanced toward Mike, twisting a red lever which opened a set of sliding doors to a small cargo lift.

"Two staterooms, double occupancy."

The lift descended one level and the doors slid open. Three passages ran to the bow, port, and starboard respectively. The floors and walls were all finished in an artificial, white substance made to look like polished marble, but the metal handrails remained. One was conspicuously bent outward several centimeters.

"Bumpy rides?"

"We often get comments on that."

They followed the captain through the starboard passage and into an oval common area. A wide table occupied the central floorspace, its translucent body suspended from the ceiling by a reflective, holographic projection rod. Gravitic recliner housings lay scattered on the floor around the table like an assemblage of anthills. Nested into the far wall were cupboards, a hydration oven, a squat cooling unit, and two air filters. Sliding, blue doors to either side marked the stateroom entrances.

"You'll find the galley down the port passage in case you get hungry. Rrkal, I believe you've met our engineer, he cooks the supper chow at eighteen hours ship time. Otherwise, its fend for yourself. If you need to use medical, that's next to the galley. Rita doubles as our ship's medic; you'll meet her if you get spacesick. If you need anything else use channel zero on the IC. We'll be leaving Tizar in four standard hours, or a little over fifteen cents local time. After we jump into hyperspace we will review your drop-off instructions," Captain Quatalis paused with this last thought searching for the right words. "I hope you enjoy your stay. Good-day."

She quickly headed down the passage and made a swift right turn away from the lift.

"Apparently in a hurry," Robin poked her nose into the cupboard.

Mike leaned against the passage railing, "What drop-off instructions?"

"I think she means we aren't landing at the spaceport. Wanna split a can of mash?"

* * *

At T-0:02 Bill and Niki showed up, packed as tightly as two rats could pack. For Niki, that meant a pair of pris glasses, a string of worry beads and the standard med-kit with bandages and casting-foam. Bill carried his own sort of med-kit, three vials of purified ethanol, ten grams of hexobarbital, a laser blade, and one fiberglass body pistol of last resort. Mike never understood how two people so different could get along so well. Getting Bill and Niki together was a recipe for destruction. At formal banquets they could behave, but in a starship galley...

"Food-fight!"

"Hey Mike, what's the matter. I thought you liked yogurt."

"Wanna smoke an enchilada?"

"What the hell is going on here?!"

"Uh..oh.. Ah, hi *el cap-i-tan*. How beautiful you look this evening."

"This passenger is drunk!"

"Who?"

"I want to know who the hell brought drugs onboard this vessel!"

"Hic..."

Mike began to question the wisdom of bringing along an entourage. Niki was essential, just because without her finding Fork would be next to impossible. Robin was part of the deal, which could have been broken back on Tizar. And Bill, with his aptitude and inclination for brawling, was just cannon-fodder. Mike smiled, wondering if he would get that far.

"Are you aware of the term 'depressurization', Mr. Walker?"

"She's gonna space me..."

"Only if you're lucky. And as for you miss Sen..."

"Tee hee hee..."

Captain Quatalis had an interesting method for dealing with drunks. First, they were injected with a nausea inducing compound causing them to sacrifice to the porcelain god the entire contents of their stomachs in addition to several dry heaves just for good measure. Then she had them hooked up to plasma vaccs where they had their blood filtered by the Empire's most sadistic gunner/medic. Finally, she had them stuffed into low berths for one hour of uninterrupted hibernation, just so they wouldn't miss the hangover. Then, after they were thoroughly sobered, she offered them her sincerest apology for having put them through such stringent disciplinary measures and broke out a bottle of Antares' finest spirit, just to show them how much she meant it. If they accepted, they got to go through the whole process over again.

Mike sat in the corner of medbay taking notes and plenty of pictures for future blackmail. Half way through the proceedings he felt an unmistakable disorientation.

Bill leaned on the plasma filter, pukestance. "Was that the drug or just me?"

"We just jumped into hyperspace," Rita Ghomes examined the readings along the med displays. "Oh... that's interesting."

"Sweet mama, Mike, get me the hell outta here."

"Sorry Bill, captain's orders."

"Billy..." Niki curled herself into a little ball around the base of her filter, probably to keep the room from turning so fast.

"What is it Niki?"

"I feel woozy."

"Yeah, that's one way of putting... Mike?"

Mike looked over at his sobering companion. Bill had plainly noticed something new in his now undrunken state.

"Take off the hat, Harrison."

Mike obliged him, relishing the surprise of a half-suspended grin. Niki's was less controlled, and evolved from giggles to more puke which nobody thought she possessed.

"What the..."

"It's a long story."

"Them's head-tricks, Mike. Highly illegal for Tizarians."

Mike nodded, "Courtesy of Mr. Clay."

"In other words, you didn't have any choice."

Mike smiled, "I guess he wants to keep me in line."

"Or out of line."

Niki looked up from her barf, "I think it's gross."

"Look who's talking."

"Hey, at least I hit the bucket, okay?"

Mike turned about and left, donning his hat only as an afterthought. The dark passage with its white finish and bent railing seemed to flow over with misplaced memories. He leaned against the metal as if testing its strength. Something about the cold steel put him at ease, as if the time-space bubble which now surrounded the ship would take them somewhere else beside Calanna. Even Telmar was preferable. Or perhaps Tyber. Mike remembered the dense, choking atmosphere, mildly acidic carbons and sulfates eating his lungs as he scrambled for a filter mask, tall smokestacks cutting through the lethal fog a mile and more. Even that would be preferable to Calanna.

The oval antechamber to the passenger staterooms was dark and cold. Mike searched the table's surface for environmental controls without success, finally fumbling across the IC.

"Hello?" The voice was strange. A York accent?

"Hi. How d'ya turn the lights on?"

Suddenly the room lighted up.

The person at the other end seemed to laugh, "I think you found the magic words."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Glad to be of assistance."

Mike switched the line closed and stumbled into a gravitic recliner beside the table. He wondered who he had just talked to, and how many more "strangers" were aboard the *Vista*.

"Computer on." Nothing happened.

"Quaint..." Mike leaned over the table and found the switch at the base of the connector. The air above the table began to glow with a luminescent texture as the holo-rod generated a spinning three-dimensional representation of the *Vista*. Mike paused, waiting for some sort of prompt. The image of the *Vista* continued rotating.

"Hi."

"Unrecognized command."

"Help."

"No help available."

Mike went to the cooling unit and returned to his seat empty handed.

"Show passengers."

"Respecify at unrecognized parameter... passengers."

"Cargo manifest."

"Records unavailable."

"Bullshit..."

"Unrecognized command."

"Show flight instructions."

"Records unavailable."

Mike returned to the cooling unit and grabbed a sluice-stick. He bit off the end and sucked out a quarter of its frozen, syrupy contents.

"Who the fuck programmed you?"

"Respecify at unrecognized parameter... the."

Mike sat back in the gravitic recliner and let the head tilt back until he rested on a forward incline, his feet sticking upward and out like a gull's tail feathers.

"Who... are you?"

"Specify data format."

"Verbose."

"*Vista*, Imperial Free Merchant, SG-64923. Laid down 124-618, Dimstar, Imperial Dimstar Corporation. Tonnage two-hundred standard, twenty-eight hundred cubic meters displacement. Engineering, one Doppel PF-18 fusion-linked power plant driving two Ditar AG-217e hyperfield generators and one Monoquad MQ-3 fixed impulse maneuver drive with dual Zalpha-X turbofan installation. Gravitics, Napaliastics I-14 Field Generators with standard inertial compensation and zero to two gee sustained gravity adjusters. Range, sixteen point three light-years with unlimited maneuver...."

Mike straightened his posture as the holographic display zoomed-in on specific systems aboard the craft. He tried to keep pace with the output as the computer jumped from one topic to the next. The *Vista* was a 38-year-old retired scout ship built by Dimstar based on a standard design two-hundred ton hull. It had been purchased at discount by the Bank of Ares and leased through the Galactic Press Corporation as a refitted free merchant. Its entire class had a history of excellent atmospheric maneuverability, but the *Vista*, in particular, had been placed in drydock six years previously with orders that it be scrapped due to a series of critical drive failures. Somehow a deal had been cut, and

the defective drives had been repaired.

The vessel was crewed by two *Galactican* personnel, two independent contractors, and three robots. The captain, Christine Quatalis, was born on Tyber. She served as a pilot in the Imperial Scouts before being hired on by the *Galactican*. Her first mate, Victor Darian, was from Ares. He served Sector Navy as a tac-ship lieutenant before being discharged in naval cutbacks three years earlier. Rita Ghomes, a native of Telmar, was discharged around the same time from her planetary guard while the civil unrest was beginning to brew into open revolt. Rrkal, the vargr engineer, was from the outworld coalition. He worked his passage from the frontier aboard a merchant craft until he was laid off near Dimstar. The three robots worked in cargo, maintenance, and engineering respectively, places which passengers were unlikely to ever see.

The passenger roster was classified as were flight instructions. Mike guessed that he could have broken the security if he had Cindy on hand or access to the ship's computer directly. An idea itched away somewhere deep inside his mind, but he put it away shaking his head and smiling. If he hadn't seen the way Captain Quatalis dealt with drunks, he might have been more willing to see how she dealt with snoops.

Mike decided he was tired. He peeked down the passage and saw no sign of movement. Niki and Bill were going to spend a few more hours in sick bay for sure. Mike pulled himself to his feet and started toward the closest of the staterooms.

"Lights off." The door slid open as the room darkened behind him. He shuffled out of his shirt and climbed into where he thought the null-tube should be.

"Mike?" It was Robin.

"Uh..oh.. I think I stumbled into the wrong room."

"It's okay. You don't have to go."

"What makes you think I was going to?"

She didn't bother to come up with a reply but scooted over to make more room. Mike tried to make out her features in the pitch darkness. He wondered what she was wearing.

It! It's an android. Mike tried to refocus his thoughts, but they kept twisting around on him.

She moved again, "What are you thinking?"

"Wrong question."

"You're trying to see me, aren't you."

Not your typical android question, Mike thought. "Can you see in the dark?"

No answer.

"Like, infrared?" His throat felt dry.

She moved again, her head very close to his, but without breath. "With a dash of the ultraviolet." He could almost see her smile.

Mike closed his eyes and tried to sleep wondering why she would do the same. She seemed to mimic humans in almost all aspects of their behavior. Was it simply a part of her programming or something deeper? After several minutes he felt the suppressant currents slowly rock as she seemed to breath, quietly, peacefully. He finally let himself sink slowly beneath the cover of sleep, the depth of space closing inward like a far away dream realized in a sudden instant. And in his mind's eye he saw the fine red outline of a short fence post, its needle-thin barbs pressing outward, seeking blindly in the static wind as a trio of squat, white figures lay aside, their fluffy forms resting on a bed of green haze.

* * *

"If I wanted your opinion, I would have asked for it."

Captain Quatalis looked mildly irritated. She chewed on the end of a buttersprout and glanced around the galley looking for her lightpen. Victor sat in the far corner of the room still sizing up her intended audience of four passengers as Rrkal and Rita stirred a can of condensed terriak hearts into their joint concoction.

Niki studied the map on the near wall, trying to decipher the gist of the implications. "What if we get caught?"

Quatalis turned to the Siri, "If we land at the spaceport we'll all be picked up by starlaw, or worse, by ISIS. This is the only alternative."

"That's only true if the Calannan guard lets the Imps push them around, which is something I find highly unlikely."

"It's more likely than you might think Mr. Harrison, particularly since Calanna has never been a friend of Tizar or the Galactic Press Corporation."

Mike nodded, and reconsidered. The drop-off instructions, drawn by an ex-army commander working directly under Jaden and heading the Tizar office's internal security division, were simple and direct; a clean military troop insertion if Mike had ever seen one. Under the plan, the *Vista* would jump in at the far side of Calanna's smaller

moon, dive into the planet's atmosphere, deal with any resistance as necessary, make the drop via gravchutes, and get out. The only problems were the gravitational effects on the hyperspatial drives, and the resistance, most likely in the form of Wasp fighter craft. After the four were safely dirtside, they should easily ditch the chutes and hide in the local terrain. After that, hiking twenty kilometers into Aelflan, a large agricultural community, would be a snap.

The incident would be logged as yet another smuggling operation which made it through. Since many government and security officials took part in such activities themselves on a regular basis, no eyebrows would be raised. The Wasps would probably follow the *Vista* out at a safe distance and let the few ground personnel available handle the drop. Probability of success: 90% plus, or so it was written. And better still, the Imps would be thinking Harrison and company still on Tizar counting the ashes of poor Mr. Fork.

"Fine, but how do we get out." It was Niki again.

Quatalis had wondered when somebody would ask the obvious question. The fact that it had been asked meant that they had already accepted the plan for getting in.

"The *Vista's* cargo shuttle, the Ariya, will land at the spaceport eight days after the drop. We'll unload our cargo and begin speculating. No doubt we'll attract some Imperial attention, so when you try to get back in contact, be subtle. We'll stick around for ten days after that, or until we are no longer needed. The *Vista*, herself, will be hiding under scanner range of the system's largest gas giant. In case of complications, I suggest you arrange for a backup spacecraft. Are there any questions?"

Seeing none, Rrkal announced open season on the supper, and the crew plus one android dug in. Bill poked at the food with the end of his laser blade, watching the mixture fizzle and flame with tempered distaste, and Niki gathered half-a-bowl in a half-hearted attempt to put something down. Mike just sat around watching the others, his appetite all but evaporated by the discussion.

Rrkal grinned at the trio, "Da Pass'engurz don' eet hartz."

Bill looked up from his bowl, an enigmatic smile slowly creeping across his face.

"Z'hartz goood foood. Ven Z'Droyd noez."

Mike looked across at Robin. She was still shoveling it down with an eager hunger bordering on ravenous.

"Zhe eetz like und no tomarwoo."

Robin looked up from the table, gulping down her mouthful without chewing.

"Why iz zat, droyd?"

"Because there might not be...." She looked across at Mike with a matter-of-fact smile. Taken together with the fake sleeping, yawning, detachable ears, and punch in the chest, he decided he didn't like smiling androids, not that he had ever known any others to justify the generalization. Mike reflected on his attitude as she resumed eating.

"Doz zhe zhit too?"

Her eyebrow cocked at the query, and for the first time Mike felt an inkling of interest in the conversation, such as it was. Bill perked up too, as did the captain after a moment's pause.

"Not exactly your usual supper manners, Rrkal."

"I'm... tirzty." He seemed to search for the last word as if unsure of the translation.

Quatalis regarded him with a passing curiosity. "You're thirsty? For knowledge?"

"Da." The Vargr grinned, two canines dropping from either side of his snout. He seemed rather pleased that he'd gotten his point across, and had all but forgotten about Robin.

Mike looked across the table, "I don't know; Robin, do you?"

"Do I what?"

Mike smiled at the slated reply, "Y'know, 'zhit."

Niki spilled her bowl as Mike felt a raw reminder of the pain coarse up his spine, snapping each vertebra as it ascended until it loomed at the threshold of his mind. He awaited the burning, but it just stood there like a flickering candle flame, pausing for some sort of twisted invitation.

Mike opened his eyes to see everyone staring at Niki, her face averted in shame as she tried to dry the table. Rrkal slid across and began helping her clean-up as the Captain shuffled out of her recliner to grab a hand-vacc.

"Maybe we should have discussed the drop after supper."

Bill kept frozen in his place, his eyes sweeping from Niki to Robin, and then over to Mike. As their eyes locked in an understanding that didn't need explanation, Bill reached down to the base of his recliner and switched off, his body slowly rotating into a standing position before the gravitic currents gave way to the surrounding fields. Mike followed suit, and soon found his feet placed firmly on solid decking.

"Thanks for the food, but we're not hungry."

"Daz okay... mor foood fur uz."

Mike followed Bill to the hold, the younger man entering an access code at the lift and again at storage. A security camera watched from the corner of the room as Bill hauled one of the gravchutes off the near wall.

"Mama says it's best to strike while the enemy is out to lunch."

Mike nodded, "Looks like you've been keeping busy."

"I figured it was high time I paid my keep." Bill took his last vial of ethanol from his back pocket.

"She let you keep that?"

"I told her it was for barter... on planet."

Mike snatched the vial from Bill's open hand, twisting off its cap as the younger gatherer broke out a two and a half gram capsule.

"I wouldn't drink that if I were you, Mike."

"Not straight."

"Straight or mixed, you'd die." He began opening the chute's gravitics, snipping a thin wire with the end of his knife and fishing it out.

"Ethanol?"

"Guess again, Mike." His gray eyes seemed to flicker with amusement he tied the thread around the capsule.

"I dunno."

"Well, for starters, it's radioactive. The vial's the shield."

Mike handed it back without the cap, "Fine... you drink it."

"Not very likely." Bill plunged the capsule into the liquid and extended his hand as if for a shake.

"This isn't gonna work, Bill."

"The cap."

Mike handed it over, sweat droplets beginning to form on his forehead. "They're gonna check these things out."

"Really?" Bill's eyes widened with pretended surprise.

"Really."

"Don't be a puss, Mike. It'll take at least fifty claps for the current to dissolve the casing." Bill produced a foam napkin, wrapping the vial and tying it securely at both ends, the thin wire string falling from its interior. "And in another twenty... give or take..." He gritted his teeth as the laser blade burnt the wire back into place.

"Then what?"

Bill closed the unit and replaced the chute back on its rack, nicking its polymer housing almost as an afterthought.

"Boom?"

"Neutrinos, Mike. Lots of neutrinos."

* * *

The *Vista* hung cloaked beneath the shadow of Baal, Calanna's lesser moon, as its port sensors began scanning the cloudy world below. On the distant horizon, the rutilant giant descended into night, saffron rays slipping carelessly away to space.

"Passive EMS reports local clear."

"Focus IR, 3rd Octh, Coord 34.21, 84.13."

Captain Quatalis cautiously edged the *Vista* between the jutting walls the dark lunar canyon. An eerie silence crept outside the craft as the joints along her spine began to tingle in anticipation and fear.

"How long 'til the batteries..."

"That depends," Victor's hand fidgeted over the sensor boon controls while his adjunct talked to the ship's computer and played with the data.

"Nothing unusual."

"Try Neutrino."

"Already done. Minute's clean."

"Maybe."

* * *

Mike sucked in cold air outside the dropshaft, glancing toward the digital altimeter on the far wall. Niki and Bill sat opposite, knees bent upright, boots braced together. Bill wore a worried expression. Niki looked elsewhere, she was ignoring the tension. Mike focused his eyes forward, a cool sweat breaking out along his hairline. Robin gently fingered the straps of her gravchute.

"Overweight?"

"Paranoid."

Mike smiled at the reply as the vessel jolted sharply against a deafening noise.

* * *

"Minute's clean! Get me DR and ID!"

Christina struggled with the helm controls as the *Vista* rocked and tumbled with the impact.

"They're ground to air. Quiet snipers."

"They?"

"Two mark ten."

"Ghomes, are you reading this!?"

The *Vista's* hull armor crackled and glowed against the atmospheric friction as the heat seekers scrambled in pursuit. A swarm of plasma cells jettisoned from the aft and exploded in a fiery blaze over fifteen miles high.

"Sending pinpoint on source."

"Fire at will!"

* * *

The robot eye scanned skyward, over the gray and dusty clouds, a cumbersome program slowly analyzing the data. Chemical explosion. Plasma release. A small mechanical motor raised the antenna to an upright position as the launcher's communit broadcast the coordinates of the hit. Within moments only a burning crater remained.

"Okay, give me decoys."

"Is that neces..."

"Yes!"

Six gravballs dropped in pairs from the *Vista's* ventral aft, dispersing about the vessel as it darted toward the cloud-cover below.

"DR Victor."

"Hull breach in tank seven, jump's out also."

"Oh, and by the way."

Victor smiled at the criticism, then stopped smiling.

"Two wasps, cold fuel. No make that four, in close form pairs. They're mark six. Missile range in twelve."

"Eyes open Ghomes."

"Get me fix."

"Sending... Eight goblins folks."

A single Hellraiser flushed into the inky black as Victor pronounced the "E" in "Eight." Within scarce moments a billion cubic yards of sky burst into an intense white flame.

"One and two nixed. Three and four are breaking up. Four dupes out."

"We got lucky."

"Four more goblins. Mark five and six."

Christina reflexively pulled hard and to starboard as Rita fired an antimissile and loosed a swarm of plasma cells despite the tumbling and turning of the spacecraft. Suddenly the *Vista* lurched from impact, its steel frame splintering open and erupting from all sides in a fiery inferno of fusion and plasma.

Chapter Eight

Downward through the thick blankets of clouds a dark figure fell, twisting and twirling, helpless in the howling tempest. Darkness loomed above, seeming to descend and collapse closer to earth with each passing moment. Then the sky became as bright as a thousand suns and the darkness was vanquished. Hair caught fire; skin parched, baked, and blackened in the blink of a boiling eye. Then only a single fireball remained, high above, like a sun but lifeless and slowly disintegrating. The sky seemed to crack as the shell of an egg, and a blast ripped through the clouds, shredding the air and deafening all senses as it passed.

Michael awoke to the pain of burning flesh, the deafening blast seeming like a distant and forgotten dream. The wind tossed him between clouds, scrambling his senses with his emotions. He tasted fear as he saw the ground below and the fireball above. Suddenly, a sharp pain swept through his spine like an ocean wave, sparking memories and stinging his consciousness. He thought he heard Niki giggling somewhere and realized he'd lost his helmet.

He looked down again; it was time. He unhooked the release and pressed the activator. The gravchute seemed to

yank him upward toward the filthy night sky, now littered with burning debris as the fireball spread outward, dividing into glowing bits of metal and thunder.

Feet together, knees slightly bent, muscle braced against bone, the old routine flickered in the back of his mind as he hit and rolled, falling uncontrollably into a warm, wet, compost ditch. Botflies circled his head as it emerged from the steaming muck.

Nimble fingers worked free the straps of the shoulder harness and waistbelt, making splish-squish sounds in the lacteal water. The chute slowly sank and disappeared altogether beneath the surface as Mike crawled up the side of the ditch, peeking over the rough earthen edge. The air began to hiss and spit while small chunks of metal ripped into the ground like shrapnel from a grenade. In the distance some hundred meters, a tall wire fence lighted by iridescent lamps stood proudly, its barbed icing leaning inward, sparking against the hot debris. Mike dug himself into the soft earth as far as he could until his lungs breathed dirt. An explosion rocked the ground, and then another. Several clumps of stone and clay fell into the sludge as Mike felt his fingers grip the roots of some alien weed. The air grew thick and smelled of death and fumes and fire, all mixed together like some unholy beast.

For several minutes the sky seemed to fall, and then all was quiet. Mike crawled cautiously from the ditch. Blood trickled down his neck and dripped slowly onto the ground as he stood, haphazardly, holding onto what was left of his face. The skin crackled and fell away without feeling.

A clean military troop insertion. He tried to smile while there was nobody to see him, but the right side of his mouth was too mangled. He remembered the *Vista* jolting, the general panic, Bill diving for the drop shaft, himself scrambling with his helmet and pack.

There was no sign of his pack anywhere. No infrared goggles, no niko camera, not even a stupid pair of wire cutters. He stared back toward the fence. The distant sound of hooves against dirt met his ears. Mike staggered toward the light of the fence, drawn by the noise of the spooked animals. As he peered into the murky darkness on the other side, he saw several quagga galloping parallel to the posts, their white stripes shining dimly against the cold light.

In the distance, he heard the faint whine of chemical combustion engines, probably two-wheelers, motorcycles. This was a ranch. He stared dumbly at the fence. A high-security ranch. Mike walked parallel to the gate, crouching behind the cover of the scrub brush and beyond the range of the light. It was too dark to properly perambulate the area. Patches of snow and ice covered the ground, and the dirt was sturdy but largely barren. The air became steadily colder, and he began to shiver.

As he walked a small spark of light caught his eye. It was on his side, far away from the fence. Bright, yet so small it was hard to distinguish. A flare. Mike crossed through the shallow thicket, dizzied by his loss of blood. He stumbled over a large stone and remembered Robin screaming in mid-air, her gravchute shredded, her body burning, the earth miles below. He heard a dripping noise and tried to concentrate. His hands felt warm and sticky as he regained his footing, but the flare was closer. It stood upright, wedged between two tall rocks on a steep hillside, their sharp edges outlined in the sizzling white light. Mike climbed up the slope, falling to his knees every few meters, his temples pounding with each step, his body shivering from the intense cold.

He contemplated falling asleep. He could reach the flare tomorrow or the next day or sometime after that. He tried to imagine waking up later, seeing the flare, its white flame still burning, grasping it in his hand, touching the hot fire. It would tingle his senses, like the waves of the ocean on Tizar, the cool swells lapping effortlessly at the long shore. He would hold the flare in his hand as he slept beneath the starry night sky. He'd sleep forever, and the sun would never rise. Kitara would stay beside him, soothing his dreams as she used to, entering them, sharing her own. Something she had whispered; he could hear her calling his name.

"Michael..."

Dim evening light slipped lazily through the small glass window, coloring the dark, quiet, chamber in shades of purples and grays. In the corner, a rough wooden stool leaned against the wall by the mantle, small burning embers tickling its legs. A black kettle hung suspended above the crackling fire, steam wisping from its nozzle, mixing with the smoke in the chimney. Above the mantle, a dull wooden-handled axe rested against the wall on a set of long iron nails drilled parallel with the floor.

Niki sat at his bedside, sopping the sweat from his forehead with a cloth napkin. Through one eye, she looked comfortably tired. Mike tried to think of something to say.

"Shhh...."

He closed his mouth and let a smile escape. Sharp waves of pain sprinted through his mind.

"You'll have to learn to stop that too."

"What happened?" The words came out slurred.

"You've lost some blood. A mild case of shock. You're lucky I'm a qualified nurse."

"It was a prerequisite. Where are we?"

"I don't know... but we're safe."

"What about the others?"

Mike felt a brush of sorrow after he asked the question. Niki's sorrow.

"Are you sure?"

"I don't know anymore than you. I've been searching for Billy, but... I just don't know." Mike felt the cool, damp cloth caress his forehead as she spoke. Something in her voice said the task was hopeless.

"Don't lose faith."

"I haven't. I'm going to keep searching. But you have to go back to sleep."

Mike was too tired to argue. He settled back into the bed and closed his one good eye. It wasn't the first time psionics had saved his life or provided shelter, but the chances of Niki finding Bill were slim. Mike tried to guess likelihood; he couldn't. He wondered who owned the cabin. How long could they stay before the owner's return?

Mike felt the right half of his face. Niki had kept the swelling down, and his mouth was almost completely mended, but she couldn't reconstruct the bones or the teeth. Something had definitely hit him. He couldn't remember what. It ached for him to think about it.

The sky was dark when he awoke again, a bowl of hurtleberries on the stool beside him. Her gravchute sat lonesome against the wall. A small pocket in the cabin floor was open. Inside lay a brown leather sack, full of a hodgepodge of useful items. A two-pronged fork, a plate, a rusty distilizer, leaky chemical batteries, a wishbone, a long tin vial, a pot and serving spoon, a box of matches, a ceramic mug. Mike regarded them curiously.

Outside the cabin Niki sat cross-legged facing the forest, deep in meditation, her slight body framed by the predawn light. The forest surrounded the cabin on all sides without leaving so much room for a clearing. A thick green tarp covered the entire roof, a small hole cut out for the chimney, and above that the long, weeping branches of a dwearmurgrove tree hung limp in the cold air. The chimney ended in a dun colored box, black cords falling from underneath its corners and into the tarp's heavy fabric.

Mike guessed the whole mechanism was some sort of makeshift insulation to detract from the IR image. Somebody had gone to a good deal of trouble to build the hideaway. He wondered how Niki had found it and how she had managed to drag him through the dense brush without leaving a conspicuous trail. The memory of a lonely gravchute formed in his mind, its dull gray exterior blending into the darkness as it sat, propped, against a cabin wall.

Niki opened her eyes, "Lots of juice in those puppies."

Mike looked up, startled.

"Sorry."

He churned up a staid expression. "You're getting good. Were you just reading me or searching for Bill at all?"

"I said I was sorry." She seemed to fold inward on herself, trying to become small and unnoticed, clutching to her string of beads like a security blanket. Mike kneeled down, testing his flexibility after a day in bed.

"Speaking of juice, I'm thirsty. Where's the stream?"

She reached into her cloth knapsack and retrieved a shiny aluminum canteen. Mike drank.

"There's a stream about a kilometer north. Over the hill beyond that is where we came down."

"What have you got in here? Gyrocompass, good. Medscanner, castfoam, pris glasses, synthetic gloves; aha, mullah. You've been holding out on me, Niki."

"Mike?"

"Cold, hard imperial cash. Highly illegal at the moment, but considering the state of the drin, it ought to be good for barter. How much is this... y'know you're practically destitute, Niki?"

"Sorry, my boss doesn't pay me what I'm worth."

Mike looked into her eyes and smiled as much as his new facial structure would allow.

"Oh he doesn't, does he?"

"Billy's alive, boss."

"Where?"

"I'm not sure yet, but we gotta start looking."

Mike stretched his arms and yawned, "Hold that thought." He stepped into the treeline, backing within a clump of foliage.

"What's my Mike doing?"

"Mike-turating, lemme lone."

"Huh?"

"Answering the call of Mother Nature."

"Humph... well lemme tell you about Father Time," Niki picked out a flat stone and sent it ricocheting off a nearby branch.

"Hey!"

"Now stop rubbing your frowzy face and get back here!"

* * *

The two angry men dunked his head into the murky water, thrusting it deeper than before, holding it longer until he reflexively opened his mouth to breathe. He felt himself being yanked back to the surface, coughing, wheezing, sputtering for air, his guts surging upward to his mouth, the stank of the urine and feces weakening his cuffed limbs from nausea. A brown offal bobbed on the surface, seeming to laugh with every motion.

The white-shirted man stood opposite him, a thin smile playing across his lips. "You approve of our sewage containment system? I give you my assurance that you will have plenty of time to inspect it closely unless you begin talking now."

"No speak."

"You are a stinking liar."

Bill caught a lung full of air as his head submerged beneath the filthy muck. The two men lifted his legs above his upper torso and pushed them down into the refuse until his head hit bottom, dung and piss spilling along the barrel's rusty sides. After a minute, his body began to twist violently, convulsing for lack of air. The guards looked up with doleful eyes.

"Not just yet. Our friend is thirsty; we must let him drink his fill."

Soon, his feet slowed down, stopped kicking, and finally hung limp. The guards pulled his dripping, corpselike body from the slimy excrement, holding him upright off the ground. The white-shirted man walked over and patted Bill on the cheek.

"Yes. I think you will like it here."

Bill opened his bloodshot eyes and sprayed the man's face with a mouthful of sludge, spitting the last of the staining refuse onto the man's white shirt. Seizing the moment, his cuffed legs kicked upward as if by their own volition, striking their target at full force as the man's jaw dropped in horror and pain. Bill watched in satisfaction as the man fell to the littered floor gripping his groin tightly with both hands.

After several deep breaths, the man looked up into Walker's steely gray eyes. "You're dead."

"Now, now Sheffy," a ringing voice from the far end of the room cheerfully chirped, "the boy can't help it. He obviously doesn't speak our language."

Bill saw an elderly woman step into the dim light from the darkness of a corner. She wore a black, levantine dress with long leather gloves and boots, and her silvery hair was clipped with a furl.

"He's lying mother."

"Really dear, I think it's time you were off to bed."

"Stop patronizing me!"

She stopped in her tracks and cast her son a sharp glance, her sharp blue eyes seeming to sting him from a distance. The man tried to stand, but stumbled over his own legs in agony. She regarded him callously, like a vulture might regard a dying carcass. His eyes glazed over in trepidation as he noted her gaze.

"I mean," the quiver in his voice was laced with fear, "yes... mother. I'm going to bed now." He seemed to force the last words out one at a time. One of the guards helped him to his feet and out of the room. Bill gauged his chances against the other as the woman approached him, carefully sidestepping the scattered droppings and puddles of urine.

"Whew... you smell terrible."

"No speak."

"Though not as bad as Sheff smelled after he cornered that zorille last year. You remember that, don't you Medwin?"

"Yes Madre."

"Ambrose thought our boy was ready for some hunting."

"No speak."

"No, no that's quite all right. I don't prize my young men for their vocabularies. What I'll do with you is report you to the authorities. In fact, I'll have to report this whole mess. Then we'll have to scour the countryside for your friends. You didn't come alone, did you."

Bill shut his eyes and tried not to listen.

"Then the Imps will come in if my appraisal is worth beans. That's bad news. The Imps don't much cotton to sticky messes, which is what you're in right now. I think you'd rather work in a labor camp or as a slave in some rotting hole in the ground rather than have your brain erased. They do that nowadays, you know... with interstellar criminals."

"No speak."

"No you won't speak, and it's too bad. If you only spoke you could save your life, your friends lives. It's a crying shame, I think. But pipe beatings and dung drownings obviously won't cure your affliction."

Bill found himself pondering her words.

"The authorities will have drugs which will make you talk, and the Imps will have methods which are better left undiscussed in polite company."

She shifted her feet around another puddle and stepped in front of Bill, casually waving off a tiny gnat.

"There will be people here in the morning. Will they be looking for you? What should I tell them? What reason do I have to save your ass if you won't talk?"

Bill could feel his breath quicken. Her sharp blue eyes scintillated in the dim light, driving imaginary needles into his own as the gnat spun wildly in the air, plunging recklessly into the rusty rimmed barrel and the thick gooeey soup within.

* * *

Gall midges buzzed under the trees around the shallow stream as the early sunlight spiked down between the branches like razored knives. Mike decided that Niki must have made a bee-line for the cabin after she found him; psionics didn't account for ease of travel. He chopped brush out of the way, and made a neater trail than the one she had sniffed out. The long handled axe was somewhat dull, but it did the job all the same.

It was the axe, she said, that led her to the cabin. Psionically, it was like a beacon, a conspicuous aberration in an otherwise unlikely background, full of strong emotions and pain. She thought of calling for help at the ranch instead, but there was pain there as well, and enough angry people to blow their mission. And there would probably be government people asking questions, trying to find out what happened, maybe even Imperials.

Mike tried to collate the data. The explosion still throbbed inside his memory blocking out the usual clutter. The drop never took into consideration a strong defense. Calanna wasn't known for tight planetary defenses. If anything, the opposite was true. It was almost as if they had been expected.

The hilltop was studded with dandelions sprouting forth from the hard terrain. Niki spied the landscape through the pris glasses. To the north another kilometer almost, Mike saw the tall wire fence gleaming in the morning sunlight. A kilometer further was a ranch house and a tall guardtower jutting upward from the grassy fields.

"To count the sheep?"

"Gimmie dat."

Niki handed over the glasses. Mike adjusted the power and zoomed in, chainlocking until he could see the sun sparkling off their shades.

"Thems is autorifles. Lucy issue. Serial number..."

Niki snatched the glasses back, "No poop; lemme see."

"Yes poop. Can that thing take pictures?"

"Nope." She winced though the lenses, the internal flywheel gyroscopically stabilizing the image. "You can't see the serial numbers."

"But it was fun pretending; gimmie back."

Mike counted about twenty guards in all. The prisoners numbered at least a hundred, most working the fields with hoes and picks. One tractor sat idle underneath a canopy tent beside a row of stables, its mechanical guts strewn over the ground like so many spare organs. Two kilometers east of the house was a crater a good fifty meters in diameter. Big enough to cause a scare, he figured. Some prisoners and guards were there, sifting through the wreckage.

"What's the matter. Wha'd'ya see?"

Mike handed the glasses back to her, "Take a peek at this."

A smile crossed her lips, a momentary rupture of glee. "He is alive."

"And well, though incarcerated. Typical."

He felt the expected rabbit punch to his kidney as the clapping of copter blades echoed on the wind.

"Now the question is..."

She lowered the glasses to complete his thought, "How do we get him out?"

* * *

The black copter circled around the ranch house slowly, spying the guard-tower and the stables and the tractor under the canopy tent. The morning sunlight glimmered off its dark surface, its guns gleaming like polished spears. The old woman glanced out her office window, "What the hell are they doing back so early?"

The men in the fields stopped their work, and those in the distant crater climbed out and watched the vessel settle down beside Madre's garden. Bill picked his teeth with a splinter of hull metal.

"Those the Imps?"

"Come to pay us visits," Sheff's blue eyes gleamed in the sunlight as he smiled and shoved Bill backward. "Back to work neghral."

Bill had learned that the last word translated roughly as "alien" in the planetary lingo, stressing the negative connotations. The Calannans didn't like offworlders; most dirtsiders didn't.

Two figures emerged from the copter's cockpit, one dressed in a white, loose fitting, wrapper, the other wearing a khaki uniform sporting a kepi atop his shiny bald head. The old woman strolled out to greet them, an air of confidence and composure close about her.

"Colonel Arman, what a pleasant surprise. And I see you've brought our guest. Sule, wasn't it?"

"That is correct." The bald headed colonel bowed slightly, his thick Calannan accent drooling over the Galanglic as he chuckled nervously. The offworlder stepped in front of him wearing a determined smile, her long white hair flowing free with the warm breeze like a quagga's mane.

"I am still looking." She seemed to spit the words, harshly.

"Congratulations," the old woman beamed back.

"Madre, please." The colonel mopped beads of perspiration from his crinkled forehead with a brown cloth. He seemed to her more embarrassed than annoyed as a sharp gust swiped at the visor of his hat. She ached to pity him.

"Why don't you both come inside. I'll make us some tea. Do you drink tea Sule?"

Gusts of wind swept up loose dirt, stinging the prisoners in the field. Bill hustled into the crater for protection, scowling at the suddenly harsh wind.

The living room was plush by local standards, tiled in white marble with dark red streaks, elegantly furnished with the forest's finest. A large table occupied the floor's center, before the hearth. Its stout wooden legs smoldered black at their base were shaped as the paws of a lion. Sparks danced carelessly along the floor, seeming to conduct the crackling fire as the old woman poured the hot tea from a white china kettle, her long thin fingers stiffened with age.

"Me and my boys often break fast here, around this table. Greenleaf tea for everyone, that's what we have."

The colonel sipped the home brew, his pudgy fingers wrapped around his small bowl for security. She remembered him as a little boy, always curious and kind. His curiosity had been long chased away.

"The hospitable reputation of Madre is well deserved," he explained, his deep voice cutting through the air. "Not only she care for her boys, but she also take strangers. Is not that right Madre?"

"That all depends on how strange they are. More tea?"

Sule stroked her chin in thought, "Tell her about the tracks." Madre pondered the richness of her voice, not dark and crusty like the colonel's, but somehow different.

"Ah yes, the tracks," the colonel tried to search for the words. The interstellar verse was not easy for him. "We find the tracks of a person near the farrest gate. Much blood. It end on a small hillock south of here."

So he has a friend. The old woman nodded gently, anticipating his train of thought, "And you think I opened my house to this individual?"

The colonel smiled, a flush of pink entering his dark brown cheeks. She glanced toward Sule; the young woman stared solidly back, her bright blue eyes matching the sky at highsun.

"What did this individual do?"

The colonel's smile broke into a deep resonant laugh, "Then you admit."

Madre shook her head, "Admit? No. I never said that. I'm simply curious."

Sule stood up from her chair and walked toward the old woman, "You do understand that harboring a criminal is a felony under Imperial statute?" Her voice was too raspy for a girl, and something about her walk suggested aggression.

"I understand that you are looking for someone. Has this person committed some offense?"

Sule's voice hissed and slithered like something diabolical, "You are not in a position to question me."

"While you are in my house I'll question you whenever I damn well please." The old woman waited for a retort, for a scowl, a blush, some sign of weakness or strength. Sule's reply was silent composure. Suddenly she realized what she'd been thinking all along.

"What are you? You're not a woman..."

Sule smiled at the remark.

"...and you aren't a man either. Are you an android?" Her question touched a spark.

"Do androids interest you, madre?"

"No, I think they're quite disgusting actually, machines parading around as people. I say the lot should be rounded up and roasted on the spit Lucy style, along with their makers."

Sule perched herself on the table edge, "Isn't it a revolting notion? Microcircuits for brains, complex algorithms to mimic sentience, to pretend emotions. An absolutely horrific science."

"You seem at odds with yourself, child."

"I'm not an android any more than you are."

"Then what are you?"

Sule chewed on the query, her eyes darting to the stone hearth and the dying embers within. She slipped gracefully beside the fire reaching inside to pick out a glowing red coal.

"I am biological," her words now sarcastically melodious as she returned to the table, "yet I do not roast so easily. Do you?" Her hand wavered in front of the old woman's face, her sky blue eyes seeming maliciously playful against the dimming red of the coal.

"Is that supposed to be some sort of frail threat?"

"Just call it a forecast of your imminent future if you continue to refuse to cooperate."

"I'm qui..."

"Mother!" Sule's hand closed into a fist around the coal as Sheff crossed the tiled threshold into the dining room, puffing wearily for breath. Cupped in his hands he held a blackened, metallic object, about the size of a grapefruit. Bill was close behind, his frail body seeming less fatigued by the sprint. His gray eyes glinted with a strange mixture of curiosity and apprehension.

"Mother, look what I've found!"

"You found?" Bill started, but Sheff hurriedly bowed before the two guests, ignoring the remark. He proudly displayed his trophy in one hand. The object was a dodecahedron, somewhat scathed from its fall yet still intact. Engraved on one triangular face was the distinct picture of a small songbird with its wings outstretched as if in flight.

"I don't care who found it. Just what is it?"

"It's an alien artifact," he retorted, his free hand sweeping backward into Bill's face.

"Ah, so it is. My boys never cease to amaze me with their brilliant powers of deduction. Oh, by the way, this is Sheffy; he likes to be called Sheff. And this one here is Vilo, but you can call him anything you like, or hate for that matter, not that it matters, because it doesn't unless you make it."

"Mother?"

"Sheffy, I will not put up with your rude interruptions."

"But the artif..."

"Now that you're here you can make yourself useful. Wash these dishes. Vilo, show our guests out, they were just leaving."

Colonel Arman stood abruptly from his chair and began to leave, waiving his apology to the Madre. Bill found himself grabbing Sule's arm without effect. When he tugged it was like trying to pull a mountain. She snatched the dodecahedron from Sheff's hands as he collected the tea bowls, running her long fingers across the shiny engraving.

"You really have these jerks by their nuggets. Especially gray-eyes. Don't you know how to treat a lady?"

Bill instinctively pulled his hand away as he heard her voice, its raspy edge hissing along the hollow between his shoulder blades. It was somehow a dichotomy between cultured refinement and animal barbarism. The old woman smiled at his response.

"Don't mind her boy, she's biological."

"That doesn't mean I won't sting." Sule flicked the coal into his face, leaving a red, burned spot where it nicked his cheek. Bill wanted to shove her head into the hearth, but thought better of it when he noticed the daring smile playing across her lips.

"She's tempting you boy, trying to deny the facts of life." Madre walked toward her, gently guiding Bill aside with her free hand. "Sule, the facts are that you are being forcibly evicted from the premises; your only choice is with respect to the method of transport. You can either walk out or be carried out in pieces. I don't care which."

"I'll go, but I'm taking this." She held the dodecahedron firmly in her palm, testing its weight.

"The hell you are."

"It's from space, unclaimed. That makes it Imperial property."

"It was found on my land and it's mine."

"And what would you do with it?"

"It doesn't matter if I'd make ducks and drakes of it; I still say it's mine. Now put it down or I'll have you shot."

Sule smiled, perching the object on three fingers. "So it is yours for now. Let us see how long you can keep it." She tossed the dodecahedron into the fire, crushing the burning sticks under its weight. Flames enveloped it as Sheff ran to the kitchen for water.

"Good day, Madre." Her tall boots clicked on the tile floor as she left, leaving the stain of their echo on the pungent morning air.

"Vilo, see that they make it to their vehicle."

Sheff scurried back into the dining room with a pail of water which he threw on the fire. The flames sputtered and drowned instantly. He reached into the steaming embers and withdrew the dark object.

"Mother, that girl is a bitch with an attitude."

"She's no girl."

He dropped his prize into the bucket with a sound metallic plunk.

"Why'd you let her go?"

"Colonel Arman."

"Arman's no friend of neghrali."

The old woman finished sipping her tea as the sound of chopper blades clicked off the windows.

"He's a friend of mine."

Sheff sighed, "Mother getting sentimental in her senility?"

"Watch that."

Sheff took the bowl, "I could have softened her up."

"Like you softened up Vilo or whatever his real name is? I don't think so. I gave him to you for fifty cents. Your methods produced nothing. I talk to him for fifty claps and he's blabbering so much I need an extra set of ears just to keep up."

Bill strolled into the room wearing a quizzical smile, "I hope I wasn't that easy."

"My poor boy, being easy is a blessing on Calanna. Nobody admires people who are difficult. Now come give your mother a kiss."

Bill leaned over and pecked her on the cheek, "You're a sweet mama."

"I know I am. Now get back to work before I see fit to have you slaughtered."

"Yes Madre."

Bill headed outside into the crisp breeze. As he walked toward the crater he watched the black chopper shrinking slowly over the distant horizon, its shiny surface reflecting the growing star's light. Within the house, another pair of eyes followed its descent into the skyline.

"He's trouble, mother."

She frowned at the comment.

"He'll bring the Imps upon us. And for what? His lies?"

"I only hope they are lies..."

Sheff considered her reply with a questioning glance, "What did he tell you?"

"Enough to keep me entertained."

"He's a neghral, mother."

"Not anymore, Sheff. He's one of my boys now, and I'll not give him away to the likes of Sule."

Sheff laughed at the statement, anticipating her icy stare without fear.

"And just what's so funny?"

"He's not yours until he's ours."

"Sheffy..."

"I've got to insist, mother. It is tradition after all."

She weighed his demand against the harm it could inflict, and decided the latter a lighter sum. It was, after all, tradition.

"Tonight, mother."

"So be it."

* * *

Madre turned the time-glass over with as much indifference as she could feign, the steely grains tumbling through its neck like the falling sleet as Bill watched the eight advance around him with an almost orchestrated precision. Sheff closed the distance first, grinning wickedly as he leapt forward into an outstretched leg. Bill slammed the foreman's head into his rising knee, the squeaky crack of a splintered jaw dividing the cheers into opposing camps.

The feeling of triumph lasted about two seconds as his legs swept suddenly from the earth, the wet earth rising in a hateful alliance with his enemies. Bill braced the fall with a forearm and rolled with the momentum, rising to his feet and second later and ducking a roundhouse as the circle fragmented and the crowd pressed forward. Instinct tried to take form in his legs, but there was nowhere to run. On every side guards held fully automatic rifles, five facing inward as the rest held the crowd at bay. Bill broke into the rim as several barrels homed in on his body. The closest guard thrust a stock into his back, pushing him into the ring as two others forced him to his knees.

He twisted his head sideways, avoiding the brunt of an oncoming boot, and felt his elbow spike into a sloppily defended neck as his fist punched upward into another's crotch. The crowd cheered again but was muffled by the noise of gunfire. Bill spat mud as he rolled back to the rim, desperately trying to regain some footing in the slippery dirt before the ground came crashing back upward, spinning as it impacted and smothered.

Bill felt a rib crack from his tackler's blow, breath fleeing his lungs on its own volition as the man's arms yanked his body upward, the now familiar earth receding from his legs as he kicked wildly into another. The change in momentum forced his companion into a backward fall with a satisfying crunch, the arms which had lifted him falling to either side as he rolled from the circle's center and regained his footing at the opposing side.

"You son of a..."

The haymaker was too obvious to deserve a block. Bill sidestepped the fist, turning his motion into a backward elbow cut followed by a second. The farm boy slumped to the ground as two others approached. The crowd roared, and someone threw a burning flask of petro into the circle, the glass shards erupting into an expanding ball of flame. Bill crouched into the sticky dirt as gunshot filled the air, the crowd falling back as his attackers rolled in the mud, desperately extinguishing their burning clothes. He didn't realize the mistake until he was tackled from the side, his already broke rib giving to another as his face hit a stone.

Bill's nose flattened as Sheff pounded the young gatherer's head a second time, blood sluicing out the nostrils like a waterfall. Time slowed to a halt as the crackle of fire and automatic rifles became one; Sheff trying to say something out of the corner of his mouth, his upper lip split through the middle like a pair of outstretched wings, and a carpet of flame spreading overhead. Sheff seemed to laugh as his skull connected with the ground, wheels of time resuming their motion as Bill found his arm limply tangled around the foreman's neck.

The gunfire ceased as the guards fell back into the circle's center, flames evaporating beneath the foamy spray of chemical extinguishers. Bill felt himself lifted off the ground and carried to the front of the house, the top of the timeglass now empty except for the refraction of the dying firelight. Madre was gone, and her bodyguards with her. Bill scanned the windows and noticed motion from the balcony as three guards in riot gear, weapons blasting, forced their passage into the clearing.

"Confukingratulations Vilo!"

The largest of their number slammed him to the ground with a sturdy nightstick, belting him over the shoulders until he agreed to remain still. The second revealed a branding syringe from its cylindrical casing, stabbing the needle end deep into the small of his left knee. The ensuing howl of recognition did little to relieve the pain. The guards lifted him to his feet and turned him back toward the crowd, icy hands hoisting him skyward like some enfeebled lark as the Madre watched from the safety of her balcony.

"You're one of us, now, Vilo..."

"Hey Madre, he's done!"

She held the tracer in one hand, adjusting its dials with the other and finally glancing back downward with approval.

"She sees you, man."

They carried him into the stables, each singing with unfounded joy. His leg throbbed and buckled as they set him down, their bodies rocking with laughter as he tried to walk.

"Takes time, Vilo."

"Tu saadras... c'mon!"

Bill stumbled forward, forcing himself back to his feet. The knee threatened to explode as he tested more weight.

"That's it..."

He fell forward again, bracing his fall with outstretched arms.

"What you need... is a good kick in the face." Sheff's words came out slurred, and Bill heard more laughter as his skull snapped backward with the force of the blow. A warm, mushy feeling swept over him, holding him down as he tried to fight for air. The second kick was lower and far more painful. Voices blurred together in the background as the white ice filled his mind, numbing his senses as he passed out.

"Hey man, that's cold."

"Payback, Rone. Just payback."

Chapter Nine

The cold, black night betrayed the scattered silence of a waiting tempest. Occasional droplets fell from the heavens, freezing together as solid pebbles in their descent. The pitter patter of their bodies striking branches and leaves mixed

with the distant roar of a shallow creek cascading gently over smoothed stones and the occasional rustle of a bitter, darktime breeze among the tall wicks of the lodgepole pines. Ambrose crept quietly through the dense thicket, his eyes darting back and forth as he moved beside the cabin, the pungent odor of burning wood chips bringing his body to a crouch and then a slither. From the corner of his vision he caught the flicker, something ugly in the playful flame telling him to turn away, but his cabin stood as solid as he had remembered, and the warmth of its hearth beckoned as the light hail began to quicken.

"If I knew that, we wouldn't still be here." Mike rubbed the brittle outgrowth of stubble on his scalp, the metal prongs still coming as a surprise. Niki pulled her knees against her chest, her dark eyes still focused on the axe at the hearth.

"I don't like this place, Mike."

"What's so bad about it?"

She shook her head, somehow unable to clarify her feelings.

"You're getting too good at that."

"We don't belong here... and..."

Mike shrugged off the statement, "Of course we don't belong here. We don't even belong on this planet."

He leaned over her lithe form, closing the window as flakes of hail bounced off its glass pains. She turned her head away as he paused to put a hand on her shoulder, the wet hush of confusion and shame forming within her eyes, refusing almost to acknowledge his presence.

Mike breathed a heavy sigh, "Niki, we're gonna find Bill."

"I know," but her eyes looked away. "It's not that."

"Then what is it?"

Her eyes fell again upon the axe, its dull metal stinging her psyche like a mega-watt lamp. Mike stepped to the hearth and gathered the wooden shaft in his hands, weighing it in his mind as a weapon. Niki said the pain it generated was a beacon to the cabin, but for some reason even she could not explain, the pain only grew. It was as if their arrival sparked its aura, the axe somehow expecting.

Ambrose lifted his boot with a frown as pellets of ice pegged him in the back of the head. It had taken the better part of an afternoon to carve the door and set it on its frame. "Oh, what the hell," he mused with a smile, "doors be fixed."

The wooden portal splintered off its hinges as it fell, the shock nearly causing Mike to drop the flat of the blade on his foot. An old man entered the cabin, wild blue eyes bulging from their sockets as he waived his rifle between Niki and Mike, deciding who to shoot first. His grizzly beard and shaggy, gray mane dripped water onto a drab overcoat as droplets of slush fell onto the backs of his boots, coalescing into a pool at his feet. Suddenly a smile crossed his face as his eyes began to settle back in their sockets.

"You gone take a chop at me sonny, or do I have to blow your stupi' face off?"

Mike dropped the axe to the floor as the gnarled figure trained his rifle between the gatherer's eyes.

"We mean you no harm," he offered in his best Calannic which he knew wasn't anything to brag about. The old man seemed to notice his trouble and switched to the Galanglic verse.

"You damn right 'bout dat, son. Hell, ya can barely talk straight. Now slide dat axe over here an have a seat. Psyche... hey psyche for brains, make me some hot water or I'm gonna blow yer boyfriend' inna sushi stew."

Mike let the old man cuff his hands as Niki drew the water and set the kettle over the fire. Ambrose sat down on the bed placing the end of his barrel against Mike's forehead.

"Heh... heh... sushi stew... yum yum..."

"What do you want from us?"

"Who told ya iz okay ta speak?!" His eyes grew large and wild, the blue and white seeming to strain apart like the surf and foam of the sea on Tizar. "Huh... chip-head! Answer me!"

Mike felt the nuzzle of the barrel punch against his forehead.

"We were just staying the night here."

"Staying the night? You say you were staying the night?" His eyes seemed to soften their glare as the barrel dropped to Mike's chest, his tongue taking more care to enunciate the interstellar words. "Hell... you can stay all da nights you want... or days fer that matter. I put you outside in my cemetery like I do all da others and you can stay long as you like." He nodded his head as if remembering something he'd forgotten, then turned one eye on the kettle as it began to steam, the other cocked directly at Mike. "Psyche... what'cha doin'bout my wata!"

Niki filled the mug and brought it over, a thin steam rising from the water as she held it before him.

"No woman... not like dat." He opened his drab coat with one hand and reached into a pocket, struggling against the fabric until he finally fished out a small leather pouch. "Just a spoon now. Madre's finest cinnamon," he explained in a whisper as if there were other people all around. "Nothin' burns the blood warmer dan dat, 'cept if its got a tad o'

spunk for starters. Which it has, o' course." He fished again and produced a small metal flask. "A wee bit mo dan a spoon of dis," his other eye winking at Mike as she poured. "Ta steady ma aim. Can't be making a mess in ma own cabin, now." He drank down half and offered the rest to Mike. "Consider it in lieu of a las cigar."

"I don't smoke."

"All da mo reason."

Mike considered the logic for all of two seconds before tilting his head back and letting the old man pour the last half down his throat. The liquid would have carried a healthy flavor if not for the heat scorching his taste buds and flesh of his throat. Mike forced the last drop down, finally coughing at the end as the man laughed and slapped his knee.

"Not bad... not bad at all. You would've made a fine fool when I was a younger."

"It's not to late for that," Niki took the cup back and headed for the kettle. Mike regarded her comment with as much good humor as he could muster, a twinkle entering the old man's blue eyes as he watched her refill the mug.

"Another, or should we get it over wit?"

Mike nodded in favor of the former, hoping to extend his life a few moments longer. The man smiled, understanding the laconic reply for all it was worth.

"Ma name's Ambrose."

"Mike."

"Nikita." Niki handed him the mug.

"Well... now dat we know each other's names, les drink."

The night dragged on for many more mug-fulls of Madre's cinnamon and spunk, a hazy cloud thrashing down on Mike's senses as he lost count. The man had Niki drink too, and soon began drawing the water himself as she collapsed on the floor in a giggling fit. Mike didn't remember when he became aware of the gun sitting in the corner. The oiled barrel gleamed in the weak, shifting light of the fire's dying embers.

"C'mon foolson. You an' me play a game. You get to da gun before me, an' you can kill me." His wild blue eyes seemed to roll clockwise with the thought. "Ha! I die. Go fer it. You can e'en have da first step. Two steps. Two steps lead." Something about Ambrose's invitation told Mike to take the chance, as if the length of his life depended on some see-saw estimation in the old man's twisted mind. Mike felt his feet stumble across the slippery floor as he reached the corner, but the gun was no longer there. The man laughed and aimed the barrel with one arm, gingerly drinking from his mug with the other. "You lose!"

Mike felt his heart sink as the lonely wail of clouded memories began coursing into his mind, their withered bodies pushing wildly through the cold, steel barrel of Ambrose's rifle. For the barest moment, light burst from its void, outlining a silhouette in crisp streaks of icy brilliance. In the back of his brain Mike heard the distant explosion. Gardansa said it was an easy death, more than any psyche deserved. The old man's eyes sunk backward, the blue like a crisp winter sky, the white a frosty droplet falling ever faster, slapping eagerly against the wooden door and then jumping again like a lazy bird, breaking apart into blood and shattered bone, colliding with its brethren, falling into puddles, puddles forming rivulets, coursing together around rocks and mounds in a mad rush for muddy harmony.

And then only darkness, pitch upon black.

"You gonna shoot me?"

Ambrose blinked, "It's getting to be quite a storm out there. Proly go to sunrise, at least."

"Yeah."

Mike heard the rattling of sharp, green, dwearmurgrove leaves against a soft tapestry of color; blues, grays, and amber intermixed between gentle shades of purple and violet.

"You wanna play again?"

Mike considered what the sun might look like, if morning came. Maybe, if he won, he would see it and know.

"Three steps lead... think you can beat me chiphead?"

"I dunno."

"C'mon then an' find out."

Mike waited for Ambrose to replace the rifle in the corner and walk back to the bed, his tired legs stepping gingerly over the soggy door. Mike dove forward without warning, scrambling for the gun as Ambrose climbed over him. They grabbed the gun in unison, a grin of pleasure coming to Mike's face until he realized he was holding onto the wrong end. He pulled with all his strength, trying to twist the weapon from the old man's grip, but Ambrose grabbed the whiskbroom and in a resourceful moment dusted off Mike's lingering smile.

"Haha! You lose 'gain! Ambro too fast fer the chiphead!"

"I'm not a chiphead."

"Den why're you jacked up, foolson?!"

Mike tried to explain, but his words didn't make much sense even to his own ears. He finally fell backwards over

Niki's sleeping form.

"Hey... chiphead. What're you doin'. Leave 'er lone."

Mike pulled her feet onto the bed, and then let them fall as he reached for her shoulders, her lithe body seeming unreasonably heavy. Somewhere in the background he heard the old man laughing. Mike tried to remember the name as he worked her shoulders up and then moved to her feet as the young Siri's head plopped again to the floor.

"What're you doin'?"

"Gotta put her... on the bed." Mike moved back to her feet.

"Hey chiphead, don't you got more important things to worry about?"

Mike focused his eyes back on the gun. He struggled to pull Niki by her legs, finally falling on the bed as a blanket slipped out from under his knees. Ambrose knelt to the floor, gripping his sides with glee.

"You could help, y'know."

"Hee hee... Aw, chiphead... you's real funny."

Mike tried to see the humor in the situation. He knelt down to her arms and tried pulling her up, losing his balance halfway through the procedure and falling back to the floor. Ambrose set his gun back in the corner and helped Mike back onto his feet.

"I can't take anymore of this... I'll help but then you gotta play me again."

Mike shrugged off the old man's arm, "I'm tired of your games."

The task took a good deal of time between the two of them, all the while Mike feeling the presence of the rifle in the cabin's far corner. Ambrose sucked in air as he lifted Niki's shoulders and set them crooked on the torn mattress. By the time he looked back up, Mike was halfway across the room.

"Why, you..."

Mike heard the footsteps giving chase, a feeling of panic erupting in his mind as he skidded across the wet, wooden floor falling to his hands and knees. The gun's barrel seemed to beckon from the corner, taunting Mike as he crawled desperately toward his target. He finally reached his goal, raising it in his hands as he turned around to face Ambrose. The weapon felt heavy and unwieldy, and Mike managed the barrel into the right direction only after bracing himself into a sitting position against the corner of the room. Ambrose lay crumpled over the door he had previously smashed, finally awakening with a sudden fury.

"You know how long it took you? I was watching!"

"You were out." Mike rubbed beads of perspiration off his palms as he searched for the trigger.

"Ha! I was pretending. You was slow, chiphead."

"Am not."

"Are too!"

"Am not."

"Are not!"

"Am too."

"Hahahahaha," Ambrose fell to the floor again, his crackly voice exploding with laughter until he gasped for breath. Mike tried to figure out why as he placed his finger inside the trigger guard.

"You forgettin' the safety?"

"Oh yeah." Mike found the safety and clicked it off. With a smile and a rush of adrenalin he aimed the rifle at Ambrose.

"Go ahead chiphead. Kill me. It's what you wanted to do from the moment I came in here."

Mike steadied his aim as Ambrose's image weaved from side to side.

"You gutless sushi pie! Hahahah! What are you waiting fer?! You want me to come over there and pull the trigger fer you?" He stood and began approaching, his mouth forming into a wide, toothy grin.

"Stay away. I don't wanna shoot you."

"Bull!"

"We were just looking for a friend. He's lost." Mike felt his lungs gasp for air as Ambrose approached within two meters, the toothy grin turning wicked.

"You from off world, ain't cha?!"

"Yeah."

"You're an alien! Ya wanna see my leader?!" Ambrose grabbed his crotch. "Here he is, chiphead!"

Mike lowered the barrel until it rested against the crotch of the old man's pants. His bright, blue eyes seemed to enlarge in rage as Mike pressed the barrel deeper.

"I mean it, Ambrose. Either you leave us alone, or your leader bites the bullet."

"Pull it you sticking, loser, good fer nothin' chiphead!"

Mike waited until the insults subsided before he pulled the trigger, a hollow click being the only result.

"Hahahahah...." Ambrose yanked the barrel from Mike's hands and clubbed him over the shoulder. "You fergit to load something, chiphead?!"

Mike fell to the ground before the blow registered in his mind, and even then, what should have been a sharp pain was only a dull throb. He rubbed his shoulder in mild irritation as Ambrose made a long show out of loading his gun. When he finally finished, he made Mike drink two more mugs of "madre's tea."

"You a good younger, chiphead. Someday, you'll be a good oldster like me."

Mike took it as a reprieve.

"You know how old I am? I'm an octogenarian, and I still kick yours!" Ambrose laughed at the word, and Mike tried to imagine him as an octopus back on Tizar, his long tentacles tossing rifles, tea mugs, and whiskbrooms skyward in an elated dance, the items tumbling like snowflakes caught in a blizzard, only to descend with the distant roar of thunder, the blinding light beyond descending as bolts of fire igniting the earth in inferno.

* * *

"Rise an' shine, Vilo..."

Bill awoke to the gentle nudge, gray eyes opening only as the pain in his ribs startled his senses. A wide shouldered man knelt beside him, his dark face familiar in the glimmering rays of morning light which seeped sluggishly through the barrack entrance. Bill remembered the tackle and subsequent punch to his side, the splintering feeling he chose to ignore. A white bandage covered his ribs.

"Madre tells me you'll be breaking fast at her table. My name's Rone."

He extended a thick, gnarled hand, his thumb only a stump. Bill let himself be yanked up, the man's remaining fingers surprisingly strong.

"You hit me with that?"

Rone nodded with a wry smile, "Madre's rules. You break it, you gotta fix it. I don't know much 'bout healing ribs though."

The tired workers cast long, lazy shadows across the wet, open field, a purple sky fading to blue as the rising sun peeked over a distant horizon. A scorched patch of earth was the only reminder of the recent night's tumble, even the stench of black faded to gray with the early morning rains. The house seemed warm and homey in comparison, warm cafe brewing over an open fire while long, thin strips of quagga flesh sputtered on the grill. In a large pot, a compote mixture of honey syrup and various fruit stewed over a gas flame. Sheff held a spatula in one hand and a mug of steaming, yellow liquid in the other, a grim acknowledgment passing his eyes as Bill entered the kitchen.

"Tea, Vilo?" He motioned to the counter. A tall pot stood beside several half-filled bottles, their labels faded and wrinkled. Bill tried to decipher some of the writing, but met with little success, finally reconciling himself to pouring a mug and handing the container to Rone.

Several of the men had already seated themselves at the round, wooden table, a large seat at the far end remaining empty as if awaiting some important dignitary. With an almost disciplined uniformity, Bill felt his conspicuous presence carefully ignored. Familiar eyes seemed to avert from their sockets, dry mouths casually striking conversation in a foreign tongue, the dull resonance of their words falling deftly, like snowflakes upon a sodden crater.

The black dodecahedron occupied the table's center, a gaudy ornament seeming more a warning than a trophy. Bill felt his attention involuntarily drawn by the smooth exterior, the shallow etching of a bird trying to fly as stormy, gray eyes flickered with amusement.

"Then you know."

The brittle rasp of her voice snapped his concentration, its harsh tone like a sharp sliver of ice cutting the cords of his throat. Crystal blue eyes betrayed a curious mixture of amusement and disgust as a fine, silver-white mane shifted with the turn of her head.

"Vilo, I believe you've met Sule."

Bill stared at the offered hand, sharpened nails perfectly transparent save for their thin, black outline. Madre seated herself at the far chair, seeming to enjoy the moment.

"Now show our guest a tad of courtesy. You'll have to forgive him Sule, he's forgotten his gatherer manners."

Bill looked up, startled at the comment.

"Yes, Vilo... Sule's told us a considerable deal about you and your friends. Not that any of it particularly matters at this point anyhow."

"Unless you make it," Bill felt a twinge of regret at his words, as though they closed a doorway he'd rather remained open.

"We've tried son, now have a seat before the fast breaks without you."

Bill chose a place at the table as Sule stood beside the window watching the distant tree line.

"Will you not eat with us, Sule?"

"I'd rather not."

"Suit yourself." Madre dished out a portion of the compote and sent the rest around the table.

"I think you'll like this Vilo. Do they serve Calannic dishes back on Tizar?"

"What else did she tell you?"

"That your name is William... Willian Walker. I like a boy with W's in his name, but William is just so... I don't know. It sounds so stiff."

"My friends called me Bill."

"Now Bill is better, but Vilo takes the icing on the cake as far as I'm concerned. You don't mind it, do you? You mustn't, after all. It's the name you wore in the door. I'd much rather consider it a transliteration than a flat out lie."

Bill decided he preferred food to conversation, downing his bowl and filling a second before looking back across the table. His ears had filtered out the clutter of their alien language, separate discussions merging together as one and then suddenly falling away. Madre seemed to share Sule's fascination with the treeline, letting her eyes wander to the window as she ate.

"I haven't told you any lies... yet."

She glanced back toward him, his words scarcely noticed.

Except by Sule, "What make's you so sure you're going to get another opportunity?"

Bill turned toward the window. Her eyes seemed to flicker with a quiet sort of laughter, almost mocking in their intensity.

"He's not for sale, Sule."

"I'll throw in an extra million drin."

Madre set her spoon down to the table, wiping her lips with a cloth as if considering the offer.

"He's one of my own now; well, since last night, actually. You missed quite an initiation. The point being that he's recognized and can't be sold like some... some hunk of ceramic." She motioned toward the table ornament.

Sule regarded the statement with a mixture of confusion and resentment, finally turning back toward the window with a sudden movement in the treeline.

"I'm sure we can settle the matter at a more convenient hour. It seems that your men have returned."

Madre and Sule waited at the porch as the scout team trudged through the thick, shallow mud. An old man took the forward position, leading the others along the gate's outer edge, through the barbed aisle, and into the inner circler. The rest of the team broke off from him as he approached the house itself, moving toward the barracks as he waived them away. He finally pulled the hood away from his taunt, weathered face as he ascended the porch steps, letting it settle against the gray shoulders of his coat. His blue eyes seemed to sparkle with a weary brand of playfulness as he focused on the Madre, the drab browns and grays of the landscape serving a subtle contrast.

"Sule, this is Ambrose. Ambrose, Sule."

"You the imp?"

"That's correct."

"Ha! You been makin' bed too, Madre?"

"And what's that supposed to mean?"

"Heh... you should have to ask... Hey! Be that my food I'm smellin'?"

He stepped toward the door, halting only as she grabbed his shoulder.

"Long time, Madre. I understand."

"Wipe your soles, Ambrose," she scolded.

He shot her a toothy grin as he kicked the mud off his boots.

"Not a way to welcome yer old man...."

"I keep my hospitality for those who earn it."

His thin, gray lips curled blue against the cold, a lethargic snarl escaping his throat as he pointed a long, bony finger in her general direction.

"What in heck's you think I've been doin' woman? Polishin' my one-eye?!"

"In your case, I wouldn't be surprised."

Their voices slipped into the domestic tongue as they mutually spat a clamor of open insults, Sheff's eyes widening and his sewn lip stretching into an unabashed grin.

Rone stifled a chuckle as he leaned toward Bill, "Man and wife will be man and wife."

"Serious?"

"No more so than any other marital ritual. She's mad at him cause he went and left her all alone. He's mad at her

cause she threw him out the door... and then some."

"How often this happens?"

"Oh... once every other season... maybe give two or three. Except for this mornin', before you woke, it was near to a full cycle since I'd seen the man. You think this is bad, you should be here when they break up."

Rone turned his head toward the door as the trio ushered themselves inside, Sule skirting along their fringes like an eccentric comet revolving about a closely paired binary. She maintained a blank expression, as though waiting for the commotion to subside. When it didn't, she merely stood there, her impatience become increasingly apparent.

"Does ignoring 'em make 'em go away?"

Bill winced as several of the others laughed at his question, their amusement catching the old man's attention. His bulbous blue eyes bulged out like two rotten lemons wildly seeking the perpetrator of the query.

"Who be the negrali younger?"

Bill felt numerous pairs of eyes fix on his general location.

"Hmmm... you be a popular boy, Billy."

"You know my name?"

"I just got done blowing holes in yer friends!" He laughed wildly at the memory, yanking his gray coat open with one hand and pulling a short stocked automatic out with the other. "Boom boom! Sushi stew! Hah!"

"Ambrose... how could you?"

"Woman, I did it! That's how! Now where's a bowl? Killing makes me hungry."

Bill felt his legs kick over Rone's chair as he dove toward the old man, his arms outstretched, fighting desperately to be relieved of their sockets. The barrel smacked him against the side of the skull as he fell, Rone tackling him from behind and ramming a now familiar, mutilated fist into his already broken ribs. The sensation of pain was more numbing than he recalled, suffocating as it fell. He gasped for air, but his lungs felt clogged and heavy, and he choked out the salty taste which swept through his windpipe.

The old man spat something in the guttural tongue, the force of his words relieving the pressure on Bill's back. The sharp jab of cold steel replaced the smothering pain, and a safety pin clicked amidst the clutter of alien voices, quietly hushing the static.

"No Ambrose. Not in my house."

"Your house? Woman, you got quagga eggs fer brains!"

"Amb..."

"My offer stands." Sule's harsh voice cut through the impending squabble, shattering the old man's attention.

"We'll be seein' to you later, ya scrawgy imp!"

"Eleven million drin. Interested?"

"What?!?"

"For him and the black hunk of cermic... center table."

Bill felt Rone lift him off the floor as Ambrose gathered the dodecahedron into his free hand.

"Heh. Birdy."

"A robin to be more precise."

"I knew dat!" Ambrose leveled the barrel toward her stomach.

"Do we have a deal?"

"Sure... eleven em-drin fer Ambro... a robin and a dead younger for the ugly thing."

"Live younger..."

"No deal."

Bill felt Rone cuff his wrists, holding them back and up so he couldn't jerk free. Sule's stare betrayed nothing other than apathy, both for the gun and the man who wielded it.

"Name your price."

Ambrose smiled his greedy grin, setting the butt of his barrel against Bill's ear.

"Is only one more body for ma cemetery, which is overfull already so I won't be askin' too much. Fifty em-drin, you want him alive."

"You must be out of your mind."

His eyes bulged outward, blues and whites confirming her observation.

"Don't make me any madder dan I already am. I will blow his fool head off."

Her face remained unchanged, but her eyes seemed to glitter over with laughter. "Then fifty it is."

"What? You accept?" Settling blue eyes stared at her in disbelief.

"As if I had another choice." She gathered the dodecahedron from the old man's free hand and gently nudged his other aside as she gripped Bill's cuffed wrists and wrenched them upward as far as they'd reach without dislocating his shoulders.

"I'll transfer the money into your wife's account."
"Before you go."
"Colonel Arman will be arriving shortly. If you don't trust me, then trust him."
"I trust him all right... just as far as I can kick his blubbery, snot-nosed..."
"Ambrose!"

* * *

The salt water used to sting her eyes, something about the sea repelling her even as she used to spend the night along the water's edge. As then, she sat beside him, smoothing the wavy curls of hair as he slept. Their journey to Calanna had been without incident. The *Galactican* was welcome, or so he'd thought. But something in her eyes told him otherwise, though she'd follow him all the way to her execution. Both knowledge and the sea were like that with her, something that could hurt you but was too big to change. "Playing with fate is a fool's work." It was as if she had foreseen her own, but resigned herself without telling anyone. Not even him.

The bullet pierced the trees lower limb, scattering leaves and berries across the grassy bed below. Mike and Niki awoke with a startle, rolling away from the sturdy trunk as Ambrose giggled with delight, his soggy boots kicking leaves and dirt into their faces.

"Ha! You youngsters sure is funny."

He leaned against the trunk, peering up between the leaves at the crisp, blue sky. In his free arm he carried a large brown blanket. On his belt, the wood handled axe hung with a small spark lighter. A thin metal disk nestled against his shin, strapped there by a tight elastic cord.

"Rise an' shine, sushi-stains... ol' uncle Ambro bring happy tidings fer a happy mornn."

Mike crawled to his knees, shaking away the fading memories of his dream.

"Surprised to be alive?"

Mike looked at Niki and then back at Ambrose and finally nodded, "a little."

"So you should be. I normally kill chipheads just fer bein' chipheads. Nothin' personal about it. But then, you being so recently shaved and all, I figured you must be real cute with a full head o' hair. You are, aren't you?"

Mike looked back at Niki. She shot him a worried smile, something she'd saved up for a rainy day he figured. Sunshine spilled over the dew laden grass, the nearby sound of rushing water distracting his senses. He tried to remember when he'd seen Calanna so beautiful.

"Hey, you still in lala-land?"

"Where are we?" Mike stood up and glanced over several rocks beside the stream. The gravchute lay against the nearest boulder.

"Well, considerin' everything dere is to consider, I'd say we're at a tea drinkers crash-haven. Not that it matters much. All I know is dat your fandangle o'er dere seemed to suggest it was a nice enough place to stop last night. Me? I don' care much either way."

A cool morning breeze gathered Niki to her feet, her usually carefree eyes still sharp and bitter despite the drug's aftertaste.

"My stuff."

"Gone." Ambrose announced the word as a matter of fact, as though any more thoughts or emotions on the topic would be wasted. "All I have fer you is right here." He set down the blanket, knife, spark lighter, and rifle. "Oh yeah, an' dis. Heh, almost fergited." He handed her a small slip of paper.

She read it momentarily and glanced back up.

"I don't get it."

"What's there not to get?"

"This is a check, made payable to Mike for fifty million drin."

"Dat's true as my big blue eyes which nobody fails to notice, Mister Harrison."

Mike looked up, realization slowly dawning.

"How'd you know my name?"

"I read the papers too, y'know. No sense learnin' Galanglic unless yer gonna. I liked dat piece on Telmar. Very nicely done, and correct to boot. Civil war and all dat. Makes me almost glad to be here instead. I would o' recognized you right off da bat too, if it wasn't fer yer clever disguise."

Mike felt the thick stubble on his head, the metal jacks protruding from their dense growth.

"Makes you look like a genuine chiphead. I was goin' to blow yer head off, but when you said yer first name, something just clicked in dat old skull o' mine. Not dat I was absolutely sure, y'know. But it did fit, you losin' a friend and all. I understand dat's fairly common."

Mike felt his skin grow cold as he pocketed the check.

"The only thang I didn't understand which I'm only beginnin' to is why yer e'en here. Madre said it was cause the imps nabbed one o' yer friends. I figed dat couldn't be the whole story. Seeing how if it was, you'd be chasin' after all sorts of people everywhere."

"Right now I'm lookin' for another friend."

"Huh? Oh, silly me. Talkin' too much and fergitin' why I'm e'en here." He reached to his shin, unstrapping a metal disk. "Go ahead, open it."

Mike opened the catch and peered at the dark surface beneath. Several rings were inscribed within the crystal display, and an shiny green dot blinked steadily at the outer circler, hovering off the display as the rings closed inward, pulling it backward with their retreat.

"It's a tracer. That dot is yer friend."

Mike looked up, unsure as to whether he could believe the old man.

"I know this comes as somethin' sudden, but there was no way we could just let him go. That would be aidin' a criminal. Arman's too familiar with our operation. He knows people don't just escape. It was either give him away once the paperwork got done or sell him off to the imps."

"Imperials?!"

"They'd have gotten him sooner or later. But time is money, if you know what I mean."

Mike nodded, "And people are profits."

Ambrose snorted at the remark. "All depends who's buying."

"At the rate this blip is moving, we're gonna need transportation."

"Dat's what the money's fer. I've gotta friend, Cole, say 'bout twenty-five an' some odd kilometers downstream. Say Ambrose send ya an' dat yer a payin' customer an' dat ya wanna go straight to Xin. Ya go to Aelflan an' yer a dead man, hear me? By da time yer in city limits, yer have yer friend back in focus. An' with any luck, da imps'll keep dere songbirds in one choir, if ya follow me at all."

Mike picked up the gun, checking the magazine for bullets.

"Cole's gonna have more o' dat too."

"I'm not sure how we can thank you."

"Ha! Don't git mushy now. Blow away a few imps'll be thanks enough fer me. But now dat you mention it, dere is one thing..."

"Anything."

"Well, I hope it ain't too much, but ya think ya could mention me in da story?"

Mike grinned at the request as he nodded his acquiescence and tried to imagine what Chuck would think.

Chapter Ten

She awoke before sunrise. Thirty feet below a small stag slipped quietly between the sparse nettles foraging for his breakfast. The slimy mud which coated her body the night before still masked her scent. Now it was dry and threatened to crackle and fall with her slightest movement alerting him to the threat.

Slowly, the creature moved again, somewhere below and near. She peered around her supporting branch and studied the dim terrain through the icy predawn mist. The stag sniffed with his nose to the ground as his pitch black eyes scanned the horizon. Without hesitating another moment she cocked her arm back and let it come down with all her strength. For a heartbeat the spear seemed to hang motionless, its course predicted by years of practice and an unerring instinct. Then, silently, it consumed the space between them, twirling with reckless abandon as it tore the skin just heartward of his neck, plunging hungrily into the flesh below.

The stag cried out as he bolted away, but already his legs had buckled as he tried to run, and the dark stain of blood flooded his coat and dripped to the ground beneath his hooves. The second spear burrowed deep into the middle of his back as he staggered deeper into the brush. She leaped to a lower branch and then to the ground.

The stag slowed at the frozen stream bed, turning suddenly to face her. He bravely held his ground, confused and bewildered in the thin morning mist, cautiously dipping his head to the smooth, polished stones as if to drink. His blood splattered carelessly over the rocks, forming crimson puddles in the white frost. The third spear sunk deep into the small hollow above his ribs.

She watched, out of spears, as the stag's black eyes seemed to roll upwards toward the sky. The sun's first rays cascaded between the tree branches, warming the cold earth below his hooves as he slowly settled down into the bed of stones to die.

* * *

Dawn's saffron rays spiked beneath the dark, shifting clouds like a flock of birds, slowly turning as they plunged toward earth, each gliding back and forth along the icy, lakeside shore, sparkling across the water's surface as thousands of tiny droplets swooped from the sky, diving and splashing in an endless, majestic dance of laughter and tears.

Mike groggily opened his eyes, sniffing the clean, cold air as the coarse stubble on his head began to prickle and rise against the light drizzle. His booted feet sunk carelessly in the thin silt like two half-buried logs. Niki lay stretched out over a long smooth stone rising from the rippling water, her long black hair beaded with the wet, diamond icing.

"Good morning."

"Is it?" She finally sat upright, letting her hair fall along her slim shoulders as she pulled her legs inward, locking them into a crossed position. Mike bit his lip as she closed her eyes, ignoring him, the lake, the gentle shower; he watched her soft hair begin to shed its icy glaze, dripping with an almost determined precision.

For several minutes she remained motionless, like a statue sculpted from the white stone, searching, opening up into some hollow place inside him. He remembered her drugged, corpse-like body at the Solomon residence, a heartbeat as shallow and distant as some unknown wave rolling steadily for the forbidding shore, the ripples of raindrops mixing with its falling crest, snuffing out its existence as it merged into something greater.

She finally opened her eyes, unlocking her legs and letting them dip into the cold water, sloshing them through to the muddy bank, her head drooping low as she walked.

"Niki...."

She looked at him, then shifted her eyes to the rifle and axe at his side. He shook his head, not knowing what to say.

"Niki, I've seen this before, but never from you. What's the matter?"

She reached out and hugged him, her voice mutely whispering something he could barely hear, much less understand. As though by instinct, his arms tightened protectively around her, holding her for a long minute in the icy mist.

"C'mon Niki. We'd best be moving on."

She pushed his hand away as he reached for the rifle's stock, droplets of water streaming down her cheeks. Lifting it off the brown blanket, she leaned its barrel over her shoulder as she turned to face him.

"Dangerous weapon."

Mike nodded in acquiescence.

"Well, I guess it is your turn." He lifted the soaked blanket, wringing it out before rolling it into a tight bundle. Then he reached for the axe. She turned away as he strapped it to his belt.

"Any idea which direction?"

She glanced back over her shoulder, her staid expression making him wonder if he slipped into Calannic.

"Niki, any idea which way we should go?"

She nodded, "It won't matter."

Mike pondered her words, uncertain how to take their meaning. Something about her mood told him it'd be better if he didn't bother. He peered across the lake for a long moment, his eyes half-expecting to see some dilapidated hydrofoil skirting over the surface water. He shook away the vision and followed her along the shoreline.

The black silt gave way to bright yellow sand and shiny beds of smoothed pebbles, the cold ground changing its features with sporadic abandon. Images of the Tizarian coast kept springing to mind, but he shoved the memories down into a place as distant as their origin. The forest lay to the left, trees straddling the lake shore, greedy for the water thus entitled. Long green stems and orange-purple vines hung from the leafy canopy, the pungent smell of apple resin hanging thick in the frosty air.

They walked for two hours more before the clouds grew white and parted. Niki's hair, drenched from the rain, seemed to stiffen as it dried. Dark feathered birds appeared from the treeline, their long supple frames gliding gently over the placid waters as they searched for prey. Niki watched them as they'd stop in mid-air and dive into the cold water, their wings flapping with panic as they emerged. Something about the way she carried the rifle told Mike to keep on going, as though she wanted to be alone.

The splash turned him around. A short metal-tipped javelin protruded from her belly as she staggered for the stony bank, her hands still knotted around the rifle. Mike raced toward her as a dark, mud-caked figure fell from the branches above, throwing sand into his face as it bolted for the rifle, wrenching it free from her arms as Mike staggered toward them, axe lifted. He hurtled it as the barrel pointed down in his direction, the explosion deafening his ears as a bullet ripped through his shoulder.

For the barest instant, all he could do was fall backward into the ground, his mind numbed by the shattered bone. He scampered to his feet, instinctively sprinting into the light thicket, his lungs clogged with terror. Legs tightened painfully as his limp arm swayed back and forth almost comically. His boots kicked furiously against the icy, damp earth, patches of dirty brown snow, and beds of hard stone. Above, in the treetops, the birds fell quiet, and the sparse woods seemed to close around him, silently stealing his breath as he ducked between large bushes and thick trunked trees.

The noise of gunfire surrounded his senses, its tangibility offered for the taking. Bits of bark snapped off nearby trees, the wild sputtering, popping sound taking hold of his mind, establishing rhythm in his legs as he stumbled, rolling end over end in the soft loamy earth. She was there before he realized what had happened, his chest heaving desperately, madly sucking in air before it finished pushing breath out. She leveled the barrel between his eyes sockets, cold black opals staring into his without reason or remorse.

"No... wait... Ambrose..." His tongue searched for something in the Calannic, sputtering gibberish from a host of other languages, all stained with worry and confusion. However, the corners of her eyes twitched with recognition, as if he touched a spark somewhere deep in her mind. Finally, he found the words.

"Ambrose sent me... to find Cole."

Dried patches of mud flaked off her skin as Mike gathered his breath, the hint of recognition blossoming in her eyes.

"Get up."

Mike complied with her wish, moving where she motioned him with the barrel.

"Ambrose doesn't talk to negrali."

"He talked to me."

"You have proof?"

"I think you're pointing it at me."

Mike wiped the sweat from his forehead as she examined the weapon, hoping against probability that she'd find something distinctive.

"Maybe, maybe not. What else?"

"The axe from his cabin. Maybe you've seen it before?"

She cocked a dark eyebrow, her memory of the hurtled weapon still distinct.

"Walk."

Mike walked. Tall trees loomed overhead as she pushed him forward with the sole of her boot, their wide branches and thick foliage rustling with a gentle breeze. The wide expanse of water remained still, its surface an icy, blue reflection of the morning sky. Niki's crumpled form lay at the water's edge, her legs settling below the silt as her hands gripped the stony bank. The laceration cut deep into her skull, blood dripping from the wound, falling into a crimson pool over the smooth, white stones as it mixed with the soft, black silt.

The woman dug the axe from the mud, washing it in the shallows and then lifting it so that the sun's rays glinted off the quick of its blade. She nodded with satisfaction, turning Niki over and searching her body.

"Niki..."

The woman looked up, her dark unfeeling eyes staring through him.

"Was that her name?"

"I killed her."

"Yes..."

Mike moved over to the body, stopping only when she leveled the barrel back in his direction. She glanced him over and unable to ascertain any threat backed away, letting him advance. He felt afraid to touch her, as if the dead body would leap up or cry out. Her flesh was still warm, and he searched half-heartedly for a pulse. The girl watched his expression of hope dwindle into one of despair.

"C'mon negrali."

"I'd like to bury her."

"I don't have time to watch you waste yours. Come now or I will leave and let you bleed to death, friend of Ambrose or no."

Mike touched his aching shoulder. The cold air bit into his wound, a trickle of blood dripping through the jacket sleeve, the hollow chill slowly gripping his mind. He considered sitting down to wait and imagined Niki waking after a day or two. It wouldn't take long, he figured. He'd keep bleeding, shock would eventually take over, and then...

"Negrali!"

Her short, black hair and dirty, mud-caked body made him think of the salamen on Aiwelk. He remembered crouching in a pool of warm, muddy water, snapping images while two Yahhen hunters readied their gauss guns, cold, black eyes staring skyward, blinded and numbed by the tranq-crystal. They'd die later. Too bad. He'd forgot what they

paid him.

She tugged him to his feet, pushing him forward with the stock of the rifle. His legs walked at her direction, his mind not bothering to imagine where. Birds, trees, rocks all blended into a single panorama, the separate parts intermixed and suddenly coherent. Spindles of light broke through the forest canopy as they neared the shelter, its dull tin-colored doors marred by bright red paint. An old IMC ammunition dump. She punched several buttons on the keybox, finally yanking the thick portal open with both arms.

She motioned him to an empty, polyceramic crate, watching him sit down and lean over before scrounging the shelves for a first aid kit. Mike felt the lathery foam harden on his bandages before he realized the bleeding had stopped. She's injected him with some wake-up.

"You're gonna be needing a doctor."

Mike watched her scratch a name on the smooth white surface, as it squeezed his shoulder.

"Something to remember me by," she added sarcastically.

"You're Cole?"

"I think you'll be interested in this."

She handed him a flimsi-leaf, the lower tech variety with lots of window space but short on memory. His face was reproduced in three-dimensional facsimilation, a standard mug with the hair electronically erased.

"I don't understand."

"Came off the relay three days ago, a chiphead and a psyche, very sorry sight indeed, unless, 'course, you're looking for the reward."

"Ambrose didn't call ahead?"

"Radio's out. Board's down. All I got left is public relay. Regional News."

"Then you heard about the drop."

"I saw it. Kinda hard to miss fireworks that high up."

"How much've they offered."

"A million a head, DOA."

Mike scowled. It had been several months since he'd been shot, and even longer since he'd lost a friend. He wondered what he was doing back on Calanna, as if one time wasn't enough, and imagined the chain of events that led him back, that led to this. Niki. It wasn't supposed to be like this. The local guard must of known of the drop before the *Vista* ever reached system, which meant a bug in security: someone very high up, someone who wanted them dead. And Bill had guessed it, hitching along for the sheer hell of it?

"The well is never that dry."

"Say again?"

Mike shook his head, pale implications fluttering carelessly from the shadows into a hue of light he couldn't accept.

"There were two others in the drop."

Cole shrugged her shoulders in response.

"Did they say there was anyone else they were looking for?"

"No. What's it matter? They probably didn't know who was coming down, anyway."

Mike rubbed the scarred side of his face. It was this sort of underestimation that kept getting him in trouble. Back on the *Vista*, he'd wondered what Bill was doing. "Lots of neutrinos," he'd said. That would mimic a fusion plant on almost any passive array, making Robin a target so bright the Calannans couldn't help but take her out. Mike wanted to dissect her, not blow her to pieces, though he had to admit the thought was somewhat appealing.

"Did I miss a joke or something?" Cole looked mildly annoyed. Mike remembered the hollow feeling as his gaze fell upon the axe. Its dull blade seemed to laugh wickedly from the shelter's dim corner.

"I've got to get to Xin. I'll have money once we're there."

"Just like that."

"Ambrose said you could take us... me." He turned his eyes away from it, unwilling to meet its laughter or to accept what had happened.

"In your condition..."

"In my condition, I could use a doctor. You said so yourself." He tried to smile, "Don't go denying it."

The smile wouldn't come. Niki was back there still, growing colder by the minute. His fault.

"Why are they after you?"

"It's a long story." He looked away from her as he answered, unable to make eye contact.

"The relay doesn't even give a name. What should I call you, negral."

"Mikael."

She nodded, strangely, as if considering its flavor. He wondered why she bothered; all she should want is the

money. It made things much simpler. Money.

"Come."

His feet felt wobbly as he stood. She held his good arm with her free hand, gathering the axe and rifle as she led him outside and along a winding, dirt path. The glittering lake waters seemed to dance and rejoice as if in celebration. Mike watched for Niki's body on the stony beach, but it was as if she had disappeared, the hungry lake gobbling her up with gleeful abandon.

The hydroplane sat docked in a shallow inlet, its gray, metallic sheen casting a fuzzy shadow across the waters. They waded in. The water, more than waste deep, felt icy and numbing. Cole settled him into the passenger seat, buckling him down before producing another hypo.

"Is that really necessary?"

"Not at all." She stuck him in his good arm, retracting the needle with a satisfied smirk.

"You bitch." Mike watched her climb around to the pilot's controls, her long, sun-browned legs now shiny and clean as late morning rays filtered through the cockpit window. The whine of a chemical motor echoed somewhere along the distant coastline. Beneath its vibration, Mike heard her whispering, the rattling of vertical rods, grimy steel stained with sweat and a hollow explosion mixed within the shattered bone, a texture so familiar and soft, as though it were meant to be felt rather than understood. Shades of blue huddled together beneath folds of green and gray, his limbs tiring, nerves deadened, the dry cold parching his throat as the sweet scent of apple resin stung within the dark corners of his memory.

* * *

Their voices rose as hushed murmurs, traces of worries averted, clandestinely dropping out of key like some harmonic duet, each resurrecting the other, interchanging places, holding together for sheer lack of hope.

"We knew this would eventually happen." His tone sounded cold, unfeeling. She saw the door crack open, streams of moonlight licking around its edges.

"Michael. Is that you?"

They were afraid to touch him, afraid to even get too close. Dim fluorescent rays scattered sullenly along the glassy white walls, barely penetrating the icy darkness as he slowly wakened from a dreamless sleep. A gray-haired stranger sat by his bedside staring down from behind a professional expression of stoic indifference.

The loneliness quietly crept in between the cracks of his senses, stealthily slipping beneath his skin, and hungrily gnawing on his bones. With cunning elegance it swept upwards, through his spine and into his mind, knotting itself around his soul and slowly squeezing until he could feel the suffocating, smothering, nothing.

The woman curiously smiled. She wore a white medical tunic without insignia or decoration. He concentrated on her face, on the stormy blue of her eyes and the furrow of her brows, but the features just blurred in and out of focus, shifting like waves on some forgotten shore. He felt his lungs try carefully to breathe; short, unfamiliar, raspy sounds being the only response.

She turned away suddenly, something was beeping, another patient maybe, or perhaps someone died. She was talking to someone now through a commlink. Her voice flowed sweetly, like warm rain on summer days when he would walk through the barrens and nobody would follow.

A cold lump settled in his throat as he waited for her to return, the cool breeze lifting brown and yellow leaves from the broken asphalt, coiling sticky shapes, their edges fluttering and preparing to strike. And the awful beeping, rising from the air like some depraved siren, stung his ears, its intensity rising. He wished somebody would turn it off and found himself reaching out, his fingers touching it, the pulse tangible and real like a heartbeat except stronger.

"Mike." From a deserted alleyway he heard the voice call him. He paused before moving forward, unable to see its source.

"Wake up Mike. Get the hell outta there, now!"

He felt his eyes snap open with the surge of electricity in his mind. Sweat coated his body as he laid face-up on a simple mattress in a small, dark room, cords of sunlight streaming from the only window through a pair of wooden shutters. Police sirens beeped loudly in the distance as a gentle rain pelted the open ledge. Cecil? He looked around for the voice, but the room was empty. He pulled himself upright with his good arm, shaking off the daze of noises and confusion as the metal disk tumbled from his pocket. The dim light played over its surface, tempting him to pick it up. He pressed it against his bad hand, clenching it with all his strength to force away the numbness and triggered the catch, revealing the black surface within. The green dot closed in toward the center, circular lines growing brighter, pressing outward, fifty meters, forty-five, forty.

Mike closed the disk, placing it back within his pocket. Beads of sweat formed on his scalp as he moved toward the window, lifting the shutters and crawling onto the ledge. He was four stories up. A good jump? Teeth ground

together at the thought as drizzle mixed with the perspiration, forming a tiny rivulet down the crevice of his nose.

"Hey Mike? You in there?" It was Bill's voice. "Open up Mike, it's okay."

He crawled out further along the ledge, pulling his legs away from the window. Vehicles knotted together in the streets below, chemical combustion motors sputtering, whining, complaining to their drivers beneath the dying sirens. The door broke open. There was the sound of footsteps and an unfamiliar voice as dry as caster-sand.

"Shit!"

Galanglic. Mike considered crawling back inside, then stopped.

"I want his head you little weasel, you understand?! He knows too much about Erestyl."

Mike could almost see Bill nodding on the other side of the wall.

"I'll... I'll wait here until he comes back."

"What makes you think he'll return?"

"Where else can he go? He has no money."

Wooden shutters swept away from the window face, the crackling noise of metal and wood in violent separation resounding through the room. Mike waited, breathlessly, for a head to peek out as small black birds scattered along the ledges above and below.

"Harrison has friends on Calanna, or have you forgotten? He'll have ways of getting money."

"What do you want me to do?"

"First get that thing out of your kneecap."

"And then?"

"I trust you'll be able to figure the rest out yourself."

Mike waited another two minutes as vehicles carelessly zigzagged on the streets below. The small, black birds returned to their cement roosts, the outcroppings serving as poor protection from the rain. Like the wandering beggars, they seemed ready to take whatever handout fate should devise. Mike finally crept back inside and past the splintered door.

The rain smelled musty and noxious, exhaust fumes clogging his throat and stinging his eyes as he drifted along narrow walkways beside the ground traffic. Street urchins clothed in dapple-gray kirtles and drab brown coifs played amidst the traffic, climbing onto the slow, red cabs to ask for money and ganging together for some bashing to keep the stingy in line. Bums sat huddled along the gutters, some clenching bottles and others holding small, box batteries with thin, elastic cords connected to their head-jacks, their emaciated bodies slowly rotting in the gentle rain as thin smiles played across their lips, eyes glazed-over with the entertainment of some abstract fantasy.

"K'drin onuvalye?" One grabbed for Mike's boot as he passed by. "Daro!" The box was out of juice, and he wanted money to recharge it; just one chiphead asking another for a small, important favor. Mike kept walking, finally stopping in front of a large window facing the street. He did look like a chiphead, even worse perhaps. The stubble on his head did a poor job of concealing the jacks, and his left shoulder, still numb, sat firmly in its temporary cast beneath the coat. He pulled the disc from his pocket and glanced at the readings. Bill was on foot, less than half a kilometer and heading northeast, toward the city's heart, toward the underway probably.

Mike turned and picked up the pace. He'd have to cut through the rowens to catch up. Just his luck. The ground changed abruptly from wet, black asphalt to soggy, brown dirt as he skirted from the roadside and hopped the rusty gate. The fumes and noises of traffic seemed to fall away as he crossed over the damp earth, a peaceful, musty quiet replacing the garble of chaos. Long columns of raised earth, sparse trees, and an occasional thatch hut served as the only occupants. At least it was still light out, he reminded himself. Stiff gray clouds loomed above, blocking the sun's gaze. He tried to make out where it rested, but it was no use. Morning, afternoon, or evening, it didn't matter anyway. It was day, and his chances of getting accosted were slim.

Even so, he breathed easier when the tall buildings of the uptown came into focus behind the curtains of falling rain. Mike hopped the outer gate with a sigh of relief and headed toward the underway, rechecking the disc's display with a nod of satisfaction. Bill was right on schedule. Now the problem of acquiring fare came into focus. Mike remembered the check Ambrose had given him and felt around in his pockets, the slow realization that he'd been robbed dawning on him for the first time. Her name still lay etched in his cast, an unpleasant reminder, but then he should have expected as much. That was fifty million drin washed down the drain with five to ten thousand being all he'd need for trans-fare. Mike cut through the back allies, memory tracing his steps into the pawnshop.

An old man with a thick, red beard and pot-belly knelt beside a wooden stool, spray coating its legs with a plastic adhesive. He ignored Mike as he continued working.

"Hi."

"Ain't got no juice."

"I'm looking to sell."

The man glanced up from the stool, seemingly unimpressed.

"This coat."

The man continued layering the legs, the nerves in his hand jittering the fingers as he sprayed.

"How much can I get for it?"

"That coat has a hole in the shoulder. And it's stained."

"I need ten thousand."

He put down the spray can and turned the stool upside-down, setting it on its seat.

"How about five then?"

"It's worthless."

"One."

He shook his head with annoyance as he unscrewed the nozzle head, replacing it with another.

"C'mon. Give me a break. I was shot today."

"Nice boots you got."

"They're offworld."

Mike kicked them off and let the man examine them.

"Contraband?"

"No. Its legal. Look, it adjusts for the size."

"That's pretty tricky. I'll give you twelve."

"Fifteen, and I'll throw in the coat."

He shrugged, taking the coat to examine.

"See? Pockets on the inside."

"What, do I look blind to you?"

"No, not at all." Mike shook his head trying hard to sound sincere.

"Fifteen."

Mike strode barefoot, avoiding the broken glass as he headed toward the underway. The disk showed Bill ahead of him but not by more than a hundred meters. Mike slowed his pace, taking the escalators down to the ticket dispensers as a computer synthesized voice droned above the background chatter.

"Welcome to Xin terminals. Please have exact fare ready. CME cards accepted."

Once in the ticket lobby, Mike leaned against a shaded wall as he consulted the disc. Hundreds of people lined up against the dispensers, a young couple swapping spittle to the self-sustained ignorance of those around them, a three-year old kicking his mother's knees as he swung from her brown satchel, a tall chiphead with spokes for jacks eating a quagga and manouri on rye, drinking something blue and bubbly from a leftover sluice tube. The green dot dipped off the display at it headed south, the concentric circles shifting first into ovals and then narrowing into thin slivers of their former shapes and the dot came back into view for a moment and then descended off the surface entirely. Mike pocketed the disc and stepped into line behind the spokes man.

"Where's the output, dude?"

Mike looked up, surprised. The chiphead took a swig from his sluice tube and offered the rest to Mike.

"You get fucked up?"

"Ummm... no thanks."

"Damn, EI receiver point. You even got a manipulator plug. Y'know, you can hook in an output jack there real easy. I know this guy who'll do it for pretty cheap."

His eyes roamed Mike's scalp with fascination.

"You interested?"

"I'm kind of in a hurry."

"Hey, no problem."

He turned around to buy his ticket, pausing at the entry gates before continuing.

"Just leave a message on the 'Doggie Blitz' if you change your mind."

Mike nodded as he fingered in his destination, the synthesized voice finally acknowledging his presence.

"Your fare is eight thousand five hundred drin."

He shuffled a ten into the machine.

"Do you accept credit for non-exact amount?"

"Yes."

"Thank you for traveling the Underway."

"As if I had a choice..." Mike grabbed his ticket and entered through the gates, another machine snapping up his slip of magnetic paper and returning it as he passed to the other side. "Credit: Drin 1500" was etched in red symbols at the upper right-hand corner of the stub.

The trams sat cushioned on gravitic fields, a recent innovation Mike recalled as he boarded. Most everything

other than transportation and communication was despairingly backwater, even in the capital's suburbs. He found a seat at the back of the last car. Only two others entered with him, the young couple. Probably evening then, he figured, everybody's going the other way. They resumed their foreplay as the tram picked up speed, and Mike turned his head more out of embarrassment than courtesy.

"Feeling lonely?" Mike sat up, suddenly surprised. "Come to 'Temple of the Mermaid' where your whim is my command." The feminine voice continued babbling over the car's speakers as the girl started licking her boyfriend's face. The guy watched Mike out of the corner of his eye, a cocky smirk playing across his lips. "Satisfaction guaranteed, or your money back."

The tram finally stopped, Mike pulling the disc from his pocket and consulted its display as the doors slid open and several dozen people entered. Bill was within half a kilometer and moving on the rollers. Mike pocketed the disc and slipped outside the car as its doors slapped shut behind him.

Several rollers coasted by on cermelecon rails, arched bridges making way for their passage. Mike hopped on one and inserted two thousand drin. The digital gauge clicked away as he stepped on the acceleration peddle and gripped the handrails. Soon he was in the city's midst, the canopy of stone several hundred meters high and around him thousands of sparkling lights, a lattice network of railings, glowing exit pads, steel office complexes sitting atop large cylindrical stalks, one built atop the other, and a hive of cable connections hanging in the air like uncropped weeds taking over a forest. Suddenly he realized he was sitting still, the roller having shuffled off to the side so others could pass. A small red light blinked near the money slot and zero's glared out from the counter.

Mike inserted another thousand and parked the roller before the money clicked away. Two women in dapper, black frocks raced toward him in long, determined strides, pushing past to the free roller before anyone else could beat them to it. Meanwhile, large, circular, iris valves continued disgorging a steady stream of mainly government tight-necks, a few laughing but most sedate, languid, or exhausted. Glowbeads sparkled on the sides of the escalators like little droplets of sunshine, and as a line of rollers passed overhead, their bright rims cast a dizzying array of colors on the velvety black sheen of the thick, airy mist in the space beyond.

The disk showed Bill remarkably close, and Mike felt his head duck almost imperceptibly as he crossed, unhurried, into a deserted portal. The reading shifted slightly, circles bending again into ovals. Mike tapped the surface with his index finger and eyed the double doors of a maintenance lift. Suddenly the green dot flickered and died. He cupped the disc into his pocket and headed out the portal, finding a cool table beneath the shade of a low hanging ceiling. The table's surface displayed the menu, showing two-dimension pictures of each of the meals. Mike settled for a glass of ice water, inserting a thousand drin into the slot and collecting his change. The crystal cubes were still making a faint sizzling sound as they clinked against the inside of the glass. Mike sipped the fluid, the fuzzy numbness slowly receding from his shoulder as he watched the portal.

He turned back to the table's smooth surface and brought up an area map of the city. Xaos, pronounced Za'-os by the natives, was the capital of the lesser continent. Excavated long before the civil war, it was utilized during the planetary revolt as a stronghold of last resort. Its location, several kilometers beneath the seabed, was virtually unassailable except by the thermonuclear warheads which the Archduke would never use. Afterwards, it grew, large suburbs like Xin and Xekhasmeno rising at the surface like the first seedlings of a dwearmurgrove. Mike examined the display. They'd done a good deal of construction over the past two years. He brought up a voice window on the display and pressed a few more keys on the interface, depositing his change back in the money slot. The channel clicked several times before there was any answer.

"This number had been disconnected... if you need directory assistance, please dial..."

Mike killed the window and searched through directory assistance for 'Cecil Dulin.' He then expanded it to the suburbs and ran a search of the local emigrations and obituaries, finally punching a few more keys in frustration. A red light flickered on the display. Insufficient funds for a planetwide directory search. He slammed his good fist against the table surface without effect. The display shimmered, seeming to laugh at him from behind its protective cover.

"Have it your way," he finally conceded, taking the disc once again from his pocket and consulting the reading. Somebody put money in a soundbox, and Mike found his bare toes involuntarily keeping time with the music as he rubbed his bad arm beneath the castfoam and patiently waited for the reading to stabilize. The green dot remained stationary, glowing steadily just beyond the fifteen meter mark and then suddenly disappeared.

"This isn't my day."

Mike plucked the surface with a wary finger as the empty ovals glared back at him.

"C'mon Bill, don't do this to me..."

Mike pocketed the disc and pulled himself up from the table. The portal beckoned from across the walkway, its keypad nestled against the maintenance lift doors. Stern, blue letters marched across the lock's indicator, "access code required." Gears began whining as Mike stepped to the side, clenching his good hand into a tight fist. The double

doors opened, and Bill started out, his long, lanky arms dangling to his sides as his mouth opened in a wide, toothy grin. Mike caught him in the neck with his fist, taking him backwards with the blow. As Bill lay on the lift's floor, crumpled and choking, Mike kicked him once in the stomach and twice in the nards. Satisfied, the older gatherer twisted the lift's operating lever and quickly removed Bill's fiberglass pistol as the doors slowly shut.

For a moment, stormy gray eyes betrayed anger and fear. After that, there was only shame. Mike looked down, a course determination quietly roiling within his guts as Bill clutched his crotch with both hands.

"You bastard!"

"Niki's dead, Bill."

"So ya gonna shoot me?"

"I'm thinking about it."

The lift stopped, its doors opening at Mike's back as he quickly spun to the side of the lift.

The room was cluttered with a variety of maintenance equipment and medical gear. Two semi-automatic carbines rested on the far wall, and a portable microframe lay at the floor's center along with a package of optical storage disks and a large, black dodecahedron. The room's furniture was sitting in the corner, a single, short, wooden stool.

"Nice place, Bill. You get good rent?"

"Real good."

Mike shook his head in concentrated disbelief.

"Go on."

Bill let himself be kicked forward into the chamber, the cool flow of ventilation cutting across his shoulder blades as he retreated into the dim light of an electric lantern.

Mike sat stiff in the corner rubbing his bandaged shoulder. Her name lay etched in the white surface.

"You get shot again or somethin'?"

"Here, why don't you come over and take a closer look," Mike invited with a sarcastic snarl.

"Mama gave it to ya?"

"That's close enou..."

A shin snapped into his forearm, and Mike found himself reeling off-balance, falling backwards as Bill's fist nailed him in the midsection. He never heard the stool splitting against the floor planks as he tumbled backwards. Instead, silence seemed to surround him entirely, and then there was only the deafening echo that followed the silence and Bill slipping quietly along the floor within the pool that was his own blood.

"You stupid fuck!"

"Sorry, Mike..."

A twinkle of amusement roamed through his eyes, the gray spheres seeming webbed within the clouds of a paternal haze.

"Bill!"

Chapter Eleven

The nightlife was blossoming in its usual splendor for the Calannic capital, the blues, reds, and sunny yellows of eveningwear mocking the conservative, almost draconian apparel of the working day. Xkutyr was known, locally as well as abroad, as the undercity of sleepless dreams. Before the war, the Duke of Arcadia was said to be a frequent visitor, reputedly lounging within the watery, volcanic caverns awaiting noble orgies too numerous to enumerate. At least, that was the popular philosophy. History, on Calanna, was jaded at best, most recently by the war. Mike had always regarded the stories as a poor attempt at anti-Imperial propaganda, but whenever he visited the Temple of the Wrything Mermaid, he was always persuaded to reconsider his point of view.

On this occasion, the waters churned with unusual vivacity, the warm glow of soaking bodies paddling on the surface as others more intrepid ventured beneath, between the terraces of gravity nullifiers and into the labyrinth beyond. Mike found himself swimming within a crowd of strangers, some groping each other for comfort and others huddled within large floating bubbles of oxygen, bodies intertwined, playing games of the flesh for all to see. Together they imbibed amber and purple fluids from plastic sluispheres, bubbles within bubbles holding potent aphrodisiacs judging from the inclinations those who shared them.

Most came here out of boredom, hoping to find fascination in a moment's idle folly. Others, however, came here out of pain, a few thousand drin to smother one burrowing intoxication with yet another and that perhaps with another still. Of course, it was all Bill's money, but that didn't matter; he wouldn't need it anymore. Mike was sure of

that much.

He swam until the water grew cold and dense and the oxygen bubbles became too few to venture further. Alone, in an alcove, he shivered, bare of everything save the mandatory wrist locator. The air grew musty and coarse and he tried to close his eyes and sleep, but the water was too frigid this far out from the complex. Suddenly bubbles emerged from below and a woman clad in a gelsuit appeared, her black hair slicked back by the cold water as she emerged.

"Vanwalye?"

Mike regarded her question for all of five seconds.

"Uh... No."

"Uquenlye Calain?"

"Umm... lastalmet."

"Tulye?"

Mike wondered if he had a choice. They had probably seen how far he was going and sent her out to fetch him back. There was nothing like a troublesome offworlder to piss off the management. Her worried, green eyes seemed to confirm the assessment.

"Okay," Mike nodded. She moved closer to help him.

"No, really, I'm fine. I'll just follow. Hilmet. Okay?"

"Okay," her anxious smile confirmed the communication more than her use of the galanglic. She kept a slow pace, feeding him oxygen from her tank at several intervals. By the time they reached the warm waters, Mike figured he was lucky he hadn't ditched the locator.

After he dressed, Mike spent the next hour sitting at a table along the stony terrace, sipping Miruvor and re-scanning the various databases. The girl came back to check on him, apparently trying to tell him something from the ledge before being yanked backward into the bubbly water by another employee. Mike waived as she was dragged beneath the steaming surface. The bottom half of her gelsuit emerged several moments later, floating around the surface as various patrons began tossing it back and forth between the access pools.

Cecil was nowhere to be found. Even the search on the planetwide directory turned up nothing. Mike went back to investigating the local boards when he came across a familiar name.

"Doggie Blitz?"

He entered within the steady stream of other electronic freefloaters, quietly carousing the various sub-boards for something of interest. He then passed along to the membership records, or at least those sections open for public scrutiny. A number of faces flashed across his screen, most of them chipheads, one of them strangely familiar.

"Check 143/741."

"User online."

"Call him."

"Error. Respecify at call."

"Call 143/741."

"Waiting... connect."

"Yo?"

"Umm... Hi, 'member me? Command open visual. Umm... in the underway. Purchasing tickets?"

"Huh? Oh yeah. You lookin' fer some output."

"That's right. I was wondering if maybe we could meet someplace. I may have more than just output in mind."

"Such as..."

"Finding a friend of mine."

"Well, I guess that depends mainly on who it is you're looking for. If you could just give me the name now, I'd be able to give you a better idea when we meet."

"You sure that's safe?"

"Uhhh... let's see... you're in sector thirteen. Let me repipe this, hold on.... Okay, go ahead."

"The name is Cecil Dulin. He used to be a local res..."

"Hold on... did you say Cecil Dulin?"

"Yeah."

"Uhh... sorry, I don't think I can help you there dude."

"What's the matter?"

"Gotta jam."

"Wait... damnit."

"Na Manor."

"Huh? Oh, hi. I thought you lost your suit."

"Ulastalmet."

"Uh... nevermind." Mike reverted to the Calannic, but his words came out wrong when he tried to explain anything too complex. Her green eyes twinkled as she laughed, either perceptibly oblivious to his being both an offworlder and a chiphead, or incapable of harboring either of the two most common prejudices.

"I no understand why you go in cold water without air tank."

"Umm... I dunno either."

She liked that one. Her eyes seemed to glitter more with each new giggle, the easy laughter reminding him of Niki, but her eyes were too shallow and sparkly. Mike rubbed his cast, still encased in its mermaid-plastic sheath, wondering how long the tissue-stabilization would last.

"Where you are staying?"

"Umm... no place yet."

"Ah, you just arrive then."

"You could say that."

"You looking for a place on computer?"

"I'm looking."

"Hard to find."

"Yeah."

"Maybe you find a friend?"

Mike froze cold before he realized what she meant. She started giggling again, taking his look entirely the wrong way.

"You do find friend. Is easy here. Yes?"

"If you say so."

"If you like, I have extra space."

"Between your ears," Mike added in Galanglic.

"Huh?"

"Nevermind."

"No?"

"Well... okay. Sure."

"Okay?"

The cold breeze gave ample excuse for her to nuzzle against him as they exited the underway, the puddles of water on the streets congealing with motor oil and fragments of dead leaves in the dim light of actinic lamps. Drunk stragglers and chipheads were the only inhabitants between the seldom cab carrying home a late-shifter from the city below. Several drivers huddled just outside the doors, gambling via coin-toss and drinking mataxa.

"Hey... any of you speak Galanglic?"

"Quesse? Hallon... neghral?" They seemed to get a good laugh.

"Very funny; maybe you speak the universal language." Mike rubbed a fifty k'drin note between his forefinger and thumb.

He rode with Vilya in the back seat, watching a pale fog build on the windows as they drove to the outskirts of the city. At a quiet intersection, Mike nudged the driver and pointed to a corner tele-booth.

"Dalmet?"

"Stop. You wait."

"Huh?"

"Wait. Stay here."

"No go?"

"No go."

He entered the booth, hitting the operator assistance key while depositing several coins. Outside, the driver rubbed his windshield with a dirty, brown rag.

"Gardansa, first name Narsil. Yes.... Hello? Yes, I know what time it is. I need to speak with the General... just tell him it's Michael Harrison."

* * *

"Meow..."

Mike awoke as something clawed his head jacks, a cool ripple of pain flowing across his skull as he bolted upright, tossing the feline across the room.

"You no like pussy?"

A faint shimmer of light caught the pistol's fiberglass barrel, Vilya lowering it just a notch as she waited for Mike's reply. He studied her eyes, green spheres twinkling with mischief.

"I find out what 'between your ears' mean, asshole."

She clicked back the pistol's lever, preparing for the shot as she licked her lips. Too high and she'd make a mess. Too low and she'd have to use another bullet. Mike stared straight down the barrel, trying arrogantly to suppress the cool sweat breaking along the jacks in his skull. She pulled the trigger, the barrel clicking with a faint resonance.

"Ha ha... me funny."

Mike batted the gun out of her hands, tumbling out of the bed as she scampered across the floor. She finally locked herself inside the bathroom, her spasmodic laughter ringing through the keyhole.

"Come out here, Vil."

"No way! You apology."

He pocked the gun and searched through his bag, finally finding the bullets beneath the dodecahedron.

"Me?!" Mike nearly gagged, pointing the weapon toward the bathroom door. "I think you're forgetting one little thing. I'm the one who has the gun, now."

"Ha ha ha..."

"Meow."

"Or maybe I should just shoot your cat."

The door opened and Vilya crossed the floor to her cat, picking him up and returning to the bathroom before Mike could so much as bat an eyelash.

"Vilya."

"Hee hee hee..."

"Meow."

Mike lifted the dodecahedron off the floor, nestling its weight in his lap. Its ceramic exterior carried a dull glimmer in the warm morning light, each surface flat and smooth except for one. There lay etched the figure of a songbird, its wings outstretched as though in flight. Mike regarded it with an unfamiliar mixture of relief and apprehension.

"Apology!"

"Fine... I'm sorry."

"I can't hear you."

The ragged curtain of red twill flapped from the window's edge as he cocked the pistol.

"Hee hee hee..."

He finally coaxed her out of the bathroom by frying up a can of mash and onions, the most universal sustenance in her cupboards. They ate in between the morning newsvids and cold cups of zardocho. The gatherers on the monitors were a pair of public faces, computer generated images which the government had been using for newscasts over the past century. The eyes of the female seemed to bulge out and cross as though she were reading from cue cards, an effort to make her image more realistic. Mike remembered reading about the development in an industry update.

"And now to the local headlines... an unidentified woman was killed yesterday in gunfire at the 1st Interstellar Bank. Although officials are withholding her name, the victim was purported to be in the process of cashing a promissory note for fifty million drin. It is believed that the check was stolen from one, Michael James Harrison, an independent gatherer with Galactic Publications. According to the GID, Harrison was terminated by the woman in accordance with global bounty codes and that the shooting was an unlawful retaliation by the Galatican. Harrison, author of *Shattered Eden*, gained interstellar fame with the..."

Mike changed the channel as his press image materialized in the corner of the screen.

"Hey... I was watching," Vilya flicked a speck of potato in his general direction. The other channels proved just as dull, but the ensuing battle over the remote control made up for it. He found himself back on her bed, exhausted, as she left for work, her cat purring at his side in contented bliss.

Outside, the afternoon sun sank slowly into a hazy dusk as Mike patiently hoofed his way across the city. Cecil had been waiting for well over a year, and another cent wouldn't matter.

* * *

The ochin dangled precariously from a single thread of its silken web as its spindly legs flailed aside the remains of its latest victim, a tiny mitzignat. The insect's carcass tossed and turned slowly within the nullfield until a lazy spitter gobbled it down with a swift dash of its sticky tongue. Tasting the pungent fragrance of the ochin's poison, the spitter turned sideways and retreated into the darkness.

Though still insatiate, the ochin felt safer. Warily, it crept along the narrow commcord which served as a spine to

the web, providing some structural foundation for the fragile strands of its home. A dim buzz resounded against the walls of the room as the ochin reached the end of the commcord. It paused to feel the momentary vibrations on the cool air.

The man couldn't hear the buzz. He hung limp in the air, supported only by thin fractures in the null-gravity. His dull senses couldn't feel the ochin as it slowly edged its way along his grizzly beard, searching the maw of unkept hair for juicy goobugs. His thick, oily thatch barely left an egress for the slimy worms which secreted their viscous ooze.

Suddenly the gravmodule flickered, and his body slowly descended to the wooden floor, ripping away the ochin's web and scattering the boopreys as the dusty, maggot-ridden planks creaked soundly underneath the weight of his emaciated body. He lay still for several hours without breathing, his programs refusing the interruption; however, the feeder, uncompromising, forced a disconnection as his weak lungs involuntarily gasped for air.

It was evening before he could feel the raw itch. It came on slowly, like a sleeping devil, seeming a thousand times more penetrating than anything he could ever remember. For hours he lay still, unable to resolve the agony before his olfactory senses came around, allowing him to smell the hellish stench of his own rot. Yet, the itch and the stench only served as a distraction which he used to fight the maddening bunkum of raw data which muttered sporadic illusions within the locule of his mind.

Slowly, he felt the enzymes go to work, exciting his endocrine gland, pushing adrenalin into his bloodstream, building momentum in his heartbeat, fighting the impending shock. He fluttered his eyelids, the action igniting a stream of ideas, each vaguely interrelated, but they swept by so swiftly that all he could remember was the fragment of a distant dream.

Slowly, he realized that he was sitting upright. He heard the distant hum of the spitter in the corner of the room. The feeder lay next to him; it was already disconnected. He couldn't remember touching it.

"Who's there?"

His voice sounded dry and mottled. He couldn't recognize it as his own, but there it was with nobody to answer. Then he heard the door close.

The tub was brown with mold; a family of quagroachs nested on the floor beneath the grating. He tumbled himself inside and searched for the rusty handle. The ice-cold water hammered against the floor, bathing his still insensitive skin as he rubbed off folds of dead flesh. Soon the welts that merely itched began to sting.

The scum collected around his neck as the waterline threatened. Slowly, he stood, his arms grasping the grimy runners on the walls of the tub. As the water continued to rise, overtaking his waist, he let one hand fall away, testing the strength of his legs and their balance.

He wasn't aware of the blade until it cut his ear. He tugged it loose from its cord and began to shave, slicing the filthy hair away with deep strokes close to the skin. The goobugs dropped into the water around his waist. Tangled deep within the matted hair, they sunk and drowned beneath the pounding water. He fingered his skull for the jacks; the important things were always as he remembered them.

He was too tired to think about it now. The water at his chest beckoned. How easy, he considered, it would be to drown. He sunk down beneath the murky water, its numbing chill bringing with it a strange sense of satisfaction. With a twist of the lever, the floor beneath the grating opened, and the water, bugs, and hair swirled away.

* * *

Moonlight shimmered through the doorway like a icy veil, its narrow edge stretching across the hardwood floor. She stepped quietly into the dim, misty light, letting her bags slip clumsily from her arms.

"Mikael? You still here, you leech?"

"Meow..."

A purple glimmer settled beneath patchy, black clouds along the western horizon as the red cab swerved along the central highway. The driver hummed to himself most of the way, his right foot jogging a tempo against the floor as he drove. Mike tried to fall asleep, but the bumping of wheels into shallow potholes made him nauseous. They were nearly three hours outside Xin when the car turned off the pavement, taking a dirt trail up a grassy hillside, wildflowers growing in yellow and blue patches along the road's surface.

"Where go?"

"Left... no, that way... left. You know left from right?"

"Huh?"

"Keep going; you're doing fine."

The driver skidded to a sudden halt as they reached the outer gate. Mike climbed out of the car and paid the balance. The driver opened his window a crack to receive the money and then drove out backwards, loose gravel sweeping under the cab's tires as he gunned the motor.

Two men clothed in executioner's leather led him through the gates. Their uniforms betrayed no insignia denoting either rank or service. Private henchmen, Mike figured. It was all that Gardansa had left. His house was like a temple, two marble statues rising as solemn pillars, one the fool and the other an emperor. Black veins ran their full height and the three men crossed between.

Gardansa stood against the tall, ponderous door, a canopy of yellow daisies gleaming in the faint moonlight. His smooth lips curved within some determined pleasantry.

"General."

"Gatherer Harrison. So delightful to see you again." The man's eyes turned dark and saucer shaped as he laughed, his fleshy chin dangling and bouncing as he bobbed his head in welcome.

The house was warm and smelled of sweet perfume. Numerous busts littered the hallways, and the hearth glowed with fiery sparks rising up the chimney only to swirl back down as fine black ash. The general picked short bits of hair from his nose as they talked, flicking them into the steady stream of warm air. They wafted about in the current, occasionally catching within the thick fur of his brown fez.

"I am sorry to hear such dread news of your friends, but then friends come and go. That is the way of life."

Mike nodded, not sure how to respond.

"And, after all, she was a Siri. And the other one, a traitor against you. So well you pick your friends; makes me wonder that you are still around to tell me stories."

He chuckled at some image lurking deep within his mind. It was a dry sort of noise, starting below his throat and wafting upward like the quaking of a volcano.

"How like the past, this seems. Traitors and psyches. One must somehow breed the other. You not agree?"

"I don't know, general. I came here seeking the answer to another question."

"Ahh," he nodded reluctantly, "it is an answer which I could not divulge were even I to somehow become of it aware."

"And why is that?"

"Might I interest you in some brandy, Mister Harrison."

"Not tonight, General."

"You know, before you and your psyche saved my life, I never thought that I would allow an offworlder in my home, and to allow an offworlder to enter, and leave sober... now that is unthinkable."

Mike finally relented in the hope of placating his host. The drink was a deep crimson variety from Ares. Making brandy and building guns were the only two things they did well.

"You are in a very reflective mood tonight, my friend. It makes me tremble to smell such thought in my very home. And yet, mysteriously, you stay your tongue. What chains are these that hold you?"

"I guess I'm just bummed out."

"Bummed out?"

"This whole trip has been one disaster after another."

"Ah... but is that not the life of the gatherer? To sacrifice and lose heart and shed all things precious only to triumph in the end, how like the life of the soldier. You and me, we are very much the same, no?"

"I suppose so," Mike swallowed another gulp, its acidic flavor coating the length of his throat.

"And to die... that is the sweetest sacrifice. How more alike we seem, myself in virtual exile, and you..."

He suddenly burst out with a wheezing fit of laughter, his cheeks puffing into a patronizing smile.

"Now that you are officially dead, your enemies will no longer be watching for you. What an advantage we have created, you and I. Cast it away, you could. We could easily arrange for your passage off-planet."

"No."

"No?" The general's pudgy-cheeked grin melted into a bare-toothed smirk as he stared into vacant space, his eyes glazed with eager satisfaction.

"Then you must use your advantage, and swiftly. It will not take our enemies long to realize they have been fooled."

"You can't tell me anything about Erestyl."

"As to that, you might ask your friend, Mister Dulin. And when you see him, warn him to be more careful. It is not often, on Calanna, one is granted a reprieve."

Mike nodded, "I'm sure he's aware of that."

"The question, Mister Harrison, is whether or not you are."

Mike sucked down the last of the Aresian brandy, a sour expression crossing his face as the general grinned in approval.

"Someday, if you live long enough, I will teach you to drink like a true Calannan."

"Thanks, General. I think," Mike pulled himself upright, his bad shoulder still aching despite the numbing fluid

within the cast. Gardansa reached for the bottle, his fingers fumbling at the cork as he shook his head unsympathetically.

"No, you must be certain."

"I'm certain... truly and without doubt. Do you have a terminal around here, by the way?"

"You are quite certain?" Gardansa prodded.

"Absolutely. Someday. Some other day."

The Doggie Blitz seemed to have a larger share of traffic than the night before, its electronic corridors clogging with conversation. Mike floated with the frenzy, picking up bits and pieces of conventional wisdom on the various sub-boards. It seemed word had already spread of Cecil's escape from the cellars. The lingo seemed especially prodigious at coming up with new words for various non-places.

Cecil's state was nothing more than electronic disembodiment, something about which Mike cared little and understood less. He engaged a few of the patrons on the topic, hoping to gain more information about Cecil's exact crime against the authorities, but nobody seemed to be able to agree even on the basic facts. Finally the person he was looking for appeared online.

"Call 143/741"

"Waiting... connect."

"You got the Spokes-man."

"Hi, you still can't help with Cecil?"

"Aww, man... not you again." His image wavered on the screen, its contours shifting as he spat a piece of food at his terminal lens.

"Who else? Besides, I figured you'd be happy to see me."

"All I wanna know is how you did it."

"Check where I'm calling from."

"Hold on... ummm... damn, out of the district. Can't get a fix. You tell me. No, wait. Let me guess. A certain general."

"Very good," Mike tried not to sound patronizing.

"Damn straight. I saw your face in more than one place last night. Figured I'd never have to look at it again, too."

"That was a little gatherer magic. It comes with knowing certain generals and drinking whatever they put in front of your face."

"Yeah, I read up on you. Some dirty deeds. So how come you're still alive?"

"Umm... that's actually a pretty good question," Mike rubbed his shoulder, the pain pivoting in and out of focus. "Actually, I need you to do a little job. That is, if you're not afraid of the authorities."

"Hey, I don't follow anybody to the cellars. You can't pay me enough."

"I don't want you to go out... I want you to go in."

"Huh?"

"A robot brain. Draconian design if I'm not missing my guess. You interested?"

"Draconian. Is it sentient?"

"I guess that depends on your definition."

"I'll take a look at it. Meet me at the Tiberian Compound at twenty-five cents. Suite 112J."

"I'll be there."

Gardansa was not a man for long goodbyes. When Mike returned to the drawing room, the general was already fast asleep, snoring in his armchair as lumps of loose flesh jiggled on his chin. Within the hallways, the busts seemed to snicker with mischievous delight. The chief guard showed Mike to a polished limousine, its black exterior coated with sheets of polymer stucco. Mike admired the invulnerability before climbing into the front seat with the driver.

"You speak galanglic?"

"What, do I look like a taxi driver or something?"

Cold wind swept along the limo's prow, the forelights scintillating in amber streaks as the vessel barreled against the rushing breeze. The night was crisp and clear, the celestial canopy flushed bright with a sparkling dew and far below, cool waters broke inward with the folding swell, foam lingering on the soft, white sands.

"You see something interesting out there?"

"Huh? Oh... not really."

Sea birds drifted about on the quiet shore below the cliffs, their outlines vaguely visible against the light drizzle. Occasionally they'd group into pairs and then drift apart, some coasting in circles and others swooping down to the breaking tide. In the distance, a bright point of light appeared followed by the faint whining noise of a turbofan. Mike hit the stick, sending the limousine into a diving spiral. A moment later, the missile impacted on the looming cliffs, sending shrapnel and stones bouncing against the stucco.

"Ay!"

The driver pulled out of the dive, snaking across the choppy waters as another point of light appeared.

"Slow down."

"Are you crazy?"

"Do it."

Mike leapt from the limousine as it slowed, the salty water stinging his eyes as he dived beneath the waves. Suddenly, everything turned bright orange, and for a moment he thought he could see for miles beneath the sea. The explosion rippled the current like a giant's hand slapping the surface, and Mike gasped for air beneath the waves, choking on the salty fluid as it invaded his throat. When he surfaced, all that was left of the limousine was small specks of polymer stucco drifting downward with the gentle rain.

Chapter Twelve

Yellow dandelions swayed within the smooth, evening breeze, their thin stems lingering in silent dance for the dying rays of a dim red sun. Above, the scent of sweet honey floated gently through the faint current, stirring the petals with a quiet cacophony of hushed whispers, carelessly catching the tips of her curls and caressing the thick patch of grass where she lay. The fireflies began to play, little winged faerie, or so she'd imagined. They darted about in circles, one teasingly pursuing another, whilst below, another host of insects went about their evening business, foraging for sustenance amidst the damp, loamy terrain. These fellows seemed dark and ominous, great pinchers perched atop their frames as they straggled about in the abject slumber of community, a congested mass, grinding together, crawling over and beneath, their limbs twisted about each other in ignoble partnership.

A tall bell tower rose from the hillside, its chimes ringing with tempestuous abandon. Vilya watched the bell work back and forth, its clamor growing in intensity. She reached out, her arm elongating into the elastic distance as the waning light slowly settled into black.

"Hello?"

"Hi. Did I wake you up?"

She groggily tried to place the voice.

"Johanes?"

"Umm... no. Mikael."

"Oh... you."

"I need a favor," Mike gulped down, glad that he was too cheap to pop for a visi-link.

The dawn was misty and cold, precipitation gradually forming into a dense fog along the coast. Her green eyes, though not so sparkly, were a welcome sight. Mike cautiously climbed into the back seat, checking to see the driver's face.

"What happen?"

"I decided to go swimming again." He stripped off his shirt, letting its ullage collect on the seat and slide in slippery droplets to the carpeted floor as the cab's warm air glided along his chest.

"Like cold water too well. Should hitch ride from now on... less danger."

She gave him a not-so-gentle squeeze at the end, her eyes scintillating with wicked intent as Mike's crossed involuntarily. He let out a deep groan, packaging the pain instead of striking back. "For waking me so early," she finally explained, and Mike wondered if it was some new custom as he slowly recovered.

"That was dirty."

"Justice never clean."

"Justice? You call that justice? I'd hate to feel revenge."

"Pray you don't have to."

"Vil... I don't blame you for being mad, but I really didn't have much of a choice."

"Everyone have choice. I take you in home, I give to you food, I give to you key, and you go and you no leave scratch-marks..."

"Look... I'm sorry, okay?"

"No... you look..."

Mike just nodded as she continued, her speech quickening and reverting in and out of slang so fast that he could no longer keep up. He knew that the Calannan women had a way of laying the guilt pretty thick, but this one was in a class by herself.

"Vilya, I'm sorry. I'll make it up to you, I promise. What more do you want?"

"Now you want know what I want."

She produced the dodecahedron from her wet, paper bag, its black surface glimmering dimly in the scattered light.

"Maybe I show you, eh?"

Outside, the murky air rushed against her window in pale gusts, droplets of moisture forming along its plastic surface, skidding steadily toward some common goal, and finally flailing blindly into the cab's interior. Beyond, the vague shape of the cliff's edge coursed by.

"What are you doing?"

"I want see how much you care for the pretty cermic. You jump for it, yes?"

"Vilya... I said I was sorry."

"Say again. I no hear so well."

"I'm sorry."

"Eh?"

"I'm sorry. How many times do you want me to say it?"

"You want pretty cermic too much."

"Yeah, well... it's important."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"It's a long story, okay?"

"We seem to have long time together."

"Yeah, well I'll explain it over breakfast."

She grumbled brusquely, but Mike could tell her stomach was in favor of the notion.

"C'mon, I'm buying. How'd you like to eat in Xekhasmeno?"

"So now I have choice..."

Xekhasmeno was known to locals as the forgotten city, a place given away to Imperial commerce as a settlement of war. Offworld, the appropriation was viewed as a no more than a slap on the wrist, but for the Calannans, the city was a brand of shame and defeat, a place forsaken and rarely spoken of except to provide adjectives for their more colorful slang. To hate Xekhasmeno and those who dwelt within it was part of Calanna's unspoken creed, a thing as real and as often underestimated as the thin, electrical barricade which protruded around the city's borders, forbidding entrance except to megacorp personnel and the starport authority.

They entered at the north-east gates beneath the Tizarian embassy. Work crews were in the process of finishing the new building. A guard wandered the line of vehicles, knocking on windows and stamping clearance stickers on various hoods. Mike recognized him as one of the old-timers who stayed on after the incident.

"Identification."

Mike opened his window as the guard peered within, his eyes widening in surprise.

"Why, Mister Harri...?!"

"Keep it quiet. You never saw me."

"Uhh... whole right, sir. Heard you were dead." He whispered it as though saying so more loudly might lend it truth, eyebrows wrinkling in confusion as he backed cautiously from the taxi, waving them through with a stamp of the sticker machine.

"What he say?" Vilya was rendered oblivious by the Galanglic.

"Huh? Oh... he said to have a nice day."

"Nice day?"

"Where to?" The cabby's eyebrows were furrowed in mild irritation.

"Tyberian Compound."

Suite 112J turned out to be on the ground level of a small technical complex. The suite was really more of a repair shop, and Vilya seemed altogether confused by her new surroundings. Spokes rounded a corner from the back of the room, his headgear gleaming in the fluorescent light.

"You're late, man."

"I ran into a little bit of trouble along the way." Mike handed over the dodecahedron, and Spokes inspected the casing, his blue eyes gleaming as though it were a birthday present.

"Bonded cermic?"

"Made to look that way. It's survived quite a bit."

"I'm sure it's not the only one."

Spokes said it with an air of either respect or inveiglement. Mike couldn't tell which for certain.

"You gonna be okay with this?"

"Sure. What exactly am I supposed to be looking for?"

"At this point, anything that seems interesting... if you manage to get in that is."

"Don't worry about that. It may take a little time, but I'll get in. You wanna hang around?"

"I promised somebody a square meal. After that, I need to get the shoulder fixed."

"There's a cafeteria on the 3rd floor. If you're looking for something nicer, there's the starport."

"We'll hit the starport."

"Suit yourself. Oh, take this." He handed Mike an SPA maintenance overcoat complete with tinted-bubble hood and IR goggles. "Unless you wanna be a celebrity, that is."

"Not after this morning; thanks."

The starport was not much different than he remembered, a mishmash of technicians, cargo-hands, and jaunty, third-rate brokers strewn in pairs and trios along a sea of polished floor tile. Various shops lined the walkways between the Outworld Market and the shuttle bays. Interspersed between, wide, circular planters rose from the gleaming tiles, forming benches for all the old people to sit. They studied the drifting masses with sardonic glares, their garish glad rags explicating a backward dive into altricial helplessness.

Mike let down the hood once they were seated in a corner of the Zardocha Cafe. He remembered it fairly well, and by some coincidence found himself at the same table he and Tara had sat not so long ago. His shoulder began aching again as the food came, the pain sharpening as an indication that the stabilizer was failing, and Vilya's mood seemed to improve as she used the gravitic waves of her utensil to thwack his wound beneath the hardened castfoam.

"Gee... thanks."

"Why you hurt?"

"I was wondering when you were going to get around to asking me that."

"On Calanna, is impolite to ask such thing."

"Why?"

Her eyes seemed to search the corner of the ceiling for an answer.

"Is like saying you small."

"Small?"

"Like baby."

"I could stand some babying."

That got her. Mike figured it was something about the language he didn't understand. Finally, she tapped the wound again with her grav-utensil, this time on a sharper focus.

"Ow!"

"Ha! You are baby. Tell me who is Cole."

"A friend. Oww..."

"Good friend?"

"Not really."

Mike grabbed the utensil from her hand before she could cause him any more pain. She fought tenaciously for several moments, and then suddenly let go, causing him to almost topple backwards.

"Be careful you silly boy. Waiter?! May I have a thing to eat with other than fingers?"

She turned back to Mike, her wicked smile returning as she was brought another grav-utensil.

"Ha ha... I win."

"Vilya, I'm not in the mood."

"Too bad... I am."

"Look, I don't want you messing with it. I'm gonna get it taken care of right after this."

"But I hate you, and I want to hurt you."

"I'm sure you do."

"Why you come to Calanna?"

"I'm a tourist. I like to go sight-seeing. Ow!"

A couple heads turned, and Mike tried to keep his face angled toward the wall. Vilya giggled at his predicament and motioned for another stab. She was interrupted by the arrival of the edibles, however, and consoled herself with squirting tiny packets of bean sauce on the bubble hood of his SPA suit and the soggy shoes he'd borrowed. Mike regarded her mood with all the patience it deserved.

"Stop it you brat."

"Make me."

"What's the matter? You don't like the food here or something?"

"They no have haggis."

"Oh wah."

"I see your face on three-vee after the work last night. It say you are dead Tizarian."

"A foul rumor that's been greatly exaggerated."

"Is that purpose you hide face?"

"I told you... I'm a tourist. You calling me a liar?"

"What sights you will see, tourist?"

"I dunno. Maybe the coast."

"Maybe you will swim with shoes off this time?"

Mike smiled, "Maybe."

The starport's sick-bay seemed more like a recovery hall for low-berthers. Several stood around popping fizzies to kill their morning breath while others were slowly revived from days or weeks in cryogenic suspension. Cold sleep wasn't so bad, Mike recalled. It was the waking up part that was so unpleasant. Cole's signature bubbled away with the dissolving castfoam, and the pharmacist administered the regeneration formula while a medic finished examining the wound. She held a thin fork in her hand, prodding the mesodermal layers as his blood flow slowed to a trickle.

"Passed right through. How'd this happen?"

"It was an accident."

Two shuttle attendants brought in a dozen more of the freezerinos as a feminine voice sedately announced the new arrivals. Her tone was collected, almost dull, enunciating each syllable of their names as though they were items of inventory and not actual people. Included were a few John and Jane Does, each accorded a separate number for the ledger. Mike charged the expense to Linden's account, including an all's well message on the assessment. The nurse swathed the numb shoulder in a fresh bandage as Mike finished typing in Linden's access code.

"We're gonna need some ID on this."

"Check again."

"Huh? Oh... guess not. Interesting insurance you've got."

"Yeah... Bank of Chuck."

Vilya sat with her back against the antechamber wall, her eyes glossed over with holographic images of interstellar medical technology. The promo featured minimalist cybernetics, nothing too scary or complex yet still fascinating for the uninitiated.

"Fixed?"

"Yeah... I guess."

They exited through baggage claims, climbing into a tram on the way out. Spokes was still fiddling with the dodec when they returned. He wore a staid expression, his eyes narrowing to thin slits as they entered.

"What's the matter?"

"You see these things?"

He pointed to two sets of bulbs at the base of his jacks, half of them shattered and fused.

"What about 'em?"

"Electrical inhibitors... without which my brain would be a toasty critter. The overload wiped my entire deck."

"I had no idea," Mike tried to make it sound sincere.

"Uh huh."

"What did you find out?"

"It tried to fry me is what I found out."

"Immediately?"

"It asked for some kind of ID clearance. I tried to burn out the active circuits, and it gave me auto-feedback except about ten times stronger than what I flushed in."

"So in other words it fought back."

"To put it mildly."

"Well, what did you expect, a cakewalk?" Mike tried to churn up a wholesome expression.

"I expect you to pay me four thousand for new inhibitors and software, credits not drin."

"No money until you get in."

"I almost got torched, Harrison! I think that qualifies me for working expenses."

"I'll try to get you the money."

Spokes turned and looked away, his eyes following a long, jagged crack in the wall plaster.

"Really hope you're joking, man."

"Finances are a little tight right now. It occasionally happens when you die, but I'll get the money somehow. Don't worry about that."

Spokes smiled, "I won't. I'll be keeping darkie as collateral until you do."

Mike considered the proposition, wondering if he had a choice in the matter.

"Spokes, I'm not trying to rip you off."

"Nor I you, Mister Harrison, but if you want trust, you're gonna have to show some in return."

Mike found himself nodding, almost stupidly, like some Joe Public listening to the big-time politician. Vilya sat idle, ignoring the Galanglic, her eyes casually roaming the technical hardware. Somewhere above her head, the blades of a humidifier kicked in, and a sudden current of musty air bathed her dark hair within its cool, transparent tendrils. She looked upward, squinting. The tall shaft rose above her, dark and imposing, lending a slight echo to their voices.

"Whatever."

"What are you trying to get out of this thing anyway?"

"It's a little hard to explain."

"Try me."

Mike took a deep breath, the musty air sucking through his nostrils as he inhaled.

"This thing, as you call it, was once the brain of a Draconian android. Her name was Robin, and she served what I believe was a sleeper agent sent to work for the *Galactican* before she got... somewhat dismembered... by this former friend of mine who decided to start working for the Imperials. For some reason, she decided not to wipe her memory, maybe because she wanted somebody to look at it. I don't know."

"I take it this is gonna be a long story."

Mike nodded, apologetically.

"The Imps have gotten their hands on one of my... subjects, for lack of a better word. He seems to be rather important to both them and the Draconians, and I'd just like to find out why."

"What's his name?"

"They call him Erestyl."

"What do you call him?"

"When I found him, he didn't have a name. His brain had been mangled by an Imperial mind-scanner. He didn't know who or what he was. The SPA found him in a galley stabbing people with a fork, one of the non-gravitic kinds you sometimes find in starport medical bays. He was transported to a local facility on Tizar and was snatched back by ISIS and brought here."

"ISIS? On Calanna?"

"I know. It makes no sense. If he was a criminal, I'd maybe have expected them to take him to the 47th. Instead, they opted for secrecy, even from their own people."

"Where does he come from?"

"Unknown. He was shipped to Tizar in a low berth. Another John Doe... transported on some tramp freighter that was no longer in port."

"And you feel it's your occupational duty to get involved."

Mike shrugged, "We dropped in five days ago. Me, Robin, and two others. Air defense was alerted to our mission. They destroyed the ship, and to make a long story short, me and this hunk of ceramic are all that's left."

"Does ISIS know you're still alive?"

"I had a little run-in with them this morning outside Gardansa's. I'd hoped it might be safe, seeing as how I'm supposed to be dead and all, but apparently not."

"And who's the woman?"

"A friend. Native."

"Obviously."

"I've been circled ever since I got here. I needed a safe place to stay."

"Get a flat."

"I'm a little short on funds right now."

"Does she even know anything about this?"

"She knows something strange is going on. That's about it."

Spokes winced, his eyes darting between them as an awkward smirk played across his lips.

"That's cold."

"I've made more than my share of mistakes on this drop. If I get caught, anybody who knows anything about what's goin' on is gonna be fair game."

"Oh... you're a real hero."

"If I disappear, I'd rather she just think I got up and vanished."

"Well thanks for telling me all about it, Harrison. That's just what I need... a bunch of offworld police homing in on me."

"You're the one who wanted trust. Besides, why should I care what happens to you? You're nothin' to me..."

except... maybe a possibility."

"A possibility to get yourself killed."

"I need your help to get this brain cracked. If you wanna bail out, I'll take Robin and leave right now. You can bill the *Galactican*, but you'll never hear from me again."

"And what if I decide to stick my neck out for you? What do I get?"

"The *Galactican* will cover your expenses. Maybe with luck you'll be able to land a cushy job there, I dunno."

"Weak."

"Yeah, but right now it's about all I can promise."

Spokes backed away from the dodec, his shoulders slumped and eyes wandering the walls. Mike tried to read his posture, the movement of the bony ends of his elbows as they scraped against the desk. Mike rubbed his temples, exhausted from the long night.

"Look, it doesn't take a genius to realize something very strange is going on. If we can find out what it is... who knows?"

"I'd like to help you, Harrison. But what you're doing is dumb."

"What would you have me do?"

"Back off. Get uninvolved. If I was you, I'd make a beeline for Tizar and forget this whole thing ever happened."

"Spokes... the key to this 'whole thing' could be sitting right in front of our noses... literally."

"So that you can write a story about it or get yourself martyred?"

Spokes shook his head, his scowl softening into a dreary stare as the dodec's black surface glimmered in the dim, artificial light. Once again in Mike's possession, it's surface felt icy cold, as if the recent skirmish had plunged her into some deep, cryogenic dream. Spokes wandered to the back of his workshop, his head still shaking in mild contempt. Outside, Calanna's great red sun bathed the forgotten city in hues of amber and gold. Vilya said nothing, somber, green eyes speculating as to the mood of the alien conversation.

The ride back to Xin passed quickly. Their driver was a old man, apparently from the local area. He assumed they were tourists, who had become increasingly common since the post-war domestication. He pointed out various roadside landmarks as he drove, switching back and forth between Galanglic and Calannic and occasionally a mishmashed fusion of the two. Vilya remained silent for most of the ride, only speaking near the end to correct of minor point of history.

"You make good story, but that is not how it happen."

"No?" The driver's deep brown nose wrinkled in embarrassment.

"Varilion is no crafty as you say. It was Priestess of Snagarth that give him idea."

"Ha! Why should the Priestess care about Imperial garrison? Eh?"

"She not care, such as negrali mind own business. They refuse this courtesy, to pillage her temple and to murder her harem, that she make revenge."

"Ah... the lady is of the light."

"The light?" Mike inquired.

"She is Calannan, yes?"

"What do you think, Vil? You of the light?"

She shot Mike a sidelong glance, amusement brewing within anger.

"What you know of the light, Mikael?"

"What should I know?"

The driver's voice broke into a hearty, belly laugh, the cab weaving and bouncing with the spasms of his merriment. Vilya concentrated her gaze out the window. The sun's thick rays seemed to fall down as crimson shingles, baked and plastered along the dry, ruddy terrain.

"You children are pleasant, but where to go?"

"Take us to Erfalas."

"Hah! Good choice."

The cab snaked around the back roads of Xin's underbelly, crossing the highway to Pinnath Carach and continuing coastward. The air grew perceptibly cooler, and Mike spotted a flock of gulls on the horizon.

"Hey Vil... where're we going?"

"Erfalas. You like it, trust me."

The road came to an abrupt halt at the edge of a long rocky bluff. Forty feet below, the waves bore past beds of green kelp and red coral, shooting headlong into the stony gray cliffs. Beyond, the blue sea, Aeluin, stretched past the buoyant sudd, extending to infinity, its waters sweet and young, curling softly into the expansive horizon as they kissed the crystal sky, their colors shared, mixed together in some strange yet benevolent duet.

Every liter was similar in chemistry, undulating together beneath cool sheets of air, but where the water touched

the shore, so it assumed its character, relentlessly hammering the broad cliffs, foaming against the lush coral, and settling quietly along the flat, sandy shores. Aeluin was young by geologic standards, bearing only a tenth the salinity of Tizar's ocean, safe for drinking in the short term and unmolested by the pollutants many other civilizations had carelessly scattered. Its waves gamboled amongst each other, simultaneously diverging and emerging in continuous, everlasting succession.

Vilya began descending the sheer face, her movements unusually agile, as though she'd memorized the rock's most minute features down to the texture of its skin. Mike followed, taking arduous care to mimic her steps and holds. He'd climbed rocks on Tizar, but never without gravitic momentum restrainers. Minus the security, he felt strangely naked, his nerves jittery and clumsy while a cool perspiration broke along his hairline. Dozens of steel eyehooks cut into the stone just above where the sea cascaded into the stone. Vilya rested on one of them, allowing sprinkles of foam to catch in her long, dark hair.

"Why are we here?"

"Sightseeing."

"Oh... right."

"Give me hand."

"What?"

"Give."

Mike stretched out his arm, and her thin fingers wrapping gracefully around his wrist. She tugged for a moment, and suddenly he was slipping, flailing against the stone to regain his balance as he toppled backwards. In an instant, he found himself hanging by a pair of cuffs firmly secured from his wrist to an eyehook.

"Vilya!?"

"You always such easy to snare?"

He cursed as the steel cuff bit into the flesh of his wrist. Frantically, he scratched at the wet rock beneath, his borrowed shoes nearly falling off his feet as the waves came crashing in, pulverizing his legs against the stone. Mike clawed with his free arm, still bandaged, for a nook in the rock on which to hold while Vilya watched, unsympathetically, her eyebrows arched in contemplation of something devious. Finally, she spoke, her words following fluidly with the rushing waves.

"After war, the Count of Tyber make to crush Calanna of her pride. He take her children and chain them here. For long day, they thirst, and Aeluin is at the stomachs of them. But when the sun sit down, Aeluin rise up to mouths and noses and drown them."

"Thanks for the guided history tour. Will you please let me out of these?"

"The light keep life that darkness take. Thus is why Calanna consent to domestication."

"Vil..."

"Are you so full of the pride you cannot say the travel of you? What is secret that shame you?"

"It's a long story."

"Is long time to night."

Mike tried to grab her with his numb arm, but its movement was too clumsy and slow, his grip on the cliff's face failing again. He finally gave in to gravity as the waves pushed his legs into the gray stone.

"Okay. I'll tell you, but not now. Not like this."

"You have choice?"

"I can ask please, can't I?"

She smiled, a mischievous sparkle entering her continence.

"You look so sad... you are ticklish?"

"Vil!"

"Tell all... or suffer fate worse than castration."

The climb back went more quickly than the coming down, and Mike managed his release without getting into the gory details of his travels. In fact, he'd told her fairly little, and yet she seemed already to understand everything, asking only those questions which were necessary. Even his mention of the Imperial police didn't faze her, nor his mention of the Draconian robot brain. She simply listened as though he were going through motions which were without consequence.

When they returned to the cab, the old man asked earnestly whether or not they had seen the light. Vilya's smile seemed to confirm the suspicion, and she generously popped for the fare as they pulled up to her small flat in Xin. The cat was nowhere to be found, but a warm breeze blew through the red twill curtains betraying his escape. Outside, the hot afternoon sun seemed to bleach all color from the sky, mysterious gray clouds mixing with the amber-blond vapors billowing in lumpy puffs from the tall, black smokestacks of the inner-city. Mike half expected her to throw him out as she pulled a small taser from her pocket. Instead, she set it, with the cuffs, in a bedside drawer

before falling roughly on the center of the sheets. Mike wondered if it was an invitation or a dismissal.

"When are you going to work?"

"Tonight. If I wake."

She turned to the alarm counter and set it forward twenty cents.

"I not know that I want to go."

"How long have you had that job?"

"Too long."

Mike sat at the edge of the bed, kicking off his water-logged shoes. He stretched the top sheet over her, and allowed his fingers to brush quietly through the soft ends of her hair.

"You don't like it?"

"I not like being groped by strangers."

"Hmm... wake me up before you leave."

Mike crashed on the couch in front of the three-vee, the muscles in his shoulders loosening as he closed his eyes and tried to feel the onset of sleep. The sweltering heat closed upon him quietly, forming moist patches of perspiration on his chest and forehead and beneath his knees. He threw off his shirt and pants, turning over several times, ignoring the little bits of food particles in the cushions which stuck to his skin. Outside, he could here a wryneck, hissing as it darted from the window.

The cat sneaked inside several minutes later, meticulously licking its fur in front of the couch. Mike listened as it scratched on her door and was promptly allowed entrance. He tried to suppress the slight twinge of envy as the sweat continued to gather, slowly, finally cooling as it evaporated into the thick, clammy air.

In the back of his mind, he could here the clicking of hundreds of keyboards and the cluttered conversations of dozens of gatherers on the *Galactican's* main floor. Linden sat in his huge leather chair in the central office, his entire body tilted backward, reading the obituaries column. He came across a name he recognized, circling it with a lightpen as he hit a cut and paste macro with his left hand. Into his scrapbook it went, along with all the others.

"You know what I like about you kid? Persistence. You keep coming back."

He should have called it luck, a strange kind of luck that forgives all mistakes and then comes slapping you back in the face when you least expect it. His father had called it the luck of the space cadet. The cat continued licking its fur, its yellow eyes searching his, forming accusations as they met somewhere in the space between, animal and human; they were not so different. It curled its head backward to lick a spot on the back of its neck, but the head just kept going around and around as though it didn't matter.

Its feet were coated in a soft, white sand which it spread about the carpet. Outside, the surf swept up toward the windows, rushing through the cracks in the seams as the roof began to leak, water dripping from a thousand tiny holes, all scattered about. He could only watch, immobile, as the water sloshed around him, pressing over his nose and mouth in warm trickles. It tasted vaguely salty, and he battled to spit it away before realizing that he no longer needed air to breathe, and the cat swam freely, its instinctive fear reduced to an occasional "Hissssss..."

He woke, drenched by a slick envelop of oily sweat. The evening was likewise coated in a murky haze, and Vilya was gone, save for a note stuck in the crack of her bedroom door. It said he looked peaceful, too peaceful to waken. Mike clumped the flimsi-leaf into a ball, and tossed in on the kitchen counter. The cupboards were empty save for a moldy loaf of rye and two cans of prickly nopal sauce. The flimsi slowly unfolded of its own volition, the luminescent Calannic flickering across its surface. Mike pressed the corner, releasing the message into electronic oblivion.

"Show contents."

"Done."

Nothing?

"Retrieve all."

"Done."

"Show contents."

"Unnamed1. Done."

"Read Unnamed1."

Vilya's message returned to the leaf, her tall, slanted letters seeming to mock him as he read it again.

"Set date by age reversed."

"Done."

"Show history."

"Manufacture: 01.149.968. Last initialization: 01.149.968. Done."

In the shower Mike wondered what sort of girl would have a flimsi-leaf for over a year and save something to it only once. The cool water flowed smoothly over his body, falling in dirty puddles to the yellow-stained porcelain tiles. The pipes emitted a stern squeak, and Mike imagined the sound rustling through the entire flat. He shuffled into his

smelly pants and shirt and the pair of shoes he was still borrowing, pocketing the flimsy and Bill's body pistol as an afterthought.

The evening had descended into night, and the dark purple sky glittered with spangles of illumination. The streets were fluid with movement, motor cars weaving carelessly around the herds of pedestrians like a pack of hungry wolves as volumes of voids and pleasure junkies sat fidgeting in the gutters, playfully groping the wires which pumped streams of electric illusion into their punctured skulls. The food vendors engaged in fierce shouting matches across the streets, defaming each others culinary creations while exclaiming the virtues of their own.

"Lissi mituvoreva!"

"Git yer stinkin' paws off me, ya weirdo."

"Hey... you wanna echailmet some ywalme?"

"Hirer quaggahaggis!"

"Haggis?"

"Try it. Viuvalye, yes?"

"Two please."

Traffic on the underway was fairly busy going down, and Mike felt lucky to find a seat. He set the two thermoplastic containers between his legs, the thick scent of stewed meat rising to his nostrils as the tram rattled along its narrow course. A bloody-nosed teenager stood in the center of the aisle, his lips puckered as he whistled some ancient melody with meticulous precision. He held his dirty, brown mug with a jittery grip, and drooped over his back, he wore a large, canvas bag. Inside the bag sat, an elderly, legless man, with a black, conductor's baton and a pair of painted-out spectacles. Each instant a note fell from place, the man slapped his stick sharply across the boy's face, angrily cursing the younger's stupidity as he continued to wave the baton around like a deadly saber. Occasionally, the man's face glowed with appreciation when he heard a clink from the mug. Then he mumbled a few kind words in a hoarse voice regarding generosity and alms for the poor, smacking the boy's ear to make him shut-up and then cracking him across the blue welts on the back of his neck to summon forth another round of profitable music.

A wide-screened viewer sat blankly in the corner, its glass window shattered and half its speakers inoperable. Beneath the boy's sporadic whistling, the vague din of casual muttering, and the tram's sharp rattles, a faint, monotonous voice loomed somewhere in the distance, clear and without all the slang structures and difficult intonations so familiar to spoken Calannic.

"...Gardansa had no comment, except to state that his unknown assassins had obviously failed. The site of the wreckage was examined this morning by police investigators, and the remains of at least one body were discovered. Zared Dir, a local fisherman, was driving his motorbike along this cliff when the incident occurred. ...and I see dis great ball of fire on da cliffs, and da noise is someding awful, and den dis aircar droop down to da water and someding fall out, and den da car ekzplode into dousand pieces and..."

Mike hopped on the rollers as the tram drew to a halt, logging the Temple as his destination and allowing the slavebot's traffic computer to choose the most appropriate route. He found himself weaving around the main channel, narrowly avoiding the other rollers before being deposited in front of the Temple's wide, phallic arches, their peculiar decor never failing to entice newcomers. The receptionist was a young man with soft, ill-defined features. He handed wrist locators to a pair of girls who could not have been older than sixteen and then neatly unfolded their wad of drin as they hurried past him, down the staircase and to the lockers below.

"Welcome to the Temple of the Wrything Mermaid. You make visit us before?"

"Yeah... I'm bringing some dinner for a friend who works here."

"Employee?"

"Is that all right?"

"Is the employee name?"

"Vilya."

He shot Mike a strange glance. "I no think such person work here. You certain you have correct..."

"Positive."

He tagged several keys on his computer console, smiling as he discovered the name.

"Ahh... she apparently is new, yes?"

"I don't think so."

He swiveled the console toward Mike. Vilya's picture sat in the upper left hand corner beside various employment statistics.

"She was hired yesterday?"

"No hired, she volunteer. Is custom to get job, you know. There is problem?"

Mike shrugged, uncertain.

"When yesterday?"

"You go, and you ask her... go in. No jump in water."

Mike hesitated, fear wrapping slowly around his mind like some blurry sort of hunch.

"Do you have a service entrance?"

"Yes, but is no need, you see..."

"All I really need to do is drop this off."

"You able to see her from the ledge, right that way."

"Well, it's actually sort of a surprise."

"Surprise?"

"Uhh... yeah, special occasion."

The receptionist's eyes inspected Mike with a stare both deliberate and curious.

"Is against rules."

"Well, if you don't have the authority..."

"No... of course I can, but... have we meet before?"

Mike smiled, "I don't think so..."

"Yes... I see your face on three-vee. You are in entertainment?"

"Well," Mike shrugged, "some folks call it that. I prefer to think of it as organized gossip."

"You are the famous gatherer. Now I remember. Harrison, yes? I must have autograph. My sister reads all the scratch marks of you."

The employees' entrance was around the side of the structure, down a hallway which was itself nestled between a series of old maintenance supply rooms. The receptionist walked with a jaunty air, unlocking the door with a twirl of his wrist as though he were showing off for somebody. Inside, three employees worked the central office controlling water conditions, accounting for nightly revenues, and watching some sort of location monitor on the far wall while taking turns receiving calls and eating from a pile of stale pastries. A young woman in a black one-piece walked purposefully down the corridor carrying a large bottle in her left hand.

"Justin says Mister Antonius is asking for kirsch, and the tap's just about dry."

"Oh... real emergency, eh, Pauli?"

"Get some."

"Where?"

"Anywhere and fast. Also, Corlissa says her receiver's getting kind of funky."

"Pauli... here's another. Say to her someone is lost in gallery again."

"Sure."

"Miles... what are you doing down here?"

"I take breather. This gentleman asks to see new girl... ah... Vilya."

"Right this way."

Mike followed her back along the corridor. She slowed down to look at him again, an air of concern crossing her eyes.

"Have I seen you before?"

"Perhaps... I was here last night."

"Ah, then you must be the gentleman friend who brought Vilya here last night. I must admit, she certainly has a talent for the gravitics."

"Really..."

"I've never seen anyone take as swiftly to zero-gee as she has. And as for finding her way around the caverns... you know she followed some poor fool into the gallery last night. We thought we'd have to talk her out, but she brought him right out without so much as a moment's indecision."

"She's a good learner."

"Where did she meet you? You must be foreign."

Mike paused at a cross-section in the corridor, the right passage lined with machinery rooms and the left descending into a staircase.

"I'm visiting a friend. You sound as though you're from off-planet yourself."

She smiled, "My accent is that bad?"

"No. Not at all."

When it came to Calannic, Mike figured that there were two varieties, that which was theoretical and that which was actual. The same could be said of many other languages, except that with Calannic the discrepancy was particularly pronounced and often varied with respect to region. It was the natural result when a government failed to standardize education.

The corridor ended in two, broad-swinging doors. A cacophony of laughter and music could be heard seeping in from the other side, and Mike paused as the woman swept the doors open, peering from around her shoulder to orient himself with respect to the main entrance. She turned slightly when she realized that he wasn't following.

"You don't want to come in?"

"Bring her to me. It's a surprise."

The doors swept open again, and Mike fixed his eyes toward the main entrance and the wide corridor stretching to the receptionist's desk. A thin mist permeated the space between, diffuse streams of purple and amber bathing the small, round tables squatting between the large hexagonal planters. Dozens of people sat clothed and not-so-clothed in various fashion apparel, sipping their beverages and occasionally diving from the terrace, through a series of gravity nullifiers and into the pool below. Some jumped in teams, crashing into each other on the way down, using the fractures in the null-gravity to practice a little impromptu acrobatics to the delight of the spectators and even the light clutter of guards lining the walls.

Except one. She sat with her back against the wall, her long, white mane drenched within the thick vapor. A scowl crossed her lips as she watched the main entrance, unblinking, and Mike knew he'd seen her before.

The doors slapped shut after a moment's wavering, and Mike backed away toward the cross-section in the corridor. The short, cement staircase dropped to a green door, its paint peeling away in the humidity. A steam drenched window was built into its frame, clear beads of water cutting jagged lines in the fog. Mike stepped cautiously down the staircase and peered within. Long rows of lockers occupied the floor space, as both men and women changed into and out of their clothes. Some distance away, a man sat within eye shot of the room's foyer, one hand casually resting within the baggy pocket of his waterlogged coat.

Mike retreated up the staircase, reaching the cross-section as Vilya emerged between the wide, double doors. For a moment, she stood silent, a strange smile forming on her lips as she saw the takeout containers dangling limp from each of his hands.

"This is great surprise?"

"I'd figured you might be hungry..."

She approached him, still dripping from the pools. Mike let his hand fall to the back of his pants, gulping down a lump of air as the body pistol's fiberglass frame became vaguely tangible beneath the thin fabric of his shirt.

"That's far enough."

Vilya stopped, her smile giving way to a blank expression as she began to open her mouth. Mike drew the gun, cocking the barrel as he centered he aim.

"You scream, and I'll blow you away."

"What is matter?"

"Just tell me who's side you're on, Vil." "What you are talking about?"

"No more bullshit. Don't even move."

Her eyes seemed to glaze over with a moment's uncertainty, and then she smiled, almost comically.

"This is Tizarian joke, yes?"

"No, this is ISIS joke. Now you either tell me what the hell is going on, or I pull this trigger and send your brains flying in ten different directions."

The doors behind her suddenly swung open. It was Pauli, a sedentary expression glazed on her face until she saw the gun.

"Guards!!!"

Chapter Thirteen

"Don't'cha think you're overdoing it?"

She continued dotting her cheeks, ignoring her sister's gleeful convulsions. The luminescent liqui-dots glowed faintly in the locker room's damp air. Underwater, they'd be a beacon for her regulars: gaudy but effective.

"They don't make you look grown-up, if that's what you're thinking."

"How'd you know, shrimp?"

"At least I don't look like a lighthouse."

She shot her sister a mean look, the kind their mother used to use when she pretended to be angry. The dark-coated man was watching again from behind her sister's shoulder. He sat motionless, dripping in the dense humidity. Then turned away, and a thick lump started to build in his throat. He winced and swallowed it down, narrow crevices of concentration forming along his forehead.

"Hey, mister."

A water droplet trickled down his chin.

"Hey, mister. You looking at me?"

"Maybe he's deaf."

"Hey!"

He looked over again, spurring something in Galanglic. She knew a little bit, enough to get by with customers.

"You offworlder?"

He smiled.

"Imperial? You Imperial, mister?"

He nodded, and said something else. A question probably.

"My baby sister think the dots... um... you know... make me less pretty? Do I say right?"

"The dots?"

"You think pretty?"

He shuffled his gaze to the floor, unsure how to answer.

"C'mon... you shy? Looking for a good time?"

He laughed, embarrassment flushing his already steamed cheeks. The practiced lines always did the job.

"Hey, don't be a stranger, okay?"

Someone in the service corridor started screaming for the bouncers. It sounded serious, and the man stood up and began striding toward the double doors. She watched him, annoyed that the interruption had blown her pitch. Now her sister would be able to laugh all the harder at the stupid dots.

Suddenly, the noise of gun spray filled the corridor, sharp bursts clamoring down the staircase, pinning her feet firmly to the cement. The man jumped behind a row of metal lockers, the noise of empty cartridges still hitting the floor as the service doors swung open. A single chiphead slipped awkwardly on the wet cement, his gun leveled at her as he scanned the room. For a moment, she couldn't move, except to look toward the dark-coated man hiding between two rows of lockers. He huddled against the thin metal barriers, shaking with anticipation as he fumbled a pistol from his coat.

The chiphead dashed across the moist cement, placing his shot with the direction of her gaze as he crossed the floor. In an instant, a shower of blood and bits of skull erupted against the rusty, gray wall. She watched it, captivated by the individual particles as they lingered in mid-air, falling leisurely like the jagged splinters of a shattered jar. Her sister lay under the bench. She held a sponge towel over her head as the bouncers warily entered the locker room, their weapons fixed on the dead man near the center.

"Where'd he go?"

She motioned them up the stairs after pausing a moment to consider the question. Droplets of cranial fluid still trickled along the lockers, forming a sickly, sweet scent in the warm, moist air. Peering up from the sponge towel, her sister seemed innocent and bewildered.

"What happened?"

She bent cautiously over the bench, opening her mouth to explain as small fingers clutched numbly onto the slippery, red plastic. No words came out. Only the contents of her stomach, churning sluggishly like the first time her mother had taught her the business, thrust upward with a sour, sticky taste, spilling over her lips in frenzied spurts to a haphazard puddle on the cold, cement floor.

* * *

If there was any city within which a person could just walk around unnoticed, it had to be Xaos. It was like the Silver-Tri Acrology on Tizar, except that instead of playing the towering eyesore, Xaos was built entirely underground in a tremendous man-made chasm reaching to several kilometers in height. In its upper reaches, business and government buildings were supported by narrow, cermelecon spines. At the bottom, a network of pumps tirelessly coaxed the icy Aeluin which seeped between polymer coated patches on the cavern's stone walls. Below even the pumps, however, was a great hub composed of several narrow, concentric bands known as the furrows. These circled the dual fusion reactors set within the city's basement, and here, from at least an engineering standpoint, was the city's heart, the source of its power and the source of much of Xin's and Xekhasmeno's as well.

The furrows were basically suburbs populated mainly by maintenance and transit personnel and, of course, by the diggers. Each possessed its own separate character and norms, however, at the same time they were linked by a common purpose and by a common, underlying commerce that the uninitiated tourist rarely stumbled across by chance. For the native, however, it was well known that in the furrows of Xaos a person of means could purchase anything or anyone.

Mike had visited there once, albeit not by choice. The particular locale to which he had the pleasure of returning, unnoticed, was called Delta-3 by the city planners, also known as Jangletown by its residents. It held mostly a collage of diggers and fix-it jocks hitching rides on the government trams which traveled up and down the coreward expressway. Two years before, they were looking for heavy elements used in the processing of eka-metals. There was part of the reason the Imperial's wanted to stay in Xekhasmeno. It was also the reason they financed much of the region's mining operations.

Despite the rampant inflation, the misery, and the corruption, Calanna was a world fabulously blessed with natural resources. Mike found it difficult to accept that such a world could be so callously mismanaged without some grassroots revolt by its inhabitants, and he often reminded himself that as free-spirited as the Calannans seemed, their's was essentially an obedient society which was mastered by fools. The idea seemed to him somehow unconventional, even exotic, and yet curiously stale, like the seeping walls of Xaos, that peculiar yet obvious result one gets when combining water, stone, and time.

Mike kept his head down, turned away from the view as the seeping walls and cermelecon spider web ascended into the hazy darkness. Two boxes of quaggahaggis still dangled from one hand, his other resting in a baggy pants pocket with Bill's small, fiberglass pistol. The crowd of passengers began to rub shoulders, a woman sneezing somewhere in their midst as the lift's grating fence slid open with a fitful whine. Mike had forgotten about the smell of the air, one of those odd details he had somehow managed to strike from a not very selective memory. This time the stench reminded him of his father's black boots, a nagging, musty, lived-in scent that stuck to the roof of his mouth wafted halfway down his throat. Under different circumstance it would have made him grin.

Jangletown was alive with its usual splendor if one could call it that. The hustlers were so busy turning tricks that customers had to take a number just to get a place in line. Then there were the sensitizer shops, for new and exotic cerebral pleasures, the sort of stuff that could kill you and still leave you smiling. It was chiphead heaven.

Mike wandered the various tunnels, mentally categorizing the few features he still remembered. At one spot was a fire retardant valve he'd once tripped over in a mad rush. Not far away was a small casino known locally as The Pit, named after the twenty foot hole where fights were held for a nightly mob's wagering and entertainment. The new, fiberglass tubes of its neon-caked entrance were another reminder as to why he'd been in such a hurry.

Mike found the comm-shaft without too much difficulty, its access code unchanged since his last visit. Gaudy, green paint still flaked off the metal ladder. As he climbed downward, he had to skip several steps in order to avoid whole bunches of cables which were carelessly draped between the runners. Finally, he reached the access way. Red paint still marked the surface. "Danger. High Voltage." Mike rapped the pistol's handle against the door. The sound reverberated up the shaft. Somewhere in the dim light, he could imagine some hidden lens focusing on his face, his image being digitized and fed through optical fibers into Cecil's brain.

"C'mon...."

He knocked again, but there was no response. Giving up, Mike started to head down further to the Delta-4 sector when the portal suddenly opened. A stranger looked down at him, yellow, crooked teeth grinning an unfettered acknowledgment. The leather jacket the stranger wore seemed to gather about his body like crumpled folds of dead flesh, a grimy brown paste mixing along the front with the moldy smudges of some feverishly enjoyed meal. He snorted beneath it, his breath raspy and wet as oily strands of auburn settled over his slumped shoulders. Mike climbed upward, an uneasy feeling sloshing in his stomach.

"I'm looking for Cecil."

The stranger nodded.

"Is he around?"

"Left shoe."

"What?"

"Give to me left shoe."

Slipping off his left shoe, Mike handing it to the stranger who began to pinch the sole at various points, finally pulling out a pocket knife and jabbing it into the rubbery material. There emerged a tiny metal ingot less than a quarter centimeter in diameter.

"What is it?"

"Locator. No harm. Tunnel shielded. Come in."

Mike inwardly cursed himself as he crossed the portal to the dim chamber beyond. Several candles lit the area, their orange flames glowing dimly in the cold, cramped darkness. A semi-sour fragrance of scented wax hung loosely to the thin air as wisps of fine, white smoke, snaked upward along the cluttered shelves, dancing blindly about various pieces of electronic paraphernalia and scuttling carelessly along the blurry, grey walls. Cecil sat in the center of the rug, a slight smile forming in his lips as the dozen or so cameras situated about the chamber turned to face Mike. The stranger stepped onto the ladder, closing the portal behind him as he left. For the first time since he left Tizar, Mike

felt totally at ease. He picked a place by the wall, settling first to his knees and then letting his legs unfold carelessly beneath his body.

"How were the cellars?"

Cecil grimaced, his nose flattening against his face. Mike tried to stifle a grin.

"That's what I figured. I brought you some food. You like quaggahaggis? It should help you recover."

Cecil accepted one of the containers, first fingering it, testing to see if it would jump out at him, Mike supposed.

"Go ahead. Eat."

Cecil nodded toward Mike's general direction, his expression stony. Mike laughed.

"C'mon Cecil. Don't you trust me?"

Mike opened up his own box, stirring it around with a finger before tilting his head with a wink for the camera. A quarter of the container's warm contents slid down his throat before he came back up for air.

"See? It's some kind of meat pudding. I'm not really sure what it's made of exactly."

"Cecil knows."

"Tell me."

"Liver of quagga."

"Liver's not so bad."

"Heart of quagga."

"Heart too? I'm not surprised."

"Lungs of quagga."

"They sure do use everything, don't they?"

"Fat of quagga's kidneys."

"My dad loved kidneys."

"Boiled in stomach of quagga."

"Cecil, that's enough, okay?"

"With loins of quagga, the meatier the merrier."

"Well... thank you for spoiling my dinner."

Cecil beamed, the crevices in his face crumpling into tight wads of skin. Mike set the container of food gingerly to the floor, watching Cecil's shady outline from the corner of his eye. It seemed to stiffen for a moment, as though immersed in the most serious concentration. Then it became relaxed again. Mike had seen Cecil do it many times before. It was his version of wandering around looking for something he'd lost.

"What is it?"

"Message from Spokes. He wants you to meet him at the Runyaelin after the midnight ceremony."

"You know Spokes?"

Cecil shrugged.

"How did he know I'd be seeing you?"

"Perhaps he supposed that on Tizar one should pay a visit after a most kind and courteous rescue. Actually, he figured you'd be begging for money."

It was Mike's turn to shrug as Cecil nodded toward the money jar.

"Go ahead. It's what you came here for, isn't it?"

"Did he say anything else?"

"Yes," Cecil seemed to chew on the moment. "You seem to owe him something."

Mike smiled, "I hope this isn't going to be an attempt at collecting?"

"Doubtful."

"Why's that?"

"He seems to like you."

Mike dropped the smile, somewhat to Cecil's amusement. The cameras swiveled in circles like dancers on a stage: Cecil's way of telling people he was mildly entertained. Then they stopped. Cecil frowned, uncertainty forming in the wrinkles around his eyes. Mike looked toward the money jar again, then back at Cecil.

"Did he say something else?"

"Getting police reports, Michael. You're popular."

"It's been one of those days."

"Hmm... the Mermaid. Trashy place. Why do you always do this?"

"Does it say anything about casualties?"

"Two fatalities, a male and a female."

Mike felt his heart sink to somewhere in the pit of his stomach, the cameras drooping slightly with Cecil's chin.

"Friends of yours?"

"I'll tell you about it later." Mike stood up, the cameras pivoting with his slight ascension.

His old friend wore a dour expression, as though he'd been the one eating the quaggahaggis and just realized what it was made of. Mike crossed the room, the green jar half-way hiding behind an optical storage device.

"I'm gonna need a loan to get surface-side. You sure you don't mind?"

"One shouldn't have to warn you that going through the Underway at this particular juncture of your career is..." Cecil gulped a lump of air, "hideously stupid."

"It's important, Cecil. I'll be back after I see Spokes."

"Is that a promise you can't keep or a threat you'll never carry out?"

"One or the other. Wish me luck?"

Mike picked a healthy wad from the jar and then crept back into the access shaft, leaving Cecil alone with his dusty cameras and the multitude of unseen, electronic visitors. As he climbed the ladder, he imagined one of Cecil's constructs floating beside him, keeping an eye out for danger. Beneath miles of steel and stone and water, Cecil began to sleep the strange sleep of the void, his dreams curling about the incoming data, isolating, analyzing, distant voices muttering numbly beneath the vague current of electronic wind. "Good luck, my hideously stupid friend. Good luck."

* * *

For some bizarre reason, Mike felt lucky. Perhaps it came from seeing Cecil again. That plus the present surrounding brought more than the usual tide of memories.

They'd first met on Tyber, Mike the aspiring gatherer and Cecil a doctoral candidate in artificial sentience. Only a few years older than Mike, he was a published success, the mousy upstart in a rapidly evolving field. These days he seemed more like a zombie long since fallen from grace, his brilliance and natural sight taken by pitfalls of the electronic ether.

Cecil never expressed remorse about the past except to joke from time to time about how one's eyes were the first thing to rot in the cellars, the mind generally following soon after. He seemed to delight in the wickedness of it, and Mike occasionally wondered if Cecil had ever taken his past achievements seriously or instead treated them merely as passing curiosities, his brush with fame a transient, ephemeral state somewhere between happiness and idiocy. Though strangely enviable, the latter case was rare. More often, when success slowly evaporated like a tide pressing out to sea, its addictive lure would drive those it had intoxicated to actions both hideous and stupid lest they curl and wither like fallen leaves. Mike reconsidered the advice Spokes had given him for all of two seconds. How much of this was he doing for John Doe #17, and how much of it was for himself?

Ascension from the furrows was uneventful, and Mike stepped off the rollers shortly before reaching the Underway. Long ago, he'd figured out a plan for getting topside, if ever there were unfriendlies within the station. At the time it seemed more of a creative exercise to pass the time, something to keep his mind from numbing under the influence of the more noteworthy of the local intoxicants.

Kitara was always the experimenter when it came to that sort of stuff. She'd drag him along just to shove various mixtures down his throat, often at his own expense, and then compare his reaction with her own. Anyone else would have to bully Mike into such an exercise, but she always knew exactly what to say in as few words as possible to coax him into tagging along. He'd told her about his "great idea" on one of those occasions, but she just stared back at him sort of sympathetically and sort of like she wanted to slap him silly. The she said something that stuck. "Coinders make plans when sober." Mike looked the word up later on.

Coinders are those that live longest.

* * *

Sarn leaned back, tired, his brain slipping quietly into neutral. The sugary aroma from a pink box of stale pastries teased about his nostrils as his boots idly clapped the rhythm of some neghrali-noise beside the smooth, grey frame of a black and white surveillance monitor. It was the sort of job he appreciated because it didn't demand a great deal of cognitive activity. The computers did most of the work for him.

Beep

He shifted slightly, subconsciously debating whether or not to ignore it.

Beep

Sarn blinked open his eyelids with some effort, a long yawn escaping as he tapped a key at the station.

"Underway Surveillance #4."

"Anything happening over there?" It was Beth.

"Should there be, Commander?"

"Some orders just came down the chain. It looks like they're after somebody pretty bad. I'm sending image recognition code on the target."

Sarn sat upright, fingering his keyboard and opening a reception channel.

"Hmm... a chiphead. Who is he?"

"Offworlder, apparently. Orders are to search for him at the exclusion of all other targets. DOA."

Sarn blinked, "Sounds like fun. What's the reward?"

"Thirty days off at double pay."

"Ha! They must be desperate."

"Central guesses that he'll try to get surface-side sometime tonight."

"If he comes through my end, he's history."

"I'm told he's slippery, so stay on your toes for once."

"Of course, Commander. Don't I always?"

Static was the only response, and Sarn chuckled as he loaded up the new program. At least she'd had the courtesy to deny him an answer.

* * *

Erestyl awakened to another day of darkness, to a body he couldn't feel, his consciousness drifting within a infinitely vast pool of silent oblivion. He didn't know for certain how long he had been there. It seemed like a long time, though he couldn't actually remember arriving. He thought about it for some time, slipping into and out of sleep so often he occasionally found it difficult to distinguish conscious from its counterpart.

Bizarre images would flash just behind the door to his memory, their details blurry, as if trapped behind a cloud of fog. Then they'd be gone, not just gone for the moment, but gone forever, like a page ripped out of a book, so utterly removed that he was no longer sure whether or not they had ever existed.

"Is this what it is like to be dead?"

The question gnawed on him, something obscene about it burrowing slowly into the inner sanctum of his spirit, and an answer beckoned so tormentingly close. It was just across the periphery of thought like a candle burning in the darkness. All he had to do was reach forth a tentacle of volition to touch it, but to summon forth the memory even for the briefest moment would be to sacrifice it, like all the others.

He could somehow sense that something out there beyond the numbing cloud was waiting for that moment. For an instant he remembered the old battle of two great warriors, patience and time. Time always won, eventually.

* * *

Beep

"Huan here."

"Karl, it's Beth."

"Nothing to report, Commander."

"I need you to circle your people around to the south entrance immediately."

"What happened?"

"Sector 3 just had a steam main burst. Looks like vandalism. All the surveillance cameras are useless, but we have a guard at the gate. If you get your team there to reinforce the perimeter, we'll have our target trapped inside the sector, and we can do a person by person search until we find him."

"If he's there."

"Just do it Lieutenant. I'll worry about the risks."

"Yessir. Huan out. You heard her. Get the others and meet me at the south gate. Mitzo, you stay here."

"Right, okay... I'll just kick back... I don't believe this. I always miss out on the good shit. Mitzo, you stay here. Mitzo, lick my boots. Whoa... raise that hood mister. Oh... sorry ma'am. Go ahead. Damn. They do this to me every time. I'm as good as they are. Hey guys... yeah, you two. Hold up. Where do you think you're taking the carpet?"

"On the train."

"If you want to get that topside you have to send it through cargo."

"Cargo hasn't moved for the last ten cents."

"Don't tell me about it. There's been a little bit of a backlog. That's all."

"Look man, we've been trying to get this roll of carpet topside all night."

"Hey, I sympathize with your plight, but there's nothin' I can do."

"Look, here's a donation to security from our employer. Can we just go through? We're already late, you know?"
"Aww... this is cheesy. Okay look, just go ahead. If anyone asks, we never met."

* * *

The walk to Vilya's was quiet. Most of the food vendors had turned in for the night, and taxi's coasted through the narrow streets carrying people to and from the Underway. Earlier in the evening, they'd have to stop every ten meters due to the congestion, but most of the late night action was below ground in Xkutyr or Xaos depending on which part of the capital you frequented, the old or the new. Xin was more of a suburb, a mostly residential area for people who liked to breathe fresh air at home and recycled air at work. Tonight the air was cold, and Mike considered calling a taxi more than once. He knew he wouldn't, though. Cecil's comment had voided that option. He was getting just a little too famous for public transit of any kind.

The cat sat outside on her steps, licking its black coat and meowing in Mike's general direction as he approached. He leaned over to pet it, but it ran away before he could so much as touch its tail, ducking behind the back tire of a yellow motorbike. Its bright yellow eyes watched him, unblinking.

"I never did get your name, did I."

"Meow."

"Food? Dinner?"

"Meow?"

"C'mon."

The cat followed him cautiously up the steps. Mike paused at the door, unlocking it with a swift twirl of the key. The dead bolt clicked audibly in the darkness.

Inside, everything seemed to be turned upsidedown. All the drawers and cabinets were opened, their meager contents strewn about in haphazardly piles. The bookcase in the living room was turned horizontal, the three-vee having been ripped right off its cable. Mike crept inside, drawing Bill's pistol with his right hand and peeking left. The door to Vilya's bedroom was part way open, a sliver of light shining into the hallway. Mike inched slowly toward her room, finally kicking it open and ducking to the floor. The flapping of red twill curtains was the only movement as the whine of a motorbike rose above the noise of Mike's heart beating.

Mike ran around to the front, but the yellow bike was gone. The dodec was still in the toilet's flushing mechanism where he'd left it. He stuck it into a plastic sack which he tied to his waist belt. The largest of Vilya's jackets was still a bit smaller than he was used to, but he took it anyway, remembering the temperature outdoors. He finally taped the pistol to his stomach, catching the cat into a tight grip before he left.

The ceremony at the Runyaelin was nearly over when Mike arrived. He waited outside, cheers from the crowd still to be heard over the cries of its remaining victims. The temple served a dual purpose; it was institution of both sacrifice and justice. Felons from all over the continent eventually found their way to the Runyaelin if they didn't manage to fetch a decent price at any of the slave exchanges along the way. Their executions would at least contribute something to Calannic society in the way of the mandatory temple donations.

The crowds slowly dispersed after the show. Inside, it was like a sports arena with a large pool as the centerpiece. Two attendants were still hosing off the circlet of stockades surrounding its small, marble island.

Mike sat down at the bottom of the stands and looked out over the dim, crystal pool. Its shallows rippled in the moonlight, and a quiet chill seemed to ascend from the waters. The bottom was coated with a dark gray film, bits of bone and tangles of hair interspersed between the various incinerated remains of the temple's most recent victims.

The cat scratched toward the sky as a black hawk soared somewhere overhead, the dark sky betraying its presence only by the dim light reflected by Baal, Calanna's lesser moon. Mike remembered the moon from orbit, its cavernous and broken texture somehow noble and violet, as the pool itself. He studied its gaze in the water's surface, light reflected twice from two points so distant and different and still so near and so very much alike.

Spokes sat on the pool's narrow ledge, his long, bony legs stretching outward as the thin spikes on his scalp jutted upward, cutting distinct lines against the moon's reflection. He regarded Mike and the cat with a cheerful smirk, like the kid in the Underway, except more malignant.

"You traded one friend for another?"

"The cat was Vilya's."

"Was?"

Mike shuffled his gaze toward the ground. "It needs a place to stay for a little while. Do me a favor?"

"What do I look like, Harrison? An animal shelter?"

Mike shook his head, trying hard to make it look sincere. "You wanted to see me, Spokes. What about?"

"Because I know something you don't."

Mike imagined the size splash Spokes would make were he to be propelled violently backwards into the murky water. The tall, bony one seemed to read his mind, leaning forward with a bit more tension in the veins of his neck.

"You wanna hear it or not, Harrison?"

"Go ahead."

"You remember when I told you to buzz off yesterday?"

Mike tried to conjure a smile, but Spokes continued before he could claim success.

"After that, I decided to do some playing around."

"Good for you."

"I located the comm-address of that restricted line you were using from Gardansa's estate by comparing the amplitude logs on the Doggie-Blitz and some census dialing records on that district."

"Pure research, I take it?"

"The purest. Against my better judgment, I did some listening. Turns out that Gardansa was setting you up."

The hawk drifted downward, closer to the water, finally sweeping to the surface and then darting skyward. A burnt chunk of someone's body dangled from its talons, more of a vulture's victory.

"You aren't surprised?"

Mike shrugged, "A little, I guess. I didn't think he would destroy his own limo."

"The man is obviously a maniac."

"I don't think so. You have to understand Gardansa. He was doing me a favor with Cecil. That sort of entitled him to take something in return."

"Like your life?"

"If he wanted that, he could have had it. You have to know the guy. It's just a big game to him."

"Well maybe you choose the wrong fuckin' friends."

Mike nodded, "That's what he said."

Spokes gathered his lanky mass beneath his feet. Reaching into his pocket, he handed Mike a crumpled flimsi-leaf.

"What's this?"

"The comm-address... just in case you decide to tune in."

He began to walk away, taking long, casual steps, as though he was early for a meeting.

"Spokes."

"Yeah?"

"Why you helpin' me?"

His tall spikes seemed to bounce back and forth as he shrugged and continued walking. The cat leapt from Mike's arms to follow him, stopping Spokes in his tracks. So much for feline loyalty, Mike figured, and added out loud, "Only for a couple days, okay?"

Spokes picked up the cat, seeming to inspect its belly. "Do I have a choice?"

A thin mist coated the narrow streets outside, various lurkers of the night huddling together in the alleyways, some seeking warmth, other seeking the strange companionship formed by similar circumstance. Many crowded around the motorcars as they tried to leave, knocking on windows for handouts. Mike kept his head bowed in the darkness, his new coat's wet collar buttoned taunt around his neck. He stepped over the occasional native as he made his way toward the west side, trying not to think too much as he walked. The prospect of being set up still foamed in his mind along with memories of Vilya, Niki and Bill. He could almost feel the corpses stacking up around him, one by one. It was like multiple slaps in the face, except that he had seen each of them coming in a strange sort of way and refused to duck out of sheer stubbornness. Maybe that was the sort of stupidity Cecil had been talking about.

"Hey, friend. Spare a drin?"

It was a young boy, trembling in the gutter, dirty, wet hair tangled over half his face. He couldn't have been a year past puberty. Just another one of the homeless, Mike could only guess as to what he did to survive.

Mike reached into his pocket, somewhat surprised to hear the jingle of several loose coins. He withdrew two, allowing one to slip between his fingers on the way out. The kid slapped his hand over it before it made a clinking noise on the pavement. Then he looked up again, expectantly. Mike let the other coin twirl on his fingertips and he glanced around and behind.

"What's your name?"

"What it matter?"

"Good point. You willing to work for money?" Mike let the other coin drop.

"What you want me to do?"

"Just attract attention. C'mon... I'll show you."

The walk was a long one, taking them across town and well into the outskirts of the city. They'd passed the

rowens, along the way, and Mike considered cutting through for all of about one second. Then he shoved the idea where it belonged. Walking though it during the day had been risky enough, but during night would be suicide. The kid looked toward the hedges with an ominous glare, then toward Mike as though he knew what the gatherer was contemplating.

Mike shook his head, "Don't worry. I'm not quite as stupid as I look," adding, "at least not at the moment," under his breath.

A light sprinkle began to fall as they reached the west end of downtown, a glossy sheen forming on the vacant, asphalt streets like a coat of wax. Many of the houses were burned out, and glow-in-the-dark graffiti painted a multi-hued display. Most of it was undecipherable for Mike, except for the occasional Calannic or Galanglic name. One wall depicted the Archduke in a particularly unflattering pose. A budding political humorist, Mike figured, wishing he had his camera.

Mike heard the hum of a grav-car come to a halt across the street. He turned around to inspect. It was a slicked down version of the Sebastian-Z48, a real cruise-mobile, except that it had absolutely no altitude control. It would just zoom around at about a half a meter off the terrain: as sporty as you could get and still miss the whole point of having gravitics. Five kids hopped out, one holding a minisaw which he waived around as he started yelling something about chipheads in thick, Calannic slang.

"Just what I need. What's he saying?"

"He say we are trespassing."

"Fine, we were just leaving. Kelelmet."

"No, he say we no can go that way."

"Which way is it okay to go?"

"He say you have to pay for safe passage."

"Look, tell him to just slow down."

Mike considered drawing the gun, but there were five of them and only four bullets to go around. He decided that he hated arithmetic as he dug out his best of his broken Calannic. They already knew he was neghrali and a chiphead so there wasn't much left to conceal anyway.

"How much?"

"Hundred k'drin and we let you walk. Otherwise you sorry you ever come here."

"I'm already sorry."

Mike reached into his pockets and forked over the cash, grateful to Cecil that he had enough. Then he turned around and tried to leave. Two were still blocking his way, one with a shotgun pointed toward the night sky like he wasn't particularly planning on using it.

"What is it now?"

"Hundred only for one person. I see two."

"Look, here's the rest. That's all I got." Mike turned the rest of his pockets inside out.

"What's in there."

Mike opened the small bag hanging from his waist belt and took the dodec out. The kid with the minisaw regarded it with suspicion.

"Give to me."

Mike tossed it to him perhaps a little too high. Yanking the fiberglass out from under his shirt, he deposited a slug between the kid's eyes as the dodec reached the pinnacle of its arc. It came down slowly as the kid clenched forcefully to his minisaw, head snapping backward and back of skull erupting in typical Calannic splendor. Twice in one night, Mike reflected how it was far better to give than to receive.

The next two squeezes took the kid with the shotgun in the arm and shoulder. The shotgun skidded onto the pavement as the kid waffled around on the ground shouting obscenities. Mike guessed that he'd never even gotten the safety unlocked.

The rest of them scrambled madly for the ground-speeder. Mike scooped up the dodec on its first bounce and ran down the street, leaving Cecil's money in a pool of blood. He expected them to give chase, but the only person behind him was the beggar, young legs taking ground against older if more experienced ones.

"Idiot neghrali! How you pay me now?!"

Mike turned down an alley and kept running.

* * *

Red twill flapped freely in the soft breeze as Sule inspected the flat with a mixture of curiosity and contempt. Either the abode had been thoroughly ransacked, or somebody was a pretty slovenly housekeeper. Major Doran was

waiting outside the threshold as instructed. He stayed at attention the entire time, not that his stance had much to do with attentiveness. He wanted to impress her. To do otherwise would jeopardize his career not to mention his longevity.

"Shall I send for the dusters, sir?"

"No," Sule considered the problem. "You will remove yourself and all other unnecessary personal from the premises. Then call in our psyche and inform the locals that their target has escaped the Undercity."

"What about the Director, sir?"

"You are dismissed, Major."

Sule sat down on the steps outside the flat, the dark, cold air quietly enveloping her as wrinkled, grey leaves scuttled along the narrow sidewalk. It somehow reminded her of the vast, black ocean to which she longed to return.

The gatherer would have to be dealt with, of course. He had made a fool of her two times in one night, an interesting if annoying prey. If it meant turning the entire city inside out, she would find him. Dead or alive, Harrison belonged to her.

* * *

Of all the places Mike had ever visited on Calanna, his favorite was probably the Arien Mansion. Surrounded by five machine gun turrets and a moat, the place had an atmosphere that typified the world's turbulent and violent history, but somewhere in that midst, it retained some semblance of tradition and honor that Mike found difficult to pinpoint. The family was notoriously reclusive yet highly networked with the power brokers of Calannan society. They maintained their fortress-like estate on the outskirts of Xin, over a square kilometer of property sealed off from public eyes.

Mike remembered the night with Kitara. They'd invited her to attend out of respect for her family. Somehow he'd weaseled his way into tagging along, or maybe he'd just allowed himself to be dragged inside for the boozing. Sometimes it was difficult to tell which was the actual case. It wasn't until he'd returned to Tizar and immersed himself in her collection of private correspondence that he pieced out exactly why she'd been summoned. The Arien family were sponsors of psionic research and instruction on planet. It was all kept secret, although there had always been rumors floating around. The government turned a blind eye so long as nothing could be proven, but people feared them just the same.

Mike decided they were a strange lot when he saw the worgs. The creatures, four feet tall at the shoulder and perhaps seven to eight feet long, were the genetically engineered descendants of Terran wolves. The family bred and trained them at the estate, doling them out as gifts to local politicians and offworlders alike. Although the worgs seemed relatively intelligent and well behaved, Mike later heard horror stories from the locals about the creatures' supposed pleasure for dismembering trespassers. For some reason, he didn't find the stories so difficult to believe.

The first purple rays of the sunlight began peeking over the eastern horizon as the two reached the tall, cermelecon gates. Barbed wire and motion sensors laced the thin, black rods in generous measure, and Mike figured that if good fences made good neighbors, these people had to be the best neighbors money could buy. The kid studied his expression as if trying to gauge his level of sanity.

"I not go in there. You not can pay me to go in there."

"You're right; I can't."

"Even if you have money, I mean."

Mike squinted beneath a cool resin of perspiration. He saw what he was looking for. A yellow motorbike was parked outside, almost as if somebody had expected him to show up. It would be a heck of a long sprint to the moat, though. The worgs would probably catch him even if they were distracted.

"I'm gonna need a favor from you."

"I not..."

"I know. I need you to make some noise at the other end of the gate to attract the worgs, okay?"

"You crazy. You get ripped into itty-bitty pieces."

Mike nodded, "Maybe, but not if I can make it to the moat."

"You jump in moat? You really crazy!"

"Hey, worgs don't swim."

"What about the moat monster?"

"Oh, give me a break."

"You not believe?"

"No, I not... er, I don't." Mike shook his head to emphasize his conviction. "What kind of moat monster?"

* * *

"Hey chief, look at this."

Tiros glanced toward the gate monitor's station. A chiphead's face stared out from the console, red, flashing symbols overlaying his forehead.

"I'd like to speak to a person, please."

"Image recognition says he's a homicide suspect. Should I call the police?"

"No. Give me voice."

"Is anybody home?"

"What do you want?"

Mike blinked, "I... I need to see the person who owns the yellow motorbike in your parking lot."

"Mute Voice. What's he talking about?"

"Must be about the Draconian."

Tiros nodded, "Put me back on. What's this about Mister... Harrison?"

Mike slumped his shoulders. He knew he should have ran it.

"Look, don't call the police. I've got to see this person right now. It's urgent."

Tiros shrugged, "Hold a moment while I transfer you."

Mike waited as the kid gave him a thumbs-up sign. Then the line crackled with static, and Mike heard the sound of somebody groggily waking. For a split second he found himself wondering if perhaps the yellow bike was just a coincidence. There were probably thousands just like it all over the city.

"A little early, isn't it?" The screen was dead black.

"That depends on how late you stay out following somebody."

"What? Who is this?"

Mike cringed, hoping the line was voice-only in both directions. "Are you still interested in the dodec?"

"The what?"

"The robot brain."

"I... uh... How did you find me?"

Mike breathed a sigh of relief. "Why don't you meet me outside? I think we should talk face-to-face."

"Where are you?"

"At the front gate."

"Well, I can have the guards show you in."

"I don't think so."

"Okay. Just give me a milla to throw something on."

The kid was still grinning as the line went dead. Mike regarded him with all the good humor the situation allowed.

"What are you so happy about?"

"I was right. You were wrong. You owe me big-time now."

"Don't worry. You'll get what's coming to you."

Mike waited several minutes, idly wondering whether or not they had called the police. He knew he was still banking on several unproven assumptions, any one of which could completely ruin his day.

A woman and a man approached the gate, the former allowing the latter to exit. He was probably in his 40's, slightly plump, dirty brown hair and the makings of a beard. She smiled, lifting his hands to both sides.

"I'm unarmed. You want to frisk me or something?"

Mike motioned the kid over.

"I'll frisk him. Hey, he has money."

Mike kept the gun to his side. One shot was all he had, and one was all he'd need.

"I assume you know who I am, Mister..."

"My friends call me Johanes."

"I assume you also know what happened to Vilya."

"I know only that she's dead, Mr. Harrison."

Mike nodded, "I want to know why were you following me and why you tore up Vilya's apartment."

"I can explain everything. Is that the dodec you spoke of?" He pointed toward the bag.

"Yeah."

"May I see it?"

Mike took it from the bag, "Satisfied?"

He seemed to want to hold his breath instead of answer, finally exhaling with an eerie expression.

"We have a great many things to discuss, Mr. Harrison. I know an all-night pub not too far away where we can

talk."

The place they went was quiet, very few of the locals willing to pull an all-nighter just to go boozing. Johanes ordered a pot of *alqua vraso*, a large water fowl common to the planet stewed with vegetables and baby trout. The bartender brought out a complimentary loaf of bread with some olives and cheese. He seemed to recognize Johanes, his manner friendly though not too familiar. Mike kept his hand wrapped around the gun's handle beneath the cover of a pocket as the kid plunged with zeal into the appetizers.

"I take it you no longer feed your research assistants Mr. Harrison?"

Mike opened his mouth to answer and then decided to have an olive instead. Johanes frowned slightly, as though he was still worried about getting shot.

"If you don't mind, I'd like to know what happened to Vilya. The full story."

Mike swallowed hard, "I didn't kill her, if that's what you're thinking. I spotted two ISIS people at the Mermaid. I figured that Vilya might know something about it, so I called her into the staff-only corridor for a little interrogation. We got spotted by one of the employees who called the guards, and the rest is history."

Johanes looked back incredulously, "The guards fired on her?"

"They fired on me. She was in the middle."

"There's more you're not telling me."

Mike focused on a pornographic etching in the table wood. At another time it might have made him smile.

"She made sure that she was in the middle. I don't know why. She just wanted to be there."

Johanes leaned back, "Perhaps I have an answer for you. Vilya was a psychic."

"I think I figured that much out myself."

"We needed her to find you."

"We?"

"My employer."

"The Draconian government?"

Johanes nodded, "Psyches many times seem to have a strange sense as to when their time has come, Mr. Harrison. They have been known to be very accepting about it."

"I know. A friend of mine once told me about it. Look, Johanes. I've answered your question, but you haven't yet answered any of mine."

He frowned again. "I was following you in hope of... thank you..."

The pot of stew came with a number of large mugs. Johanes began by serving the kid. Mike wondered if he was such a gentleman naturally or if it just came with the job.

"...in the hope of securing that very special item which is currently in your possession."

"Why didn't you just take it from Vilya's?"

"She told me that you'd hidden it and that she never saw it except for the first night you were with her."

"You were there, that night?"

"I was at the Mermaid. Vilya was an expert at finding people based on their psychic impressions. She was the best on this entire planet, Mr. Harrison, and she had a memory for detail which bordered on the photographic."

"The perfect spy."

"Precisely."

"Did she speak Galanglic as well?"

"Enough to get along. Oh... you didn't know that, did you?"

Mike winced as Johanes continued.

"She was turned over to my guardianship by the Arien family. You might have even seen her the last time you visited Calanna. I believe you were a guest at one of the Arien's socials?"

"You still haven't told me why you want the dodec."

Johanes paused, searching for a place to begin.

"ISIS is holding captive an man who is very important to the Draconian Realm."

"Erestyl?"

"Yes. I need to find him."

"Same here. How's the dodec supposed to help?"

Johanes shook his head, "It contains a very small inertial detection unit. As you have been carrying it around, it has been mapping out your route in precise detail. According to an army report, the dodec was turned over to an ISIS agent by the name of Sule. It is my guess that Sule took it to her director as a prize but that they decided to examine it away from the ISIS stronghold on-planet for fear of counteractive consequences: things that kill *en masse*, Mr. Harrison. Then it fell into your hands if my understanding is correct."

"Opening a bomb in the Undercity isn't my definition of prudence."

"They were probably more afraid of a biochemical or viral agent. Don't look so surprised, Harrison. There are many way to kill people. Not all of them necessarily involve explosions."

"I'm not surprised. It just hits a little close to home."

"Shattered Eden?"

Mike nodded, "The Imps thrashed that entire world, and the thing that still gets me was how easy it was for them."

"Well, sometimes killing is like that. Easy."

"What's important about Erestyl?"

"Well, it all comes back to that, doesn't it?"

"Both you and the Imps seem to want him pretty bad."

Johanes chewed thoughtfully on a chunk of soggy bread. Mike guessed he was deciding how much to spill out and how much to lie about. The kid seemed to follow along pretty well with what little Galanglic he knew. At least his eyes widened every now and again as he continued to stuff his face. Johanes finally swallowed down the last of his bread, looking up like it was his turn to say something profound.

"I'm not really sure how much I should tell you about Erestyl."

"How about you tell me what you can and then I push you for more?"

Johanes smiled, "We know that he was a Cassiopeiaen scientist, a physical theorist to be more precise. He was working at the Imperial Naval Shipyards at Hermes with a Cass Technics group which was apparently in the process of completing a very important project for the Archduke."

"What sort of project?"

Johanes looked toward the corner of the room, "Does the term 'doomsday' mean anything to you, Mr. Harrison?"

"How 'doomsday' are we talking about?"

"Enough that Erestyl decided to renege on the contract. He did something to the device in question, but he was caught. The navy decided to determine how to correct the damage he'd caused, even if it meant ripping his mind apart to find the information they needed. One of our people got to him, however. He was frozen and shipped to Tizar and would have eventually made it to the Realm."

"What happened?"

"A great deal, apparently. Our agent who was organizing his transportation was captured. Erestyl was lost in the process."

"Lost?"

Johanes grimaced. "There was nobody to pick him up when he arrived at Tizar. The freighter carrying him decided to dump his bones and run rather than face the authorities and explain why they we're carrying in interstellar passenger without the proper passports and whatnot. Then you got into the picture."

"What did I do?"

"You caught the attention of the Imps, Mr. Harrison. They were paying close attention to you. You led them right back to Erestyl."

"Is that why Clay was asking me to retire from fieldwork?"

"I don't know anything about Mr. Clay other than that he screwed up."

Mike popped another olive into his mouth, spitting the stone back into his mug.

"I don't understand why you just didn't take the dodec when you had the chance. It was sitting in a locker at the Mermaid that you could have easily ripped open."

"It doesn't work that way, Mr. Harrison."

"Well why not? You must have whatever access codes you people need to get into her brain."

"True, but I'd have to send her all the way back to Tizar and risk losing her in the process. The Imps have the space lanes between here and your world tied up tighter that you could imagine."

"Why send it back at all?"

"She won't let in somebody she doesn't know, somebody she doesn't already trust. As far as I can tell, Mr. Harrison, you're the only person in this solar system who has a chance of cracking the dodec, and if you want to get off the planet alive, you're going to have to try."

Chapter Fourteen

"Well?"

Vlep crossed the front room again. The flat was still in chaos, furniture and personal belongings scattered

haphazardly, but he was sure it was not because of the quarry. Sule stood in the doorway, sharp eyes transfixed upon her servant as soft, blue rays of pre-dawn light fell silently along her icy, white mane. Vlep ignored her while she stood there contaminating the mental space with frustration.

Frustration, definitely, and yet there was something underneath it.

"Nothing?!"

He shook his head, "It is as I told you before."

"You ran us into a dead end, before."

Vlep turned, cautiously. Her patience was like a strip of rubber ready to snap.

"Is it my fault that your quarry decided to go to the Runyaelin during the ceremony of sacrifice? How am I supposed to trace him from such a place of death?"

"No excuses, psyche. I need information now."

He shrugged. She understood very little about the second sight. Explaining the difficulties would earn few favors. He decided to shovel out the few answers he had rather than bank on her dwindling hope.

"I will be plain Sule. I don't think this mess was caused by the quarry."

"You said Harrison was here."

"He was. I am certain of it. But I don't believe he did this."

"Why didn't you tell me this before."

"I was not sure before," he lied. "Beside, would you have believed me?"

"Come here, Vlep... closer."

She smacked the sheepish grin off his face before he even noticed her hand in motion. By the sting it left, he guessed that there would be blisters.

"When you have permission to think, I'll let you know. Until then you do as you're told. Clear?"

"Ah, very," he replied, surprised that he hadn't seen it coming.

"Who is this person who is with Harrison?"

"I don't know. A man, I think."

"And he didn't follow Harrison to the Runyaelin?"

Vlep shook his head, "I'm not sure. I was keying on Harrison only."

"Get me answers," Sule commanded, stepping back from the doorway.

Vlep rubbed the side of his face, looking again around the flat.

"He was looking for something."

"Obviously. Did he find it?"

Vlep stepped into the hallway, crossing the threshold into the bedroom. The impressions were mixed and strong as before.

"The girl Harrison was with... it is difficult to see past her."

Red twill hung silent in the still morning air. Somewhere up above, a bird was singing.

"Try harder, Vlep."

He put his hand on the window sill. A mixture of anxiety upon anxiety, fresh and unpolluted. Vlep crossed back to the front door, this time almost running.

"What is it?"

Outside, the sidewalk lay empty except for the clutter of dead leaves and the white, government car.

"What is it, Vlep?"

"He sees something, yet it isn't there."

"What does he see?"

He descended the steps, looking at the pavement directly in front of the flat. From the corner of his eye, he could see an alley cat cross the sidewalk and hide underneath the car, its two occupants oblivious to the intrusion, and in the back of his mind he heard the whine of a chemical engine.

"Vlep!"

Vlep felt his arm extending to point down the street, "He was running from something."

"Get in the car. You're going to take us where he went."

"No. I have to be on foot."

"Okay. Come people! Vlep's taking us for a walk."

* * *

Soft voices crossed within the fog like knotted strands of hair, pulling taut and then snapping as they spiraled and blurred beyond recognition. The lumpy terrain seemed familiar, but the wispy, white haze swirled his recollection into

a befuddled mass of disarranged static. Below, a small girl with long, sandy hair and wide, hazel eyes stood screaming, her voice lost within the vacant space between. Then the old city rose cautiously to its feet, a museum of looming statues, gargantuan and hollow, all abandoned except for the rush of tattered echoes, voices of bogeymen, or so he was told.

He'd occasionally see them, their skin drab and mottled. They kept a distance, eyes webbed with curiosity, daring to look but not to touch as he snapped images like a tourist at the zoo. Sometimes he pretended to be some famous archaeologist searching for relics of the past, sneaking home later to bury his trophies before anyone should discovered his absence. The bogey-people didn't seem to mind. They would sometimes even leave him gifts which he would collect with a gravitic net and boil before handling.

They had only become angry once, and then they poured out enough anger to sate the frustration of an entire lifetime. Mobs of them had stormed the Naval Hospital, the one safe place in the old city or barrens as it became known. The underground routes to the suburbs were caved-in, and the overland barriers were laced with mines. After the battle, the hospital stood alone, the buildings around it reduced to rubble by explosive detonations. Hours were counted within by the number of corpses incinerated on the 40th floor. Volunteers, they were called.

"Put on the slickersuit, or you'll be next," his father had warned. Mike spent a week just learning how to secure the plastic helmet. Righty-tighty... clip, tighten, tie... swivel, clip, tighten, tie, check. Or was it tighten, clip? "My son, the space cadet." He accepted his father's recognition with a sense of accomplishment, holding the memory with a youthful pride which bordered on the pompous. A year would pass before he learned that the comment wasn't meant as a compliment.

He cheeks wore a rosy hue that day, somewhat brighter than the burnt brown of the doctor's whose thick, blue veins and patchy tufts of white hair blew back and forth in the ventilating stink. Dirty beads of perspiration glistened on his brows, flowing in trickles from the wrinkles between his eyes, as he stacked small metallic cylinders into the small, silver box.

"Here boy," he offered in a soft but desperate voice. "Take this to your mother. And watch yourself while you're out there. Lei got away; crafty, little runt."

Outside, sunbeams bathed the asphalt in a bellowing heat, and the dust of the dead fell about him like a summer shower, clogging the filter as he unfastened the helmet and gulped for air. The buildings stood about him in various states of disrepair, the tall communications tower rising like a lone palm tree amidst a rocky and deserted beach. Memories of her running along the flat, wet sands sparked to mind. She'd been crying. Her brother destroyed the house she'd built for the small, white, kitten crabs. He couldn't remember why.

Somewhere in the distance he heard her voice, sweat accumulating in his eyebrows as he searched the hillside. She stood near the top beside the old cathedral, its tall, stained glass windows once polished and beautiful before people came and painted graffiti on the saints. Now, instead of reading from scrolls, they played long violins and wore red and black headbands. The big guy in the dome window no longer smiled, and his chalice and loaf were replaced with a straight-backed snake and a bulging phallus.

They'd visited it several times. The few who attended sat in sparse clusters, their moods somber and suspicious. She'd once gone wandering, greeting people as they came in. His father grabbed her by the shoulder and put her over his knee. Later she asked him why, but he wouldn't explain. He just looked up at the dome, muttering something under his breath.

"Does Jesus sing, Daddy?"

"He snaps the sticks, sweetheart. Can you hear him?"

They never went back after that, but his mother told them stories about how people used to pray there, especially after what had happened. He didn't understand what she meant by praying, but it seemed like a serious business. It had something to do with the guys in the windows. She often showed him her favorite.

"Michael!?"

She started running down the hill, her bony legs quaking with each hop until a moist patch suddenly gave way and she blundered into the thickets, her legs falling away from underneath, hurtling her into the dense brush below. He felt a cold lump of cotton form in his throat, stealing his voice. Then she crawled out, tears streaming down her cheeks as patches of blood showed through the knees of her white stockings.

"Mike, don't leave me. I'm afraid."

A shaft of stark red cascaded from the dome, its bright, pulsing heat joining with the perspiration in his brows. Together, they splashed into his eyes, blinding him within in a warm veil of brine. For a moment he was aware only of the sun's broad cymbals clashing on his skull and of his pounding heartbeat and the sprinting sound of his feet touching the ground and leaving again in quick succession.

"Michael!"

The pounding grew louder, like a sledgehammer crushing a block of marble, all the splinters shattering in all

different directions, jumping out at people, bodies imploding in a maelstrom of hydrogen and fire, and then the blurry ground rising as he skidded and slid down the loamy slope, skipping over brambles and thrush as large stones protruded from the path to strike him. A dew-laden carpet of grass and twigs lay before his feet, the small, crooked trees emerging sporadically from the dense brush as birds scattered from their branches, the squashing noise of his sprint splashing dirty water toward either side.

He'd dropped the metal box somewhere far behind and kept running until her wails were only a thin whisper in the distance, the sound reverberating against the walls of his conscience, a texture soft and familiar but which he could never seem to reach.

"Namarie, nilimo, ve firnuvan hior."

And then it faded until it was too quiet to distinguish as more than random noise.

"Mike..."

His whole body tingled, a fluttering sensation as though he were chopped into pieces and frozen. He tried to move his fingers, yet his hands couldn't find them, nor could his arms find his hands, and so forth, all the way to his spirit, unshackled and floating free, ready to draw away with the gentle barrens wind.

"Son of a bitch is giving up... five more cee-cees."

"C'mon Mike, pull out..."

A thin man stood over him, watching Mike as though he were some spectacle at a freak show. Mike imagined the tall spokes jutting from his skull to be the long fronds of a palm, its stalk swaying in the coastal wind. Thin, brown eyebrows danced like frolicking caterpillars, the soft eyes beneath shimmering a placid blue.

"Did you hear me? Five more!"

"Got it..."

With the sudden jolt in pulse-rate, Mike's fingers gripped at the null field for something to squeeze.

"Well... that worked..."

Johanes pulled back the syringe as the convulsions began, a rattling of bones against flesh all suspended in air.

"Is he gonna make it?"

"Of course he will... although..."

"Although?"

"What's left when he gets back..." Spokes shrugged his shoulders apathetically, "Unhook him."

Beneath a canopy of skull, thin fibers pulled taut and disappeared, the throbbing hum echoing into the silence of an invisible rhyme. Johanes quickly cleaned the connections before replacing their caps, and Spokes bent over Mike, checking the pupil reflex with a bright penlight.

"How ya feeling, Harrison?"

Mike felt the grid solidify as he involuntarily rotated toward the cheery voice. His eyes overcompensated for the distance making the figured blur in and out of focus, and he could hear a steady pounding in his head. Spokes slapped him on the cheek and watched as the sensation tingled slowly across the gatherer's face.

"Huh?"

"You need to talk to me, Harrison. How many fingers do I have up?"

"Uh... three."

"Excellent. You don't mind if I check out a few reflexes, do you?" A crisp bolt of electricity arced from somewhere above, its touch like icy fire upon his forehead. Mike winced at the shock.

"Good. Now, try saying something intelligent for us."

Mike paused, finally blurting out the first thing that came to mind: "Where am I?"

Spokes beamed, apparently impressed.

"Tyberian compound. How much do you remember?"

Mike pictured Vilya sitting under the ventilation shaft, her dark hair shuffling gently in the damp current. From the corner of his vision he could barely discern the outline of her shadow amidst the yellow rays of sunshine which scattered evenly through an open doorway and onto the cold cement floor. All the while Spokes kept trying to make conversation, threatening to test a few more reflexes if Mike didn't mumble a response every so often.

"You folding up on me, Harrison?"

Mike yanked his head to the side but the field re-solidified, closing him within a tight bubble of gravitational force. Spokes, looking vaguely apologetic, readjusted the controls as the field gently settled Mike to the floor.

The shadow and a pair of legs crossed the chamber in synchronous step, finally meeting like twin V's at a pair of quagga-hide loafers beside the bio-monitor's tall, metallic frame. Mike watched his own pulse rate in the electronic display for several seconds before he realized that it matched the faint pounding noise in his head. A pair of electronic pinchers still wavered carelessly in the gravitic null. The densest objects were always the last to fall due to over-compensation on the part of the computer. Johanes snatched them on their slow descent as he watched Spokes

unplug the inertial modules. Then he looked toward Mike, his sweaty face the color of a rotten egg.

"Anybody home in there?"

Mike considered the question carefully, but Johanes seemed impatient for a response.

"What's the matter? Can't he understand?"

"Of course he understands; he's just a little whomped."

Spokes finished stowing the equipment and turned around, a white plastic tube in one hand and a pair of silicon adapters in the other. He knelt down beside Mike, cautiously extracting a thread of optifiber from the tube and uncapping two of the jack's on Mike's skull.

"This is going to feel sorta funny, but we figure it's better to zap you while you're still dead to the world."

Spokes worked both ends of the thread into the adapters, finally plugging them into Mike's skull so that the optifiber seemed to emerge at one point and sink back at another. Mike felt a tingling sensation within his joints which spread along his skin as Spokes sat back to admire his handiwork. The tingling slowly grew into a strange, blazing sort of itch, as though hundreds of electrical spiders were crawling within his stomach, head, and limbs. Spokes and Johanes held him down as the floor seemed to wrap itself around his body in a vain attempt to extinguish the fire. Johanes was talking in a worried tone, but Spokes kept shaking his head as if everything was normal.

Mike listened to the sound of the voices, finally accepting the burning sensation which swept back and forth along his spine and through his legs like the icy Aeluin on the gentle, sloping shores beside Erfalas. Then, it slowly began to transform itself into a numbing, almost paralytic massage, the tingling returning, and the entire series of sensations beginning anew and repeating, over and over. After more iterations than he cared to count, Mike noticed that the familiar hands which held him down during the burning periods had mysteriously disappeared. He waited for awhile to see if they would return, finally observing that the yellow rays were also gone, and the room was bathed in dim blue and pink, most of it generated by the bio-monitor's video display and small glowbeads scattered about the walls.

Reaching to his head almost instinctively, he carefully unscrewed the adapters, allowing the sensations to leave him like a decent lover: sweaty, sore and thirsty. A sluice-stick lay conscientiously beside him on the floor, and he chewed it open and sucked out the syrupy contents while righting himself into a sitting position. Something sharp bumped into his head, and he crouched back down, squinting toward the ceiling. A flimsi-leaf seemed to dangle in mid-air, "try me" scrawled across it in dim, glowing pink. Mike tugged it free from two long black cords which hung from one of the many ceiling cables, curling it and himself into a tight ball. The cold cement felt strangely comforting, the wet, sticky sluice still coating his numb lips as he watched the cords swing gently back and forth, beckoning in the dim light.

He reached toward them, propping himself up with one elbow as he tugged himself back into a sitting position. Mike examined them, cautiously, the dim pink light changing in intensity as the flimsi slowly stretched itself out. The cords ended in adapters not unlike those he had recently unscrewed. Shrugging, he screwed the new ones into where they seemed to fit. At first he could just hear voices, but from the shadows around him, ghosts seemed to emerge.

"Well look who's here."

"Hey, Harrison. How ya feeling?"

"Who is he?"

"Must be a novice. He doesn't seem to be very talkative."

Mike felt a sudden jolt of static like an electric slap across his senses.

"Hey, cut it out. He's my guest."

"Sorry."

"Hey Mike. That was pretty quick. You okay?"

"Spokes?" Mike gulped down, blinking his eyes to refocus. It didn't seem to matter whether his eyes were open or closed. They were still there, all the same.

"Yeah, it's me. Cecil's here too."

"Hi there, little one."

Cecil's image seemed to have yellow eyes, shining faintly through an acidic smog like the sun on Tyber. Mike nodded, still contemplating whether or not to tear the twin cords from his skull.

"You seem a little uneasy."

Mike shrugged, "I've having a weird day."

"I zapped him after we installed his output," Spokes explained.

"So soon?!" The yellow eyes flared brightly.

"Easy Cecil. Johanes said they were in a hurry."

The eyes dulled and tilted slightly.

"So how did you like the jitters, Michael?"

Mike frowned, "What's he talking about?"

"Technical stuff. In order to stick in the outputs, we have to go all the way to the amygdala, and that means that we have to get close to the hippocampus."

"The butcher speaks." It was a voice from the crowd.

"Shut-up; I didn't do him," Spokes retaliated.

"I'm lost," Mike confessed.

"Whenever you go that deep, anything can happen. The mind has a tendency to flip-out sometimes. We talked about it before the operation."

"We did?"

"Yeah. You don't remember, but we did. That's another problem with getting too close to the hippocampus. It tends to scramble short-term memory."

"The last thing I can remember it talking to Johanes."

"He brought you in this morning. We took you to the doc."

Yellow eyes seemed to dance in circles.

"The doc?"

"The butcher," Cecil interrupted. "I felt that I still owed you a favor."

"Some favor," Mike mumbled, except that his voice carried across the ether loud and clear, much to the amusement of several electronic loiterers. Even Spokes seemed to get a good snort out of it. Then he turned serious, as though perfectly able to jump from one emotion to the other without crossing the intervening space.

"It was time to join the club, Mike."

"Is that why you're helping me now? Because you wanted a new member for your sick society?"

"No, actually I'm getting paid."

"Johanes?"

"Yep."

"So where's he been while I've been twitching on the floor all day?"

Mike heard a few more snorts, exact replicas of the earlier ones, except this time some vague maniacal laughter seemed to hover in the distance, yellow eyes swirling excitedly.

"You can stop talking with your mouth now, Harrison. Everybody can hear you. Use your head. Just look at me and focus."

"Like this?!"

"Hey..."

"What were you doing to me today, Spokes?!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about the funny feeling you said I'd have. Can you see how much I'm laughing?!"

Mike felt an on-rush of static block the way between them. Cecil stopped laughing and stared intently.

"What are you two fighting about?"

"He's pissed 'cause I zapped him," Spokes confided.

The yellow eyes nodded, knowingly.

"It had to happen eventually, old friend. Spokes let your mind get to know itself. Auto-feedback was all it was. The pathways have to build-up mental calluses, and you have to learn to deal with pain. Spokes here is surprised you came out as quickly as you did. For many people, it takes much longer."

Mike straightened, "I don't understand."

"Johanes wants you to go into the dodec," Spokes interrupted. "If it tries to nail you in any way, the only chance you're going to have is if you have some resistance. You understand?"

"No."

"Well don't worry about it. It was for your own good."

"Where is Johanes, and where is the dodec?"

"He went back to the Arien Mansion. He took the dodec with him, Mike."

"Shit. Where are you?"

"At the Sintrivani."

"You mean you guys got done with me and just left me here to rot?"

Spokes sort of shook his head and nodded at the same time, "Johanes said that ISIS has some psyche bloodhound sniffing your trail but hard. He went for help to smear the scent, but neither of us are yearning to be around you right now. Is that so hard to understand?"

"I've heard enough."

"Johanes said he'd be coming back for you, so don't go any..."

Mike unscrewed the cords from his jacks and watched the electric apparitions evaporate into darkness as graciously as they had appeared. Outside, a chilly breeze flapped across the streets, lifting loose dirt and leaves into the sky and inducing the hairs on his bare chest to prickle and tense in rows. With a fuzzy warm ambiance enshrouding his senses, he ambled along the side of the road, waving down a taxi before the main gates.

"Where to?"

The driver was middle-aged, his sparse, graying hair combed straight back, eyes sunken and tired in the rear-view mirror. Mike dipped his hands into his pockets, the emptiness sparking an image of Cecil's money in a pool of blood. Sighing, he mumbled an apology and shuffled himself out of the car.

"Is okay. Where you want to go?"

"I'm broke."

"Get in."

The driver opened the front door to prove his sincerity, and Mike climbed in, unsure whether to thank him or just do as he was told, and the driver looked sympathetic.

"You know where you're going?"

"Erfalas."

Mike felt his back and shoulders affix themselves to the plastic seat covers, a sticky noise resulting every time the car hit a bump in the road. The driver either didn't notice, didn't mind, or was just being polite.

"So what the name of you?"

"Michael; my friends call me Mike. You?"

"Pateras; my friends call me Pat," he qualified with a smirk.

"Why the charity?"

"You look like you need it. You know the output of you bleeds?"

Mike reached to his skull, withdrawing a smear of pasty orange puss.

"Here, use this."

"A towel?"

"Hitch-hiker must never forget it."

Mike draped it over his head, catching the ullaage as it tried to drip down his neck. The rest began to dry into a sticky crust.

"The daughter of me was a chiphead. She tell me which is input and which is output. That all I know."

"She was a chiphead? What is she now?"

The man half smiled, half winced. He dug out his wallet and extracted the image plate. Mike leafed through those in memory, several of his little girl, first as a baby and finally as a teenager with all the years in between. The last one showed a bald kid in a hospital bed.

"They burn out head of her, you know. She not know which way was up."

Mike handed back the plate.

Erfalas was cold and windy, and the driver offered him the towel.

"What have I need of it? Is blood of you. You clean, yes?"

"Yeah. Thanks for the ride."

He stood, watching, as the tail-lights ebbed into the distance. The beach was soft and sandy, and moonlight sparked along the watery horizon, however, the hooks on the cliffs were no longer to be seen. Only rarely would one emerge from the pounding waves, and then it would sparkle like a diamond across the dim, lavender seaside.

Mike winced as the cold water stung his scalp and the bleeding renewed. Though he couldn't smell any salt, the nerves around the wound told him that some was there. He finally staggered out of the water, throwing the towel around his body as he curled up between two tall rocks. The cold breeze continued to blow airy waves of fine white dust over his still form. Sticking to his skin, the tiny particles bonded together in the darkness and slowly dried until he found himself wearing clothing made of sand that cracked and flaked away when he shifted in half-slumber.

Faint violet rays warily peeked over the eastern horizon, glinting across the smooth, narrow stretch of sand which teased the incoming waves. Beneath the noise of water grasping toward shore, Mike heard the distant gurgle of a chemical engine. At first, he thought it was the final illusory fragment of a dream, but the sound grew steadily, until it resided at the top of the cliff where Vilya had shown him the eyehooks and so splendidly demonstrated their use. Several people were climbing out of a white, government car, each peering toward the dim violet horizon. Half-buried by the sand, Mike watched them from his shadowy lair between the two tall rocks. He tried to make out their features in the faint, shifting light, but it was difficult even to count them. Then he glimpsed the white mane, its owner allowing the breeze's gentle tendrils to reshuffle her hair to its own liking, and for a silent moment his eyes widened with fear.

Chapter Fifteen

She surveyed the arcing waters with a stubborn glare. Beneath the cliff's gray face, an undulating seascape swayed tauntingly, the roar of pounding waves echoing between the sharp protruding rocks along the dim, purple coastline. It was like Harrison to come to such a place, she thought. It would be even more like him to stay. She motioned Jun and Clark down the rocky slope along either side of the ridge as Vlep massaged the rocks at the head of the cliff, laying on one side as he reached downward along its face.

"What is it, Vlep?"

"Fear."

"Harrison's?"

"Either his or that of children who were sacrificed so long ago. Who can tell?"

"You'd better."

Vlep looked up, a light drizzle beginning to fall from the clouds above.

"The quarry was definitely here, Sule. I can feel his presence and that of his psyche all over these rocks."

"Go down."

Vlep slumped his shoulders, wishing he hadn't revealed so much. Carefully stepping along the damp, slippery face of the cliff, he crept down part way and then looked back up, half expecting mercy.

"It is not very safe, Sule."

"Be careful."

Vlep sighed, certain that she would be the death of him yet. Continuing to the eyehooks, he could sense fear all the stronger, most of it his own. And yet there was more, like the gleam of a diamond in the middle of a dim, crimson pool, water splashing all around yet never washing away the stain. The roar of the waves seemed to lose rhythm, and then the screech of brakes imparted a small cloud of falling dust, bits of sand sprinkling upon him along with the soft morning shower.

Vlep climbed back up. It was the guard Sule had posted at the Tyberian Compound. He was holding a small, black object before Sule, his eyes gleaming in the dim predawn light.

"Look Sule. The android brain."

"Very good, Mito. Did the gatherer come back?"

"No, a boy. It was dark, and I made a mess of him. I'm sorry, Sule."

She bit her lip.

"Forget it. We have what we're looking for."

"What about the quarry?"

"This dodec is the real quarry, Mito. Now go collect the others, and call in the hydrofoil. I have a delivery to make."

Vlep dusted himself off, thankful for the reprieve.

"Does that hunk of cermic mean that I don't have to go swimming?"

"What did you find out?"

"Is very hard to say. Harrison's impressions are probably more than fifty cents old, possibly as much as a full day, but the fear is very intense."

"Strange."

"I know what you are thinking, Sule. If he wanted to take a boat, this cliff is not the best point of access."

"He didn't dive off?"

"He climbed down and then back up. I'm certain."

"One immediately following the other?"

Vlep shook his head, "That is hard to tell. The impressions go right into the water."

"If he knows about headquarters..."

"How could he?"

"I want you to continue to track him wherever the trail leads from here. Take the others in the jeep and leave me with the government car. We'll meet back at the Arien Mansion for Erestyl's appointment. Understood?"

* * *

Clark carefully descended the steep hillside, a flashlight in one hand and an automatic pistol in the other. Purple hued sands shifted in the crisp sea breeze, droplets from above snaking through the turbulent air as two pointy rocks jutted up from the beach, their shiny grey surfaces glinting ominously in the faint predawn light. He crept toward

them, shining his flashlight into the narrow crack between.

"Clark!"

He turned, unsteady, as the wind tossed a shower of soft sand into his eyes.

"Damn. Mito?"

"It's just me, Clark."

Clark lowered the pistol, shaking the dirt from his eyes.

"I heard you pull up. You bring the IR goggles?"

"Yeah, they're in the jeep. They came in real handy."

"What are you talking about?"

"That android brain. It showed up at the Tyberian Compound. Lucky me."

"Harrison went back?"

Mito shook his head, "A kid. I was so raw I just blew him away without thinking. I feel like crap."

"No shit."

"C'mon, Sule wants us."

Mike stayed between the rocks until the wind stole their voices. One glance in infrared and he knew he'd be finished.

* * *

"What I still don't understand is how you got him to agree. The Arien's couldn't be too thrilled about working for ISIS."

Sule smiled, "Everyone has a price, Vlep; albeit, not everyone yearns for the same commodity."

"You speak in riddles, traveler."

"Is that what you dirtsideers call neghrali who have power over you?"

The others arrived, each one posing in the typical "recruit's stance", trying not to stand out from one another for fear of being ordered to do something either dangerous or repugnant. Finally, Clark stepped toward the jeep, pulling a pair of infrared goggles from the back seat. He turned back, examining the landscape on both sides of the cliff as the gentle rain continued to fall.

"Nothing."

Mike surfaced from the frigid waters as the jeep began pulling away. The woman sat leaning against the hood of the government car, her wet, stringy hair blending against the white paint. Ducking back beneath the waves, he swam to the foot of the cliffs, wading into shore beneath the steep hillside. He dropped to the ground when the faint hum of a hydrofoil played across the windswept waves. Slowing and settling amid the choppy crests, the craft's two gravitic modules kept its thick, silver frame from sinking entirely.

He recognized it as the Tizarian Skipstone-Cruiser, one of the few fast and submersible, four-seater hydrofoils on the market. The more popular Skipstone-Safari model discarded two seats in favor of an autocannon and munitions magazine. Mike remembered reading about how vacationers preferred to shoot the local critters rather than take their friends along to snap images.

Mike ducked back down when he heard the splash, and by the time he mustered the courage to peek over the rocks, the blonde woman was already aboard, her white mane dripping in the tender morning drizzle. She carried the dodec, and Mike gritted his teeth in disappointment as the vehicle turned sharply about and sped into the distant horizon.

The government car's fiberglass window put up a valiant resistance, but Mike eventually forced his way inside. Reaching under the dash, he yanked loose two wires and crossed one over the other. The engine coughed and turned over, finally starting with a belated roar, and Mike found an automatic pistol and three clips of ammunition resting inside the glove compartment along with a pair of handcuffs and a pack of breath mints. He smiled, shifting the stick into reverse and letting up on the clutch. With only a mild groan, the car lurched backward down the back of the hillside. He wheeled the car around and stepped on the gas, memories of the chase on Telmar flooding into his mind. Mike had been driving while Davin and Bill were at the back window, unloading everything they had into their pursuers. If they'd only pulled over and ditched the car, he figured maybe Davin would have survived.

Then he noticed his mistake.

* * *

"Hey... look at that."

Clark peeked over Jun's shoulder. The blue monitor showed a pixel of light trudging upward from bottom toward

center.

"Sule?"

"Bet you a month's wages it's Harrison."

Clark's eyes widened, threatening to jump out from their sockets. Then the pixel disappeared.

"Yep. It's him."

"Turn around and floor it!"

The jeep ground to a near stop before swinging around and speeding back toward the coast.

"Why weren't you able to find him, Vlep?!"

"I... I've got a real bad feeling about this."

Mito groaned, "Look, just everyone shut-up. If he gets away, we're all dead. You understand?!"

Clark clicked off his pistol's safety switch and stood up in the seat, firing several rounds into the tall brush.

"Over there! He's off the..."

The jolt in his chest sent Clark sprawling backward off the vehicle. A few moments later, several rounds had shattered the windshield. The jeep skidded to a halt, and two figures darted into the brush as Mito fired on the government car from behind his driver's door. The left side of his neck suddenly splattered open, hurtling him into the door.

"Shit, he's behind us."

Vlep kept his nose to the ground as Jun fired numerous rounds into the bushes, finally dropping down to reload. With his head pounding, he tried to pull himself to his feet and assume a covering position, but something in his brain told him to stay down, freezing his legs into place. Meanwhile, Jun fumbled a clip of ammunition into the handle of his automatic.

"What are you doing just laying down?!"

Vlep opened his mouth to respond, but there was no need. Jun's head had already swiveled forcibly, a bullet's impact ripping the nose clean from his face. Jun tried to turn back around, raising his firearm toward the bushes and squeezing the trigger, but his skull popped sideways, a red cascade with bits of bone erupting from his ear and flailing into the cold rain. Vlep wanted to raise his weapon also, but his hand remained frozen, his entire body quaking with indecision as he felt the quarry's presence sweep over him. He waited several moments for the recognition of death that his elders had taught him to respect, but instead, he saw only Harrison, panting in the windy precipitation, clutching a firearm which was aimed steadily in his direction. There was no vision, no angels to lift his spirit, but only the thunderous pounding of an icy, blue curtain into a wall of grey hillside. So they waited together, each to his own thoughts, as Harrison bent over slightly to catch his breath, and together they listened to the crashing waves and the angry chirping of white-feathered gulls that rose haltingly like the voices of crying children caught somewhere in that vertical plane between the clash of two mighty and unrelenting elements.

* * *

Crystal blue eyes surveyed the horizon, daring a blink only as the hydrofoil came into view.

"You look thirsty, Mr. Clay."

The Director offered him a purple-violet concoction, Draconian dweomerwyne if memory served.

"It's been a while since I've seen her."

"It."

Clay smiled as he accepted the highbowl. It bobbed slightly in total ignorance of the waves. Steadying it with two fingers, he allowed a portion of the crisp, sweet liquid to drain down his throat.

"Robin is more than an it, Director, even if we must be enemies now."

The Director nodded. She seemed more bemused than interested. Clay sighed and turned back toward the railing as the hydrofoil slowly turned and circled. It kicked up water, splashing it away from the houseboat as it slowed to a full stop. Tossing it a line, the deck hand slowly reeled it in and lowered a stiff rope ladder. Sule hopped on board and showed her prize to the director, but Clay ignored them both, at once revolted and yet strangely entranced by what his psuedo-niece had become.

"What's the matter, Mr. Clay?"

"It's just strange to see Robin like this." He accepted the dodec from Sule, adding, "I suppose it's all she ever was."

"Let us hope so. What of the gatherer, Sule?"

"He still eludes us. I left Mito in charge of the pursuit team, and they are continuing the search as we speak."

"I still want him."

"Director, I am working with untrained, unskilled, untalented..."

"I am aware of your excuses, Sule. Find him. And while you are at it, you might as well take Ambassador Kato

and Erestyl with you. We don't want them to be late for Mr. Arien. Meanwhile, we'll let Mr. Clay crack the dodec for us. I trust that Robin knows you, John?"

Clay grimaced, "It does."

He stepped below deck as Major Doran emerged with the Draconian Ambassador. Cuffed and half-conscious, she looked more like the door prize at a Calannic orgy than a high ranking diplomat. Sule regarded the Draconian with a contemptuous scowl.

"I take it she has not been completely cooperative."

"She made her decision, Sule. It is unfortunate that we could not use her."

"She could be valuable, Director."

"I doubt it."

"With her knowledge of the DSS..."

"What knowledge?"

Sule caught the Ambassador as she slumped forward into her arms. Doran smiled and returned below deck.

"But when the drugs wear off."

"What drugs?"

Sule nodded, finally understanding.

"Mr. Arien may not accept her in this condition."

"You will make certain that he does not know until it is too late."

The deck hand carried Ambassador Kato to the hydrofoil as Doran emerged with Erestyl. The Cassiopeiaen physicist looked emaciated and worn, his small body no more than a slender bag of bones. The scanner operator accompanied them, a sheepish look of uselessness about him as he ran his fingers through a patch of curly, red hair. Sule motioned Doran toward the hydrofoil and then turned back to the operator.

"No luck?"

He shrugged, "Erestyl put up a determined fight. I think we can crack him with enough time, but there's a risk that we may wipe the information we're looking for. What we really need is a telepath."

"What about the ambassador?"

"We didn't really have a chance. It was obvious from the onset that she was well trained in resisting the scanner. That, plus her psychic talents... we just decided to go in and make her useless to the Draconians. She'll have the drugged look for the rest of her life. With therapy, maybe she could learn to talk again, if she's lucky."

Sule nodded, turning back toward the director.

"I'll be back with Erestyl tomorrow morning."

"Terminate him after you receive the necessary information from Mr. Arien. We can't chance him falling back into Draconian hands."

"And what of Mr. Arien?"

"He'll be taken care of once we are all offworld. We have already reserved rooms aboard the *Crimson Queen*. Before another day begins, we will be aboard her, traveling back to Ares in the very lap of luxury."

Sule smiled, "Assuming all goes well. You know I can't guarantee Harrison. But when we're done with Erestyl, I'll radio you."

"Forget about Harrison. We can dispatch a unit to Tizar to deal with him when he returns."

"Okay."

Major Doran sat at the pilot's seat as Sule entered the hydrofoil's fuselage.

"Where's the pilot?"

"You're looking at him."

Sule nodded, "Well, what are we waiting for?"

The hydrofoil sped away, skipping along the waves as it reached 150 kilometers per hour. Back aboard the houseboat, Clay was supervising the techies.

"Turn the camera on me. I want to be the first thing she sees. You're ready with the access code?"

"Check."

"Okay, make the connection."

The deafening noise sped across the waves, and for a bare instant, Sule thought that god had dropped a piece of the sun on the ocean just to watch the steam it would make. In back of them, the fireball increased in size until she could feel the heat blistering her face through the windshield. She hit the stick, but power control was already gone. The blast shock sent them tumbling end over end, finally drilling them into the water as a huge tidal crest swept overhead. Cold water jetted into the cabin as the superstructure creaked and whined, threatening to implode with each passing moment.

"Doran!"

He was knocked out cold.

"Damn it, Doran!"

She scrambled out of her seat and unfastened his belt, throwing him into the back as she tangled with the controls.

"How do I stabilize? Doran, wake up!"

"Wha...?"

"How do I re-start this thing?!"

"Lower left... pull it."

The craft's engines refused to acknowledge her efforts. Even the ultra-reliable gravitic units balked at their call to duty.

"The electronics must be fried."

"Floatation..."

"What?!"

The major pointed toward a red lever on the corner of the floor. She unhitched its safety and gave it a stern yank. A moment later, she heard a gas release. Two yellow bags appeared from the bow, slowly raising the craft toward the surface as Doran tried to find his way to the front passenger seat.

"What happened?"

"We got nuked, Major."

* * *

The noise of the blast could be heard up and down the coast for more than twenty kilometers. Mike looked skyward, expecting to see a wasp fighter just crossing the sound barrier. The morning clouds were burning off fairly quickly, and a majestic rainbow cut between bands of blue, white, and grey clear from one horizon to the other. He squinted at the continual on-rush of air, quietly cursing himself for shattering the jeep's front window. If he'd only remembered to shut off the tracer on the government car, he could have avoided the entire situation.

It was noon before Mike reached the geyser or Sintrivani as it was known locally. He parked along the ridge facing the coast beneath a tall hotel and condominium complex. Below the ridge, the hot waters of the Sintrivani shot from a man-made spring, reaching well over half a kilometer in altitude before they came tumbling back to earth in the form of a warm, misty veil. A crowd composed mainly of children flew about in saucer-shells, small makeshift floaters shaped as flattened spheres. They soared with gleeful zeal to the top of the geyser while dodging and just as often crashing into loose globules of water held together by faint gee-points in the giant low-gravity field. Those without the shells contented themselves with jumping upwards, a hundred meters or more, and then coasting back to the surface, splashing water pockets on friends and strangers. Naked above the waist and barefoot, Mike figured he didn't look very much out of place.

He found Cecil and Spokes camping out on the circular cement amidst about a hundred other people, mostly parents. If it wasn't for their gleaming head-jacks and Cecil's three cameras connected to his skull via invisible radio beams, they would have looked like the stars of some Tizarian vacation commercial, laying back in lounge chairs eating pocket-bread meat pies and sipping iced guava juice beneath tall, shady umbrellas. Vilya's cat wandered nearby, coaxing food from children and parents alike. Mike approached, carefully side-stepping its stage ego, as the two chiphead nodded their acknowledgments.

"Greetings, gatherer."

"Well if it isn't Mr. Lucky."

Mike sat down on the green, ice chest between them, picking out a bottle of guava and uncapping it with his teeth. Spokes regarded him with a mysterious mixture of fascination and regrets.

"Where did you go last night?"

"The beach."

"Johanes told us that the Imps came looking for you at the Tyberian Compound. Said he almost got nailed coming back for you. A mutual acquaintance of yours bit it in there."

Mike gulped down the juice. It was bitter and tangy, the sort of stuff best sipped during idle hours under the sun rather than taken in mouthfuls.

"Good time for you to take a vacation, Spokes?"

"I'm just a part-timer. I'm not going back until Johanes tells me this thing is over."

"Where is he, by the way?"

"In the condo. He's watching the news. Something big must have happened, I guess."

Mike nodded, "Then that's where I'm going."

The main lobby was about as clean as Mike remembered it, sand scattered about on turquoise tiles, white walls smudged with the occasional dirty hand print, and children running about everywhere. Mike strolled through cautiously, slowly scanning the faces as a hazel-eyed girl ran by. Upstairs, the floors were cleaner, the noise level much quieter. Cecil once said that he liked the quiet as much as the noise and that he would refuse to buy into a place without a balance of the two. Mike tested the door and then knocked when he found it locked, pressing his palm against the peeper. A long moment passed, and then the door swung outward, almost knocking Mike on his rear. Johanes hunched down on the floor, reaching up with a pistol.

"Michael."

Mike put his hands up, waving them like a politician seeking office.

"Hey, take it easy. I just wanted to surprise you."

"A guy can get dead that way."

"Like the kid?"

Johanes dropped the pistol on a counter top, hesitating ever so slightly as Mike laid out the question. A flicker of resentment invaded his eyes even as he shook it off, crossing the room to turn up the volume on the three-vee.

"His name was Nicholas."

They sat on the floor in front of the depth box as three-dimensional images of gravcars and choppers circled over an empty expanse of sea. In the background, a reporter was chattering about devastation to the oceanic wildlife. The scene cut to the cliffs of Erfalas. Mike's eyes widened as mention of a nuclear detonation reached his ears.

"I heard it."

"Was it loud?"

"Sort of."

"They say it was small. Under a hectoton. Good thing the magnetic pulse didn't reach this far."

Outside the window Mike could see dozens of children circling the giant, watery plume. He imagined the gravity inhibitors failing as tiny bags of blood and bone would spatter on the wet cement.

"Quite a image for your *Galactican*. Eh, Michael? Front page material?"

Mike gulped down a hunk of air, belching it back out with as much force as he could muster. Johanes grinned wearily as Mike studied his reflection on the glass.

"You thought that was funny?"

Johanes nodded, "Proof that we're real men. We've got guns, and we can make disgusting noises."

"There's more where that one came from."

"Spare me."

"On one condition... you tell me why it happened."

Johanes dropped his grin, "They're still trying to figure that part out."

"About Nicholas."

He shifted, then shrugged, "What's to say? We were coming back to pick you up. He ran inside before me, and then I heard gun spray. You want me to say it straight out? I got scared and ran away."

"Why did the kid have..."

A knock at the door cut him off. It was Cecil, bitching about how he was being locked out of his own place. Johanes looked toward the door sluggishly and then turned back toward the three-vee.

"You get it."

Cecil looked somewhat disgruntled as Mike opened the door, as though the sancity of his domestic life were somehow threatened by his old friend's presence. He seemed to cheer up when he saw Johanes, however. Even the kitty seemed entranced by the Draconian as it half-jumped, half-fell from Cecil's arms to greet him.

"Down you go, Pooper-dumper."

Mike winced, "Pooper-dumper?"

"Cat had to have a name. How do, Johanes? Much good on the boob-box?"

Mike scratched his head and tried to look offended.

"You're happy to see him but not me?"

"We figured that if he was still here, it's probably safe to be around you."

"Hey Harrison," Spokes came in lugging two of Cecil's cameras. "Gimmie a hand with the ice chest, will ya?"

"Where's his other cam?"

"Look out the window."

Mike grabbed one end of the chest and dragged it inside, looking outside the window into the silvery mist of the geyser as he reached the center of the room. A girl was gliding Cecil's camera upward in her saucer-shell, steering it toward the apartment complex while warm blankets of mist fell over her, making her appear half-solid, half-ethereal. Cecil was already on the balcony waving for the others to follow. Only Johanes refused, and Mike couldn't resist

making rabbit-eared fingers over his old friend's head. Cecil noticed it right away, of course, but he snapped the image anyway. When they came back inside, it danced about on the three-vee, changing hue and shade with each new iteration.

"Will send a copy to Tizar. You can consider it our team photo."

Spokes winced, "Do me a favor and don't let it get out. I don't want to be more connected to this gatherer than I already am."

Mike grinned, "Can I quote you?"

"I'm serious, Harrison. I could already lose my job."

Cecil snorted, trying to cover up his reaction as Spokes looked him over.

"You got a problem with my job now?"

"Other than that it stinks, none whatsoever."

"Yeah, well it's safe. I like safe. I don't have any psychotic urges like other certain people to be a big hero. I don't need medals and trophies. Money will do just fine, thank you."

"Speaking of trophies," Johanes dug something out the bottom of the trash container, "Catch, Michael. We were saving her for you."

Mike watched it tumble in mid-air, the etching of a song bird on jet black. With a fluster of clashing perceptions, he fumbled the dodec to the floor, still scarcely believing his own eyes.

"Well, either you're a lousy catch..." Johanes looked out the window, watching the tiny blue waves sway along the horizon. He decided to snatch his pistol off the counter top, slipping its nose down the crack between his butt cheeks as he turned back toward Mike.

"Tell me you're just a lousy catch."

Mike shook his head, turning toward the three-vee and then back again. It all started to make sense.

"Your doing?"

"I'll explain later."

Spokes looked worried and confused, stepping out of his way as Johanes headed for the door.

"Hey, where're you going?"

"Out for a walk."

Johanes headed down the hall toward the elevator as Spokes watched after him in the doorway, ducking down so his tall jacks wouldn't scrape against the frame.

"Well at least tell me if it's still safe to be here!"

* * *

She found the white government car resting slightly off the road, all four of its tires punctured with bullet holes. Three corpses were propped over it, and rigor mortis had already set in. Not being in the mood for a burial, she would allow them to rot in the white, hot sun. Vlep was asleep at the steering wheel. That he had been hand-cuffed to it without sustaining so much as a bruise angered her even more. It meant he gave in without a fight. She expected as much from a psyche. Leaning close to his ear, she allowed her breath to brush the soft wax within.

"Vlep!!!"

He hit his head on the roof, nearly tugging his wrist out of joint in the process.

"Sule?"

"Who did you think it was? Your fairy godmother?!"

"Sule... Harrison was here."

"Really?!?"

She grabbed the steering wheel, yanking it clear of its housing. Vlep tumbled out of the car, dropping to the ground at her feet. He knew she was strong. Bio-synthetics often had that tendency. But he had no idea she was that strong. He picked himself and the steering wheel up from the dirt, dusting himself off with his one free hand.

"I... I can follow him, Sule. I can find him."

She watched him with a mixture of sympathy and scorn.

"I don't care about Harrison, you idiot. I don't give a damn about the robot brain. This futile chase has cost us everything."

"But..."

"Everything, Vlep! HQ is gone!"

"How?"

"Look at my sunburn and take a wild guess!"

Vlep pondered the problem, his mind refusing to so much as acknowledge the possibility of a nuclear detonation.

Sule watched the skepticism fade from his eyes, finally kicking a dent into the car door to vent her anger.

"I've got the major and two prisoners in the hydrofoil. They're probably going to be sick, and we've got no transportation."

"The hydro..."

"The magnetic pulse fried the electronics. I managed to get one of the engines working manually, but it's not going to get us anywhere I want to go. I was hoping, almost praying that you guys would be able to take care of yourselves without me. There were four of you! Did Harrison have a fucking army?!"

Vlep shook his head, "I don't... no he was alone."

"Then why'd he let you live?"

"I don't know."

"You didn't fight!"

"I've never fired a gun in my..."

She belted him across the face with the back of her hand, sending him sputtering to the ground as he held his face. He tried to take solace in the fact that at least now his cheeks would match.

"You're going to learn, Vlep. I'm going back to the hydrofoil to get the major. With luck, we should be able to drag Erestyl and Ambassador Kato to the intersection of the main highway. By the time we get there, I want a vehicle. I want it badly, and I don't care how get it. Understood?"

Vlep nodded as she shoved a pistol, probably the major's, into his one free hand.

"Remember, I can kill you at any moment I choose. So a word of advice, Vlep. Don't think. Just do it."

* * *

Tangerine rays seeped quietly through the sliding, balcony window, its glassy surface coated with a thin, warm mist. Outside, the hot sun bathed the Sintrivani in a saffron orange glow as the afternoon slipped carelessly away like the shadows of children beneath a warm, golden fog.

Spokes was baking peach and cranberry muffins, playing the spunky apprentice to Cecil's wizened if absent-minded mentor. Mike didn't much care about the respective roles or the protocols associated with each. All he knew was that he was about to be fed, and his stomach grumbled in anticipation.

Cecil seemed more interested in the dodec than the food, however. He kept turning it end over end, feeling its edges and especially the subtle crevices of its etching. It was in the shape of a songbird, a robin to be more precise, and in place of an eye and tip of a beak, there were two tiny ports of access. Spokes looked over occasionally, watching the blind man at work.

"You making progress?"

"Found an inny and an outty."

Spokes nodded, checking the muffins' state of readiness.

"Done."

He took them out, leaving them on the counter-top to cool while Mike watched the three-vee, its volume turned so low that it was barely audible. The Calannans had pin-pointed the source of the detonation to an Imperial owned sea vessel. Shortly after the initial announcement, there had been rioting in Xin, most of it aimed at neghrali-owned businesses, and the Imperial marine commander had declared Xekhasmeno a red zone, temporarily closing it off to air and ground traffic alike. Meanwhile, public officials alternately pleaded for calm or more often demanded explanations from the Imperial embassy. None were forthcoming, and even the *Crimson Queen's* orbiting convoy initiated alert status, temporarily refusing boarding to all but preferred passengers.

Mike switched the box off and rose to take a peek at the muffins. Spokes, ever protective of his alchemy, watched Mike with a suspicious smile.

"Just another cent, Harrison."

Mike reached into the cooler and had another gulp of guava. He sat back down beside Cecil. His old friend swiveled the cameras back and forth from dodec to gatherer.

"Dumb."

"What?"

"We forgot to give our friend current inhibitors."

"They're not coming out of my salary," Spokes injected. The cameras turned toward him, zooms activating with an audible hum. Cecil smiled when he found what he was looking for.

"Good idea."

"No, Cecil. I just bought these."

"Lend to the gatherer. He needs them more than you."

"And what if he burns them out like my last pair?"

"Better than his grey muscle."

"That's debatable."

Spokes carefully disconnected them, attaching them to Mike's jacks. Mike watched half doe-eyed, instinctively wanting to protect his scalp but also realizing that he had to keep his hands well out of the way lest Spokes should make a mistake. It made him feel small, and he smiled at his own helplessness.

"Are the muffins ready yet?"

"No."

Mike suppressed a whine, and Cecil grinned knowingly.

"Let's see if we can make some hell in that head of yours, Michael. Go ahead and connect him."

Spokes leaned over, collecting two of the four thin cords which curled from the dodec. Each merged with its neighbor near the point of no return. Cecil held two for himself as Spokes toyed with Mike's jacks, finally nodding agreeably as the translucent image of a mechanical combination lock appeared in front of Mike's face. From within its hazy background, Mike heard a woman's voice: "Enter your clearance identification number." Cecil's grin widened as his cameras studied the look running across Mike's face. He handed Mike a flimsi. A long string of three digit numbers glowed pink upon its transparent surface.

"Lesson number one. Learn to think in directions."

Mike began turning the imaginary dial, each thrust of his mind sending it spinning.

"Easy now."

After a few aborted attempts, he had the skill mastered. The dial twisted and turned as he imagined placing his hand upon it and rotating it gently. Finally it disappeared, and Mike saw her face, not an exact copy of the physical version, but an outline, deep blue eyes twinkling like distant stars and blonde hair waving back and forth in the electric static.

"Robin?"

"User's access rejected. Security action two in progress."

"Robin, it's Mike Harrison."

"...Mike Harrison is not a legitimate user." A gray field of haze began to form between them, building like an ocean swell and threatening to engulf him.

"I'm with Johanes. We need your help."

The static foamed, spitting like acid as it washed over him. Then, just as suddenly, it disappeared. Mike blinked. The illusion of her face was no longer there. Instead, he saw Spokes fiddling with the connection, and once glance at the dodec told him it was all over. It was smoking, a vial of acidic chemicals released somewhere within its core.

"She was trying to fry you, dude. When she realized she couldn't, she just fried herself."

Cecil unplugged, a smile crossing his face as their team picture danced about the three-vee.

"Success," he dryly announced. "Time to scarf."

The muffins tasted even better than Mike had imagined, and Spokes served up bowls of sliced green apples immersed in chilled, sweet yogurt and topped with warm caramel and honey, finally gathering a bowl and a spare bottle of guava juice for himself before he slipped out the door.

"Where's Spokes going?"

Cecil concentrated on his food, savoring every taste. Either that or he was savoring the captured data. Sometimes Mike found it hard to tell what his friend was thinking about.

"Cecil..."

"He doesn't want to be here. He's afraid of knowledge and the danger it brings."

Mike nodded, "And you aren't?"

"When have you ever known Cecil to be scared of knowledge?"

"You went in with me, didn't you."

"It was perfect, Michael. When you told her who you were..." he chuckled.

"What did you find out?"

"Enough. You provided an eon or more, after all. When you told her your name, she was... perplexed. A gatherer does not acquire such a combination. She had to think about whether or not she wanted to let you in. For an A.I., she was very hesitant."

"She decided to fry me in a matter of seconds."

"Yes, an eternity. The recon program was able to follow her hesitation and map logically where she looked for her decision. There was more than enough time to copy the gyroscopic logs. There was time to copy more." A camera lens bobbed up and down knowingly, "If you dare to doubt..."

The image of the team picture on the three-vee was suddenly replaced by a map of Xin. A red squiggly line

zipped into the city, dashing directly to the hotel where Mike had been dumped by Cole. It continued to the Underway terminal, down to Xaos, and then back up again to Vilya's flat. Then it left the city and came back from another direction, finally darting to the Runyaelin, and then up to the Arien Mansion along the outskirts, before diving again off the map.

Cecil smiled, "It knows where it goes."

"Can you zoom out? I want to see where it went before it got to Xin."

Cecil concentrated, and the city seemed to reduce in size, becoming a tiny dot at the center of the image.

"Curious. This can't be right. It comes from the water."

"Just map it."

The image continued to encompass still greater area as the line dived into the water from near Xekhasmeno and then darted back again.

Mike nodded, "Okay, the point where it stops and turns around, how far away is that from ground zero."

"The nuke?"

"Yeah."

"Less than a kilometer."

"Then that confirms it."

The image disappeared, and Cecil looked flustered.

"Confirms what?"

"Johanes is paying you to find the local branch of ISIS, right?"

"Yes."

"Well, the information is obsolete. There is no ISIS headquarters anymore."

"What?! Why would they blow-up their own..."

"Exactly. Johanes did it. He used me as bait and Nicholas as a sacrifice just to make it look genuine."

Cecil tilted his head, "Explain."

"I was at Erfalas this morning. ISIS trailed me there, and they had what I first thought was the dodec. I knew they must have gotten it at the Tyberian Compound in Xekhasmeno. I just didn't know it was hand delivered courtesy of the Draconian S.S."

"Hence, your clutzery when he tossed it to you."

Mike nodded, "Johanes didn't know whether or not I saw the Imps make off with it. For all he knew, I was dead or sleeping on the roof of some building and woke up when I heard the gun spray. When I showed up here, he had to find out one way or another."

"And you were a dead give away."

"Yeah. I just wasn't sure he got them where it counts. Now I am."

Cecil smiled, "And the beauty of it is that he still doesn't know."

Mike winced.

"What?"

"Cecil, you remember that locator that your friend found in my shoe two nights ago?"

"Affirmative."

"How did he find it?"

"Bug detector."

"You have one here?"

Cecil dropped his jaw as the phone rang, and Mike shook his head, again disgusted with his own stupidity.

Chapter Sixteen

The condo's comm-board continued to beep, muted light from the Sintrivani sketching dim lines across the white, plaster walls. Cecil curled his lip into an angry grimace.

"Great hindsight, gatherer."

"Just answer it." Mike added a t-cross with his finger and thumb, an old gatherer hand-sign, and one of the few which he remembered teaching Cecil. It usually meant "track" or "follow", but given the proper context, it could mean "trace". Cecil's cameras bobbed in comprehension as Johanes' image appeared on the three-vee, a slight nod displaying all the greetings he wished to convey.

Cecil snorted, "Speak of the devil and he shalt come."

"Look, I don't have time to play verbal assault with either of you. I know that you're probably tracing this call, so

just stop me if I start getting long-winded."

Mike smiled, "Fat chance."

"I'm calling on your behalf, Michael. I realize that right now you probably think that I'm lower than a swamp slog."

"You could have killed thousands of people, Johanes."

"But I didn't."

"And you tried to set me up. You sacrificed Nicholas. And for all you knew, that nuke could have gone off in the heart of Xin."

"All true."

Mike shook his head in disbelief.

"You don't even care."

"There's a lot at stake, Michael."

"Doomsday?"

Johanes gulped down a lump of air.

"I've already told you far too much."

"Now you have to kill me, I suppose?" Mike grinned his baiting grin, waiting for anything that would keep Johanes on the line just a few moments longer. The Draconian seemed to read his mind from afar, sifting implications through the pores of Mike's skin. He took a deep breath.

"If I wasn't pressed for time, perhaps I would do the honors, but I imagine the Imps will do a far better job with you than I."

"Too bad. You could have done us all. Why didn't you?"

"Just do yourself a favor, Michael. Get back to Tizar. Forget about this story. If you try publishing even half of what you know, it'll be the same as signing your own execution warrant."

"How many times have I heard that before?"

"This isn't like the other crap. Don't give them a reason to pay you a visit. It's not worth it."

His face flickered off the depth box as the connection broke, and within a minute, Mike had dismembered the "bug" from its battery.

"Hmm... didn't self-destruct like the others. Did you trace him?"

Cecil shook his head, "He's a crafty one. He piggy-backed on a remote dialer. Could have found him, but he dropped the line before it became apparent."

"Damn it, Cecil! I had him on for how long?!"

"Cecil be sorry." The camera's made a dejected pose. "Got the last of it recorded from the remote if you're interested. Just didn't think to extend the trace in time."

"Great hindsight, hacker."

The camera nearest Mike perked sideways like a confused dog trying to see things from a slightly different perspective: Cecil's way of acknowledging a turn-about. However, something about its hound-like stance and the crumpled flimsi in his pants pocket told Mike the chase wasn't over. The comm-address glittered faintly as Mike flattened the flimsi out on the rug.

"Cecil, I just thought of something."

"Congratulations."

"Spokes managed to trace a call I made him from Gardansa's to a restricted comm-address."

"So?"

"He was using amplitude logs or something. Can you do the same thing?"

The camera seemed to shrug.

"That could take days."

"I bet you he's at the Arien mansion. Just compare the dialing records to the mansion and the immediate area around it."

Cecil half-sighed half-grumbled.

"He's not going to be that stupid, Michael. If he doesn't want you to find him, that's the last place he would go."

"Unless..."

Cecil's cameras started rotating in victorious delight as Mike looked out the window toward Xin.

"...he has an good reason to be there. That was fast. He's inside the mansion, I take it?"

"You aren't planning on going down there, are you?" The cameras stopped rejoicing as Vilya's cat pawed at one of them, uncertain as to its edibility.

"I'd like to know more about the Ariens themselves. They're playing some part in this, Cecil."

"And probably on both sides of the court, knowing how psyches are."

Mike smirked. It was like Cecil to understate the galaxy's most common prejudice just to needle him. He was

probably baiting for the sort of reaction that could get them into an hours-long argument. Anything to waste time and keep Mike from going there. Cecil would simply consider it a friendly favor on his part.

"I'm going down there. I don't believe Johanes will carry out his threat."

"Well, then say hello to the rioters. Tell them you're a nice neghrali and maybe they won't hurt you either."

"I doubt I'll see any. Whatever unrest there is in Xin is not being directed against the Ariens."

"Oh really?"

"Yeah, really."

"Anger, once sparked, burns a path toward the most opportunistic form of release, no matter how malign or misdirected."

"What idiot said that?"

The quote flashed across the three-vee. Below it, *"Shattered Eden, Michael J. Harrison, Tyberian Publications."*

Mike scratched his head trying to figure out whether or not Cecil was pulling his leg.

"So I write a lot of stupid things. Big deal."

"What are you going to gain by going over there?"

"Maybe I'll be able to talk to Mr. Arien. I met him briefly, the last time I was here."

"Met him?"

"Okay, Tara met him. I was there."

"Along for the ride."

"Yeah. All right. I don't really expect him to remember me, but if he does, it could be the break I need."

"Or break you don't need."

"You have a better idea?"

Cecil shrugged, "Investigate from afar. It's less dangerous."

"If I had access to Cindy, I would."

"SNDI? Supernatural Data, Incorporated? You've got it, Michael. What do you think the Doggie Blitz runs on? A VIK-20?"

Mike tried to formulate an appropriate response as Cecil taught him how to hook into the phone jack. From what he gathered, higher brain functions were off-limits to all save the super-users or "wizards" as they were called. Mike considered calling the favor, but he figured that lower-brain would be just fine as long as he could avoid running into snags. Cecil retired to the balcony. Outside, the warm, jetting waters of the Sintrivani carried a late evening crowd high above the dispersed illumination save for the few strands of blue and purple laser light captured within the misty fog.

"Woof!"

Mike jumped slightly, though the cat seemed neither to notice nor care. The noise was in his head, no more than an electrical illusion.

"Access. File. Information. Library. Galactic Press."

"...Woof!"

"Does that mean..."

"Woof!"

"Damn it."

"...Woof!"

"Access. File. System. Output parameters. Errors. Command. Set format. Long."

"...Pant pant."

Mike rubbed the side of his face. For a moment, he could almost smell wet, sticky, dog breath.

"Very funny."

"...Woof! Illegal command ignored."

"Access. File. System. Output parameters. Errors. Command. Ignore. Keyword woof."

"...Pant pant."

"Access. File. System. Output messages. Command. Galanglicize. Message. Most recent."

"...Done."

"Access. Userlog. Current. Command. Find. Username. Spokes."

"...Done."

"Query. Date. Login through logout. Most recent."

"...Insufficient format specification."

"Tora-centric. Positive past. Unit centim. Single decimal."

"96.2 through 71.9."

Mike looked out the window wondering what Spokes was up to. The evening was hacker time, and Spokes had

been gone long enough to make it back to Xekhasmeno. Long enough to get pulled off the road and molested by locals, Mike figured.

Cecil was leaning back in a lounge chair, luxuriating in his abstinence from the electronic environs as thin layers of warm mist settled over him and the gleeful screams of children resounded in the distance. He used to say that he needed the condo to get away from it all. Then, when he was rested, he'd go back into a little cubicle somewhere and not be seen for days or weeks. It didn't make a great deal of sense to Mike, but then a lot of things didn't make much sense. He hoped that Spokes had the same idea. Better isolation than dislocation.

"Access. File. Information. Library. The Aggressor. Interstellar society page. Command. Search. Keyword Arien."

"...Insufficient file specification."

"Most recent."

"...Done."

"Say file."

"...Incompatible format error."

"Show file."

A page of the local paper appeared in glowing blue Calannic in front of Mike's face. Even blinking his eyes refused to dislodge it, and whoever scanned it into memory hadn't bothered to reduce it into text. Instead, it was simply an image with a list of keywords attached to it. Sloppy but cost-efficient.

As he began to scan the first few lines, Mike realized that the article wasn't about the Arien family at all, but he instantly recognized the picture. Long, dark hair fell straight along her spine, her sharp, brown eyes watching the row of black grav-limos rising from a well manicured lawn. The color of the cars clashed against her white evening dress, her shoulders bare save for the reflection of headlights on deep, bronzed skin. In the background, a crowd of people were escaping the Lion's Den. Mike remembered the awards ceremony all too well. The headline read, "Draconian Ambassador Disappears."

"Cecil!"

"...Illegal command ignored."

"Command. Pause."

Cecil poked his head in.

"What is it?"

"I got something. How do I display this on the three-vee?"

Cecil strolled in, unplugging Mike and plugging himself in with two swift motions of his wrist. The image appeared on the depth box a moment later.

"You know her?"

Mike nodded, "I met her at an awards banquet just before coming to Calanna. It looks like this image was taken just after it."

"How did this turn up?"

"It says she was married to..."

Mike read the paragraph again, still shaking off his disbelief.

"...Alister Arien. An unnamed source in the Draconian Embassy blamed the DSS. I don't believe this."

"Good. The written word is rarely worth believing."

"Why would they kidnap their own ambassador?"

"Cloak and dagger stuff. Conspiracy of hate. You know how it is."

Mike looked up incredulously. His old friend wore a fool's grin, the sort he'd throw on for guests he was planning on throwing out. Mike stood up, stepping toward the door.

"You don't buy any of this, do you."

"It's a local rag, Michael. The Aggressor rarely prints anything worth reading beyond its entertainment value. Too bad Doggie Blitz doesn't carry The *Galactican*. But then we'd have to deal with those silly writers' royalties, not to mention all varieties of interstellar propaganda."

Mike winced, "I'm not biting, Cecil. I have to get to the Arien mansion."

"You already know Cecil's opinion."

"That I'm being hideously stupid?"

The nearest camera nodded, and Cecil sighed.

"Before you go, there's something more you should know."

"Such as?"

"Found something interesting while sifting through the booty from that android brain."

"Robin?"

"She had some very peculiar orders, Michael. Orders which she had to consult before deciding to fry you. She

was to kill you and Niki upon touch down and then report to her temporary supervisor for further instructions."

"Clay?"

"A chap by the name of William Walker."

Mike blinked, "Bill?"

"One and the same."

"That doesn't make sense."

"If she recognized him and he had the proper access code, then he could have gotten inside just like we did tonight. Judging from these orders, he could have gotten further."

"Why would Clay turn her over to Bill? Why would he send us on this mission just to kill us?"

Cecil smiled, "A change of plans, perhaps? Now, at least, you and Johanes might have something interesting to talk about. Give the Draconian Cecil's warmest regards. Translation: if he blinks, fry him."

* * *

Evening descended into night as Mike approached the outskirts of Xin, his impatience forcing a speed well beyond the limits proscribed by Calannan law. Judging from the radio reports, however, he wouldn't have to worry about being pulled over. The police were most likely busy in the inner city, quelling the incessant looting and vandalism.

He'd seen riots before. Even in his early youth, he'd learned what to expect. What made *Shattered Eden* a success wasn't so much the accurate description of such events. It was the human nature that got people, the law of opportunism as Cecil might have called it. To Mike, it was just sloth.

People liked to take the easy out in nearly all endeavors whether they were flagellating their brains in the electronic void or expressing rage at things they only barely understood. Even the grand Imperial bureaucracy which sought to destroy an entire world had shied away from the big bang approach. Too messy, they must have figured: bad for interstellar relations. Germ warfare had been far easier for them, far less newsworthy.

These locals were no different. Mike knew they would try to hit the obvious targets. But unlike Eden, the two most obvious targets, the Arien mansion and Xekhasmeno, were both out of the way and very defensible. The Calannans could fume and fuss, destroy small businesses, even kill a few unfortunates. But if they wanted to make the sort of statement worth making, they'd have to take casualties. Mike suspected that few rioters would be so inclined, because at heart, those most indolent were often the most cowardly.

Thus, the Arien mansion resembled not so much a war zone as a refugee camp. Bathed in the moon's faint luminescence, a quarrelsome throng resided outside the front gates, tossing occasional molotovs onto the lawn and shouting threats into the studded darkness. Mike parked at the side of the road among the other vehicles and started circling the mansion grounds on foot to glean some idea of his chances. He guessed that the direct approach would likely constitute a recipe for suicide, as just outside the moat, he could discern the movement of clumsy shapes in the darkness: a row of Alister's mutated minions most probably. He could imagine the worgs wearing hungry grins, the sort normally reserved for career bureaucrats and used grav-car dealers named "Slim-price Sam".

Half way around, he spotted the yellow motorbike. It sat beside a row of shrubs on the near side of the moat, plainly visible from the fence but hidden from the mansion itself. Mike figured that either Johanes was taking half-hearted precautions or he was planning a swift get-away. Another step yielded sudden pain from below. Several thick cords of barbed wire lay strewn about, one snagged on his bare foot. Mike knelt down, tearing it loose with a determined yank. Someone had cut it off the top of the gate, motion sensors and all, and a new wire was strung loosely between the severed ends carrying electricity from one side to the other but skipping the portion in between. Mike climbed up and over, smearing blood on the cermelicon rails and finally settling himself on estate grounds just inside the gate.

As though on cue, the noise of gun spray cracked through the air. Mike froze, huddling into a ball before he realized that he wasn't a target. The gun towers were firing on the front gates as gas canisters exploded in the crowd's midst. Though nearly half a kilometer distant, Mike could still see the gates open, cermelicon railings reflecting the moonlight as they slid to the side allowing the worgs to charge through. It was a slaughter, pure and simple, and those who couldn't make it back to their vehicles were chewed up and left to rot on the blood stained pavement.

Mike picked himself off the grass, the moments ticking in his mind with each heartbeat in his ears as he began bolting toward the mansion. Every stride ate precious time, but with all attention focused on the front gate, Mike skidded to a halt beside Johanes' bike having apparently attracted no notice whatsoever. The bike's motor idled quietly, its noise muffled by a black, plastic jacket. A long, insulated tube extended from the jacket, running to the moat beneath the shrubbery. It was a cooling sheath, Mike guessed, keeping the bike both quiet and invisible to infrared sensors as well as protecting it from overheating.

Reaching up, Mike gently switched off the motor and pocketed the key, glancing toward the moat as though it were an afterthought, a fifteen meter wide after-thought with gun towers looming overhead and tales of a moat monster fully appreciated. Still, the mansion walls beckoned, and Mike knew he'd never have a better chance. The water was warm and mucky, its thin layer of brown surface jelly sending memories of Aiwelk tumbling about in his head. Holding the automatic pistol overhead, Mike tried wading across but sunk into the deep, slimy mud along the moat's banks. He finally resorted to lodging the barrel between his teeth and dog paddling like a mad man.

Leafy, moist vegetation hugged the mansion's stone walls amidst a tapestry of drab moss which dipped gently into the water. The thin vines were surprisingly strong, and Mike found himself climbing upward toward the second floor windows when he felt an annoying tug at his legs. The moat had extruded a long, gray tentacle which had wrapped a determined hold around his ankles.

"Good evening, Mister Harrison. So good of you to drop by."

Mike nearly fell off the wall, his mud caked hand frozen just inches from his mouth. The voice came from the nearest gun tower. He could see Mr. Arien's head sticking from a window one floor above him, his sparse, silver hair glittering in the dim moonlight. Johanes stood beside the old man, a dour grimace painted across the Draconian's lips. The barrel of a rifle poked out an adjacent window, its laser sights cutting a fine beam of light through the damp air between it and the back of Mike's neck.

"At a loss for words?"

Mike spat, propelling the pistol from his mouth into the murky water below. The grey tentacle immediately retreated back beneath the surface either in response to some unseen command or in order to examine its new, metallic visitor.

"That's better." Someone handed Arien a flimsi. "Let's see what we have on you. Mmmm... juicy. You've been up to mischief, young man?"

"A little. Can I come inside?"

"Just hang out."

Mike gripped two vines and stayed put, the thought of diving back into the moat playing back and forth between his brain lobes. Leaning over slightly, Johanes seemed to whispered something into Arien's ear.

"Kill him?! Our first truly determined trespasser in how many years?" Johanes winced and gritted his teeth as the old man continued. "Mr. Harrison, being that I am expecting company rather soon, I don't have a great deal of time to chit-chat, so you'll have to be brief. Why shouldn't I blast you off my walls like the bug you are, and more importantly, why does your Draconian friend want me to?"

"To your first question: Ambassador Kato. To your second: he's not my friend." Mike bit his lip, half expecting to become a late night morsel for the moat creature. Arien, however, seemed to frown in consideration.

"Bring him up."

The rope was easier to climb than wall carpet, and Mike accepted the invitation with a healthy tug. Inside, Johanes and Arien were surrounded by a number of guards, each wearing black body armor and carrying automatic rifles with electronic sights. Perfect for sniping the locals, Mike figured, though a bit long ranged for disposing of nosy gatherers.

"Do not be afraid, Mr. Harrison. I have no intention of killing you so long as you speak the truth. Where is she?"

Mike gulped down, trying to conjure the knowledge as Johanes answered for him.

"You're wasting your time. He knows nothing. If you refuse to punish him directly, Alister, at least turn him over to the police."

"Silence, Draconian. I wish to hear what he has to say."

Mike looked back toward the open window. Muddy footprints left his trace easily visible. He shook his arms off, finally turning toward Arien with a discouraged shrug.

"I don't know where she is. The last time I saw the Ambassador was on Tizar. She wanted me to come here to Calanna."

"To do what?"

"To die, apparently, or so Robin said."

"Robin?"

Johanes stepped between them, "We don't have time for this nonsense, Alister. Sule will be arriving with the Ambassador and Erestyl at any moment."

Mike squinted, "Sule? ISIS?"

"Stay out of this, Michael."

"ISIS is coming here?! What, their mind scanners didn't work, so you're cooperating?" Mike gazed, incredulously.

"I'm warning you..."

"No. No, you're not. You want Erestyl. One bullet, and it'll be over. You're aware of the nuclear detonation today,

Mr. Arien?"

"Michael!"

"There's a fair chance that the Ambassador was at ground zero. You already know that I'm wanted by the police for homicide. Well Johanes here isn't wanted for anything, and it's very likely that he's guilty of murdering your wife."

"Michael, we're not playing games here! Your fantasies will have to find another audience."

"Why the fast getaway, Johanes? You planning to just kill and run?"

"I have no intention of running."

Johanes drew a pistol from his coat, an integral laser pistol to be more exact. Its polished iridium handle made it look more like a hood ornament than a weapon, however, with it aimed between his eyes, Mike didn't doubt its lethal competence. Given the proper setting, he'd seen such devices carve holes in flesh so neatly, they could cauterize the wounds they inflicted before spilling a single drop of blood. He guessed that Johanes had been saving this weapon for a special occasion and tried to feel honored.

"No!"

The voice was Arien's, and Johanes obeyed it, if only for a moment.

"Alister..."

"Put it down."

"I am politely asking your permission to kill this liar."

"Put it down or be punctured."

Nearly every automatic rifle in the room pointed toward the Draconian, the glint of steel wary with expectation as three of the guards crouched down at the corners to avoid the cross fire. It was the sort of threat that would be carried out with neither postponement nor afterthought, and Mike watched, silent and breathless, as Johanes, wavering with indecision, reluctantly complied.

"Restrain him."

"Oh for... there's no need to..."

"Remain still, Johanes. I do not wish to see you damaged. Please continue, Mr. Harrison. Your hypothesis intrigues me."

Mike sat down on the window sill, oblivious for once to the squashing sound of his muddy pants. He imagined falling backwards into the moat, nose cartilage sunken deep within his skull and Johanes' boot print embedded firmly upon his face. Johanes was thinking it too. His eyes betrayed him, if not his fists or the veins in his neck. Throat dry with expired fear, Mike swallowed a warm drop of saliva and blinked in consideration of where to begin.

"It's no longer hypothetical."

Mike withdrew the key from his pocket.

"Your fence has a hole in it. Just across the moat you'll find Johanes' bike. There's a cooling sheath wrapped around the motor. That he was planning a quick escape was obvious. I just couldn't figure out why. Now I can. If Sule is coming here with Erestyl, it means that the mind scanner wasn't a success. They need a telepath to get inside his head. Somebody good. Like you. Am I right?"

"Continue."

"However, you've never worked for Imperials, at least not to my knowledge, and according to Kitara, you have as much reason to hate them as I do."

Arien's eyes sparkled at his recollection of the Siri.

"You knew Kitara?"

"Very well. You probably don't remember me, but we've met before. A year ago. She told me a few things about you. If you're working for the Imps, you must have a very good reason. That's where Ambassador Kato comes in. ISIS has her. Just stop me if I'm wrong."

"You're right."

"Are you're certain she's still alive?"

Arien looked down, drawing a deep breath. "No. However, as long as the possibility remains..."

"You'll do anything for anyone. And Johanes here, he's to deal with Sule as soon as the Ambassador is safe. To let Imperial blood fall on Draconian hands. Pardon my candor, Mr. Arien, but you're a fool."

"Perhaps."

"Did Johanes explain to you what's at stake?"

"He didn't have to. I've known of the Prometheus device for some time."

"Prometheus device?"

Arien glanced toward Johanes, his eyes betraying a mixture of uncertainty and solicitation.

"He doesn't know?"

Johanes shook his head, "I was trying to protect him from the details. Now, what does it really matter?"

Mike broke in, "What about this Prometheus device?"

"At first," Arien took a deep breath, "I didn't believe such a weapon could possibly exist. I'm no technical genius, Mr. Harrison, but what I know of it sends shivers down my spine, like the C-bombs of Paulo's reign must have horrified citizens of the first Imperium."

"What does it do, precisely?"

"It's essentially harmless, actually. It inverts the polarity of gravitons."

"Then what makes it so special?"

"The way it does it. The inversion takes the form of a chain matrix."

"I don't get it."

"You engage the device, and it proceeds to rotate the vector of gravity throughout the entire gravity field. In a small object, say the size of a planet, the inversion lasts only for a millisecond, enough to generate some substantial earthquakes but nothing more. Engage it within a large object, say the size of a star, and the process lasts slightly longer, resulting in a distortion of the stellar core and what the Imps have termed the Halo of Prometheus. It's more like the halo from hell."

Mike stared dumbly ahead, unable to blink much less focus.

"It seems that gravity is like most other sciences," Arien continued. "The more we learn, the more dangerous we become."

"Pardon the obvious question, but is she worth it?"

Arien looked confused, then insulted, then finally a mixture of the two.

"How am I supposed to answer that?"

"You're not even sure that she's still alive. Johanes must have told you that much."

"He was very up-front. He wanted me to allow him to kill Erestyl. He argued that the likelihood of retrieving the Ambassador intact was simply out of the question, and perhaps it is."

"Then why don't you?"

Arien sighed.

"She needn't be entirely intact. If I know the Imps, they'll try their own particular brand of mental mutilation."

"The mind scanner?"

"There are ways of repairing such injuries given the proper precautions, and Draconians are, generally speaking, very cautious people."

He cast a wry glance toward Johanes.

"I'd thought I'd convinced this Draconian to bide his time, to wait for the right moment, however, it seems that he has reverted to his original idea. Kill them both, and leave old Alister to pick up the pieces. Who can tell why? Perhaps he expected that the right moment would never come, that it was stolen by things that go boom."

"Nuke?"

Arien nodded, "I'd always known it was a fitting nick-name. Her temper was rather explosive. But if I'd known what would be her end..."

Johanes coughed, "Look, she could still be alive. I mean, considering that both Sule and Erestyl apparently survived, it's not impossible."

"But the gatherer here is correct. Whether or not she still lives, you tried to sacrifice her like some..."

"I know what I did! I'm not pleased about it anymore than you, but I'd do it again."

"Yes, of course. You were just being cautious."

A small, metallic sphere floated in through the door, a red light flashing at its zenith.

"Speak."

"Sule has arrived, my lord. She is outside the front gate awaiting permission to enter."

"Grant it. Guards, make our guests comfortable."

Arien left, bequeathing his private soldiers with a simple if indefinite task. Mike stood back, smiling ever so slightly as Johanes was physically searched in the most comprehensive manner allowable by law. Being that Calannan law was rather lax on such matters, he had some time to wait and wonder if he was to be their next victim. Several minutes later, they found themselves in a basement cell, Johanes wearing a towel one of Arien's more generous employees had loaned him. He stood in the cell's corner, feet together and legs slightly bent, the white towel knotted around his waist. Mike tried to churn forth a wholesome expression.

"Did it hurt?"

Johanes merely gritted his teeth in response, angry eyes glaring stubbornly at the opposite wall. Mike nodded, trying to look sympathetic.

"I'm just asking, because if you think you need a proctologist or anything..."

"Shut-up, Harrison."

"Right... um," Mike paused, searching for the right words. "Do you mind if I ask you a question?"

Johanes ignored him, wincing as he shifted his weight slightly.

"Were you really going to shoot me back there?"

"Yes."

"You were."

"Absolutely."

"May I ask why?"

Johanes snorted and then winced again as the vibration crawled down along his spine. Mike looked away, granting him some private latitude for expression of discomfort.

"I mean, it's a little extreme, isn't it? To shoot somebody?"

"Why don't you ask Bill Walker."

"Where did you hear about that?"

"Various places. Before the operation you were telling Cecil all about it."

Mike shook his head, "Then you heard it was self-defense, and Bill was a friend."

"A friend, perhaps. As for self-defense, I understand that he was unarmed."

"I had no choice."

"Precisely. You were protecting your own precious hide from an unarmed friend as you put it. I, on the other hand, am trying to protect millions of people."

Mike smiled. "Let me get this straight. You pull out a laser with every intention of carving holes in me, and two cents later you're calling my morality into question?"

"You got it. Oh, and by the way, I didn't have the heart to tell you this before, but you'll probably figure it out sooner or later. Your friend was working for the Imps, true enough, but he didn't know it until it was too late. He thought he was working for the DSS, for John Clay to be more precise. He didn't really know what he'd gotten himself into until Sule came prancing along."

Mike stared back incredulously, the smile wiped from his face as thoroughly as if he'd been hit by a ton of bricks. Johanes simply nodded and continued.

"ISIS found out about Erestyl being on Tizar when Clay, one of our boys, decided he was getting a lousy deal from the agency. He cleverly diverted our internal investigations after the raid on the med-center by shifting the blame for Erestyl's capture to you. Then he disappeared, and that disk you stole from the Solomon mansion... that disk you left in Walker's hands... it became extremely valuable to ISIS. I don't know whether Clay told your friend what to expect from Robin upon reaching Calanna or whether he just figured it out by himself, but either way, Walker saved your life, and you repaid him by blowing a hole through his chest. Why, if it wasn't for your juvenile curiosity combined with those amazing trigger-happy reflexes, your friend would still be alive."

Mike held his breath for a moment to keep from bolting to his feet. Getting into a fight with Johanes was not something he would let himself be talked into.

"You're twisting it, Jo. He was with Sule. He was trying to get me captured by ISIS."

"For questioning. My guess is that he figured that you knew just about nothing regarding Erestyl. Sule probably promised him that you'd be set free, and who knows, you might very well have been at that point. You were still blissfully ignorant, and you'd already done them a great service. You played right into their trap, after all."

"You don't honestly believe that."

"What you or I believe isn't particularly important. It's what Bill believed that is interesting. You wrote him off as a traitor without even bothering to attend the funeral. When the locals got around to doing an autopsy on the body, they found the primary arteries in his neck already shattered. The culprit was a tiny capsule with its own radio receiver, timing mechanism, and explosive charge courtesy of ISIS. Their leverage over him, Michael. Your friend knew that he'd made a huge mistake. He knew that you were in the process of making another similar mistake, and he wanted to get you out of the picture as quickly and as painlessly as possible, even if it meant handing you over to the Imps. As far as he was concerned, they'd catch you sooner or later."

"The psyche bloodhound?"

Johanes nodded, "Before the Imps admitted to having Ambassador Kato, they had Mr. Clay pay Alister a social call. Clay, I am told, was very convincing in blaming Kato's capture on rogue elements in the DSS."

"Arien couldn't see through it?"

"Clay has a psionic shield implant. If you don't believe me, why don't you look at his file. I'm sure Cecil could supply it now that he's virtually jumped Robin."

Mike took a deep breath. "Okay. So that's how they were able to track me. Why the hell are you telling me all this?"

Johanes shrugged, "Why not? You're not long for this world anyway, given that Vlep still lives."

"His name is Vlep?"

"Yeah."

"Great. You missed him. I can tell you for a fact, he's still out there."

Johanes cocked his head sideways.

"What makes you so certain?"

"I hand-cuffed him to a steering wheel this morning."

Johanes coughed, "You what?"

"It's a bit of a story."

"We seem to have a bit of spare time."

* * *

Despair curled about the corridor like knotted strands of raw meat, a nourishing meal, though people rarely gobbled it with enthusiasm. Pausing, she carefully rested her hand upon the stone tile. Johanes and several of the guards had passed recently. Remnants of their emotions lay scattered carelessly, and yet there was more, the gatherer she had yet to meet. He was neither angry nor dutiful. Instead, he seemed relieved, as though being jailed in the mansion's dungeon had been more reprieve than punishment. Why Sule had requested him, she could scarcely imagine. The bio-synthe was difficult to read. So many of them turned out deranged, trying to establish a telepathic rapport was rarely worth the effort.

Mixtures of fear and respect pressed quickly away as the guards stepped aside to let her pass, and with a slight motion of her thumb, the one at the end opened the tall, brown door. Its metal plating was rusty with age, and its gray, galvorn lock jutted out conspicuously like some misbehaved organ. Inside, Johanes was leaning against the wall as the gatherer sat on the bench, looking up cautiously, his eyes keen and brown, a web of fear swept over whatever curiosity still lingered.

"Korina?" Johanes pressed against the bars. "Kori... tell me you've come to let me out of here."

"In your dreams, Draconian. Father sent me for the gatherer."

She watched the figure on the bench. He stood slowly, naked save for a pair of mud-caked britches. Turning, Johanes slumped his shoulders.

"Sule wants him, eh? We'd already assumed as much."

"Get out of the way."

Johanes complied, escalating Mike forward with a swift boot to the back.

"Go ahead, Michael. And good fortune. You'll need it."

Mike let himself be escorted down the corridor. Two guards stayed behind them, their rifles ready for a moment's distraction. The young woman at his side seemed to ignore them, her green eyes lost in a dreamy haze. As they passed a row of windows, he considered making a break for it. To die with bullets in his back or bullets in his front, it made little difference. Even the gullet of the strange moat creature seemed preferable to a meeting with Sule. Green eyes watched him from the corners of their vision.

"Don't be afraid. As long as you are here, my father will see to your safety."

Mike nodded doubtfully, the poke of a muzzle nudging his spine.

"And what about Erestyl?"

"He is Imperial property."

"Oh," Mike gulped, "so that's how it works."

She stopped in the antechamber before the sanctuary. Mike remembered the mauve carpet and indigo tapestries all too well. Tara had been ignoring him the night of their visit, so he'd wandered around until he was sure he was lost, eventually winding up in the meditation chamber with his head poked out a window, sky-diving snot wads and half-nibbled *hors d'oeuvres* on the patrolling worgs. She found him after a few direct hits, apparently aware of some bizarre sense of satisfaction he was feeling and curious as to its source. They ended up spending half the night there before the servants finally kicked them out. Green eyes stared through him, her expression lingering in the gray stretch between curiosity and bewilderment. Mike looked back at the floor and consciously cleared his mind.

"My thoughts are my property."

She opened her mouth as if to respond and then shut it again. Mike regarded her indecision with contempt.

"If you have something to say, say it."

"I was curious as to why she wants you."

"Sule? Why don't you read her like you did me?"

"She..." green eyes narrowed, "it is difficult."

"Must really stink to have a puzzle, eh?"

"I'll survive."

Mike let his annoyance fade into a mediocre smirk. "Are we going in or not?"

She thumped the base of her palm against the door, the resulting sound dull but determined, and as though by its own volition, the wooden barrier slid quietly into the wall. Sule stood at arm's reach, her silver hued eyes glinting with the barest trace of anger. Mike tried gulped down.

"You called?"

Chapter Seventeen

She stood before him, silent and expressionless as subtle strands of moonlight bathed the sanctuary in dim shades of purple. Then a coy smile played into her silver eyes, and her white mane rippled in the icy darkness, hair like blades, etching an icy trail along his throat. Her nails left only a thin trickle of blood, barely a distraction, one following closely upon the other in preparation for her knee's decisive collision with his crotch. He doubled over, falling to the floor with a heavy thud and torn, mud-caked britches.

"Out of the frying pan and into the fire, eh Harrison? That was for making a fool of me. This is for trying to nuke me."

Her palm pressed against his nose, two fingers slowly but resolutely forcing their way into his eye sockets.

"I didn't do it."

She held the pressure for a moment and then changed her grip on his face, lifting him to the wall by the scruff of his chin.

"I was going to kill you mercifully, but lies piss me off."

"He's not lying." The voice belonged to green-eyes.

Sule rocked Mike back a foot and then bounced him off the wall, dropping him to the mauve carpet like a wet rag. He was still shaking off stars as Sule turned toward Arien's daughter.

"Get out!"

"What are you going to do, Sule? Beat me up?" The young woman stepped forward, confidence filling every movement. "If you touch me, my father will kill you, and if you touch him, I'll kill you."

Mike raised his head slowly and blinked, the gleam of moonlight off iridium scarcely catching his notice. She had Johannes' laser. An appropriate weapon, Mike figured. With nothing mechanical to slow her down, it shaved the bio-synthe's edge to a bare minimum. Sule's scowl faded slightly, a touch of amusement sparking silver eyes.

"You are a foolish girl."

"And you're on my turf, Sule. Don't forget it."

Mike raised himself halfway off the floor, taking a wider surveillance of the chamber. Erestyl's emaciated body lay folded in a corner, his eyes staring at nothing in particular. Mike crept over, fumbling in vain for a pulse and finding a spent hypo on the floor.

"He outlived his usefulness," Sule contemplated. "The reason you came to this space sick planet is dead."

"Why?"

"Efficiency."

Mike coughed, "Efficiency?"

"With the aid of Korina and Alister, his mind was peeled open such that I could question him in solitude. After he disclosed the details of his treachery, there was simply nothing more of value to learn from him. Now all that remains is to dispose of the body, a matter to which I must personally attend."

With that she picked up the body and carried it out the door. Mike followed her, still limping, outside and across the moat's narrow bridge. Outside, the worgs guarded the mansion, their hungry eyes perched upon blood-drenched snouts. Sule dropped the body several feet from the moat, placing a small vial on Erestyl's chest and breaking it with her boot. A moment later, the body was consumed in flame, and several of the worgs took up a mournful howl. She waited a minute, finally kicking the charred remains into the water.

"Food for your pet, Alister."

Mike turned around. Arien stood behind him with Korina by his side. He seemed despondent, light from the dying flames flickering in his eyes.

"The first cooked meal she's had in years."

"You're sure you won't let me take this gatherer with me? I'd rather like to keep him."

Arien smiled, "If it wasn't for Mr. Harrison, Sule, it might be your burnt corpse in that moat."

Her eyes narrowed, but she never got to respond. A gravcar slipped casually over the gate, turning back only as

the laser canon opened with a warning burst. Arien raised his arm, effectively restraining further damage to his lawn.

"You're ride, I take it?"

Sule nodded, "Vlep and your wife. You want her, you'll have to fetch her."

"Mr. Harrison?"

Mike looked at him dumbly. "Don't you have guards to do that sort of thing?"

"Please, Mr. Harrison. Oh, you'll need this."

He handed Mike some hi-tech gizmo, a makeshift medical scanner if Mike guessed correctly.

"To check for anything physically out of the ordinary. It's been pre-programmed. All you have to do is hit this button. Easy enough for you?"

Mike was about to say no, but the look in Korina's green eyes told him not to bother. The front gate was wide open, and crossing through it, Mike saw Vlep in the driver's seat.

"Long time, no see."

"Why are they sending you?"

Mike shrugged, "I'm sure he has his reasons."

Ambassador Kato was in the back seat, her brown eyes glassy and sluggish. Mike opened her door, and began scanning. The gizmo seemed to say she was okay, and he offered his hand in what he figured was his most diplomatic gesture of the evening.

"C'mon Ambassador."

He reached in and shook her shoulder, finally getting some figment of attention.

"Mind scanner?"

Vlep ignored the query.

"It's okay, Vlep. Sule can't hear you."

"You'd be surprised."

"Oh," Mike nodded, "she's got a vice on your balls does she?"

"In my neck."

Mike made a T-sign, turning the scanner toward Vlep.

"You know what that means, don't you?"

Vlep looked up, somewhat confused.

"You're just gonna have to do what you do best, Vlep."

Mike leaned in, grabbing Vlep's hand and pressing it against his forehead.

"Understand?"

He picked Johannes' bug out of his pocket, screwing the two pieces back together. Then he dropped it in Vlep's hand.

"It's the only chance you've got."

Mike lifted the ambassador from the vehicle and pointed her in the direction of the mansion. She leaned against him as they walked, and he felt as though he were training a baby to put one foot in front of the other. They met Sule half way across the lawn. Her white mane waved gently in the cool, night air, and she held a small metallic cylinder in one hand, its tip gleaming golden in the moonlight.

"Goodbye, Harrison. And good riddance."

Then she broke into a sprint, and Mike heard the sound of gunfire. He hit the turf, holding Kato down as bullets continued to whiz overhead. Then all was silent, and the gravcar was gone. Mike picked himself unsteadily off the lawn, helping the Ambassador to her feet. Korina was there moments later, her father trotting close behind.

"Thank the fates. We thought you both dead."

"Vlep's no marksman, but all the same, it's amazing that he missed," Arien added.

Mike shook his head and started back toward the mansion.

"He didn't miss."

* * *

Mike leaned against the tile wall, his groin still aching as he watched the last of the moat gook slither down the drain pipe. Coating his body in a gentle, sleepy embrace, the shower's warm spray made him more than a little drowsy. Considering everything, it was a strange feeling. Getting shot at usually kept him wired for an evening. Lately, however, the slugs had been flying so thick and fast that they were no longer a novelty. Adrenalin was becoming a tiresome companion. Even Sule's knee in his crotch seemed in retrospect like nothing grander than a momentary distraction, though, at the time, he was quite certain that the universe was coming to an end. He curled his lips inward at the memory, letting the warm water invade his mouth and nostrils until he had to spew it out just to breathe. It was

a good memory, he decided. It helped him forget about sleep.

The black fleximesh laid out for him was vastly superior to the mendwear he usually threw on. It was designed along some Draconian, poly-adaptive, one-size-fits-all concept. All-within-reason is what they actually meant. Mike aired off and slipped into the new threads, still damp from their soaking. Once they dried, the fibers would expand and harden. Decent protection, Mike figured, and it was air-tight to boot, better than a flak vest or a vacc suit and at a fraction of the bulk. Mike checked the fit in the mirror, the imperious grin sliding off his face as the glint of polished iridium met his gaze. A draconian, military insignia lay etched into the left breast: external intelligence if his guess wasn't too far off.

Korina and Johanes were still in the study, each perched over the medical console like a pair of determined vultures as they argued over the finer features of a sub-dermal charge. Mike tried to meet Johanes' smile with one of his own, but even in his fleximesh uniform, the Draconian could put on a dastardly grin, unbeatable considering the image of the Realm most people carried around.

Vlep's cooperating," Johanes patted the reception unit. "They're going to Xekhasmeno... to the starport it seems. Oh, by the way... nice outfit."

"Same to you. You mind telling me why we're wearing these?"

Johanes put on a play frown, "You don't like 'em?"

"Walking into an Imperial starport with this on isn't exactly the quintessence of sanity."

"Well, it isn't exactly an Imperial starport anymore."

Korina sighed, "The Calannan government has assumed temporary control."

"Because of the riots?"

She nodded, "And all Imperial vessels have been banished from the planetary airspace."

Mike finally managed his smile, no longer wondering why Johanes seemed so pleased with himself. With a Royal Fleet passenger liner in orbit, it was a hefty blow to Imperial pride. Johanes had every right to be pleased, however, he dropped his smile when he noticed it becoming contagious.

"It's politics, Mike. The Imps are going along with it to help quell the riots."

"So Sule's gonna have a hard time finding herself a ride."

"A very hard time."

"That still doesn't answer my question."

Johanes took a deep breath, cautiously scrutinizing the vacant space several inches in front of his nose.

"It's like this, Mike. The locals hate the Imps."

"They hate neghrali."

"But they hate the Imps in particular."

"Jo, the starport guards are not going to give you free run of the facilities just because you're a Draconian."

"If they have orders..."

"Who have you been talking to?"

Johanes resumed his smile, "A friend of yours."

"A friend?"

"A powerful friend."

Mike winced, "No."

"Yes."

"I don't want to hear this."

"General Gardansa. He's now in charge of the starport. And the beauty of it, which is still making me crazy, is that this whole plan depends on you."

Mike sat down on the edge of the table, the med console casting a faint blue glimmer against the side of his face.

"What have you told him?"

"Enough. Enough for him to understand how important it is that we find Sule before she gets offworld."

"Then what's the problem?"

"He wants to hear it from you. He trusts you."

Mike coughed, "That's absurd."

"I agree completely, but then again, he doesn't know you like I do."

"Yes he does."

Johanes shrugged, "Then I pity him."

Mike considered a jab to Jo's stomach but stuffed the notion back where it belonged. The fleximesh would make a stump of his hand before he'd ever inflect so much as mild irritation.

"You still haven't answered my question."

"Appearances are important, Michael. He doesn't want the world to know he's taking cues from a gatherer,

particularly one to whom he owes favors."

"I'm sure he doesn't feel that he owes me anything. Besides, people will recognize me." Mike fingered his jacks to demonstrate the point. Johanes just cracked a grin.

"I'll find you a helmet. Look, Mike. He's not the nicest person on this planet, but he's all we've got, and we desperately need his help."

"Jo, whatever he does, he does for himself, not for you or me. If we go there, it's going to be us who are helping him accomplish his agenda. You understand?"

Johanes nodded, "Yes. And I can live with it as long as it means stopping Sule. Why do you have a problem with it?"

"If you knew him like I do, you wouldn't have to ask."

"Maybe I do, Michael. Spokes told me a few things, while you were busy having your jitters."

"Like what?"

"He told me that Gardansa had you take a bath... with his limo. It took a little research to find out why. Gardansa's been effectively grounded this past year, his black market stolen by strong arms in the military."

Mike nodded, "I know the details. He was too greedy. And I also know that he's trying to buy his way back in, except he isn't going through his people, Jo. He's going through ISIS. Did Spokes mention that?"

"He told me."

"Then why are you doing this? For all we know, Sule could be sitting on Gardansa's lap, playing patty-cake with him right now."

"I doubt it."

"Why's that?"

"It's what you said, Mike. He's greedy. He can get what he wants by turning us in to ISIS, but he can get much more by capturing Sule and holding her for the highest bidder. Think about it, and think about what the Imps will pay."

"They'll kill him."

"He's run that risk before. He'll run it again. And he may even make himself the planetary governor in the process."

"And you're going to let him?"

"Appearances, Mike. They're more important than the reality. Gardansa can hand her over to us and then lie like a moon rock. He'll get paid by both sides, and when the Imps do get her back, there won't be any more in her head than is in Kato's. A justice fitting the crime."

Mike blinked, disgusted and impressed all at the same time.

"I can tell you've put some thought to this."

"You disapprove?"

Mike gritted his teeth, "No."

"I didn't think so."

"You figured all this while I was taking a shower?"

Johanes blushed, "What can I say?"

"Tell me about Vlep." Mike motioned toward the medical console, and Korina swiveled the screen toward him.

"Your scan shows a rather complex piece of equipment in his neck."

Mike exchanged glances with Johanes as she continued, pointing toward various points on the monitor display.

"The receiver is here. This seems to be the timing mechanism. This is a transmitter, presumably for location purposes, and here's the charge."

"Large package."

"Minute, actually. But it packs a wallop. Sule must have a transmitter somewhere on her which we assume will activate the charge."

Mike nodded, "She was holding some sort of metallic cylinder as she passed me."

"Anything about it distinctive?" Johanes interjected.

"No. Well, it had a gold tip."

Kori hit a key on the monitor, switching it off.

"To help Vlep, you're going to have to block the signal."

"How?"

"The starport med-bay has durilium sheaths. Without knowing what frequency it's keyed to, it's the best we can do. I've already made the necessary arrangements."

"Thanks. How's your mom?"

"They're freezing her downstairs. The radiation dose she took was killing her rather quickly."

Johanes cringed, and Mike tried hard not to smirk.

"I didn't know your mother very well, Ms. Arien, and I'm no fan of the Draconian government, but I do hope they find a way to make her better. I hope everything works out for both of you."

Green eyes stared blankly back at him, either unimpressed or vaguely angry.

"You sound like you're making a farewell speech."

Mike looked toward the ground, almost certain that he didn't mean a word of it, and very certain that she knew.

"I guess I am."

She snorted on that one.

"Y'know. If there's one thing about you neghrali, it's that you're as presumptuous as hell. This may be news to you both, but I'm going with you. And before you say anything stupid, just remember, I've got more reason to want Sule than both of you put together."

The ride to Xekhasmeno aboard the Arien's grav limo proved both safe and expedient. During the trip, Mike kept a watch out the window as the amber glow of the city's electric barricade grew slowly in the distance. The city itself, however, lay covered in a murky shroud, as though the cold, ominous wind sweeping beneath the clouds had shattered every light and killed every flame. From the corner of his eye, he could see Kori watching him, her green eyes glinting faintly in the silver moonlight.

"Pretty incredible, eh Harrison?"

"The locals must of knocked out the main reactor or something. The outer fence is on a separate capacitor."

"You didn't think us locals had it in us, did you?"

"You know, Korina, you're not really a local any more than your father."

"I was born here."

Mike nodded and shrugged, "Well, congratulations."

"Here Harrison. Watch this."

She steered the limo into a dive so that Mike no longer had to tilt his head to see the ground. The earth below was nearly invisible against the night, a black tapestry marred only by a single long row of glowing specks. Every now and then, one of the specks would flare up and then die down slowly. As they continued to descend, the reason for the congestion became apparent.

There were rioters, perhaps a thousand or more: adults and children and many somewhere in between, each hateful enough to make the incident at the Arien estate seem more like a tea party. Instead of tossing their molotov's on a green stretch of lawn, they were throwing them into vehicles. One congregation worked on forming a blockade with burnt-out automobiles while others took pot shots at people as they ran from their cars. The smarter motorists took their vehicles off-road and out of the death zone. The limo leveled off at around a hundred meters altitude, and Mike felt more thankful for gravitics than he could ever remember.

There was less bloodshed at city's gates. Starport authority personnel had apparently been called out to supplement the city guard. Together, they held the line at the customs checkpoints, trying desperately to sift the deluge of legitimate inbounders from those who would get into the city just to wreck havoc.

The limo touched down outside the starport as a team of Imperial inspectors cruised around checking city passports and ID's. Mike was resigned to hiding beneath the floor in a tight space the Arien's had reserved for special occasions. He felt the gravitic propulsion kick in with a sudden jerk, knocking his head against the compartment's wall, and by the time he crawled back out, Kori was steering them into an anchoring shed over the starport's upper concourse.

The entire concourse deck was flooded with people, mostly offworlders seeking shelter from the rowdy locals, while groups of Calannic guards stood at the escalator entrances double-checking ID's and frisking the prettier ladies. The power on the escalators was down, and people were using them as stairs, most pausing as they stepped on, as though expecting the metallic steps to lurch from underneath and send them hurtling to the bottom.

"See something interesting?" It was Korina. Mike tried to conjure a wholesome response, finally shaking his head and frowning.

"Here. This might help."

She placed the helmet over his head, helping him lock it in place. Mike squinted as the light-intensification automatically switched on. He could suddenly see clear beyond the landing ledge and all the way to the city gates. The moon glared like a strobe light on full beam, its glassy surface seemingly enlarged by the white clouds fusing beneath to form a bright, billowy halo.

"Better?"

"I guess. Any word from Vlep?"

"He's been quiet ever since we left the mansion. I can barely make out his breathing, but that's all. I'll give you a buzz on the helmet when I find out more. Okay?"

She patted him firmly on the head as she exited the vehicle and began climbing down to the crowded deck,

Johanes' reception unit swinging back and forth on her belt.

"Until we meet again, gatherer."

"Where's she going?"

The Draconian casually removed his white overcoat.

"Somebody has to get Vlep's sheath and keep track of the bugger, right? We'll meet her at the med bay when we're done finalizing our arrangement with Gardansa."

Mike chewed his upper lip as Jo started patching in a line to the tower.

"I'll talk with Gardansa alone, Jo. You'd better go with her."

"You don't trust her?"

"She's got revenge on her mind. She might try to go it alone."

Johanes paused for a brief moment, finally putting his overcoat back on and heaving himself out the door. Mike waited a minute before placing the call.

"Tower, this is the DSS. Get me General Gardansa."

* * *

Perkins sat at the edge of the airlock, fists sunken deep into his pockets as the cold night air washed over his face and into the hold. Beyond the landing platform, he could hear shouting and the loose carnage of Imperial gunfire. Long ago, it could have made him cringe, but he'd learned to expect such things from Calanna. The mood of her people was as unpredictable as her weather, balmy as a swamp on one evening and as cold as death the next.

He stood upright as the flat-top approached, Dilly behind the controls, and two locals with badges wandering among the crates, poking around here and there with Imperial mass detectors. Just trying to look busy for each other, Wendell guessed, though he had to wince and scrape a strange, leathery tongue off the roof of his mouth. Dealing with newbies was almost always a problem. He reminded himself to be polite, and stepped forward, nodding and smiling.

"Hi there."

"You Captain Perkins?"

"Call me Wendell."

Deep brown eyes consulted a flimsi-leaf.

"You fill claims form?"

"My broker handles it."

"Ah... where is?"

"You should have it on page three-dee."

The inspector tapped the corner of the flimsi with his light pen, obviously struggling to find the correct cell. Wendell smiled, trying to look alert and nonchalant all at the same time.

"You boys are new at this, aren't you? Look, do you mind if we load up here? We're sort of on a schedule and all, and I don't want ol' *Louise* blown out of the sky 'cause we missed our launch window. Okay?"

He tagged it with a laugh. The two locals either didn't understand or weren't paying attention.

"Hello?"

"Eh?"

"Load cargo? Put boxes inside?"

The one in charge nodded apologetically and waved his hand, as non-committal a gesture as Wendell had ever witnessed. Dilly seemed as confused as his boss until Wendell finally snorted and spat on the white cement, narrowly missing the inspector's boots.

"Go ahead Dil. If they start bitching, we'll just have to stop."

"Is okay." The inspector nodded again and then got a curious look in his eyes, "We go in ship."

"Well, that's perfectly understandable," he forced a grin. "You are inspecting us, after all."

* * *

Mike yanked off his helmet, the resulting pressure release making his ears pop as he stood squarely before the plush mahogany desk. Grinning with a faint air of supremacy, the general tilted backward as far as the gravitic recliner would allow. Like his newfound power, it was just another toy, ripe for his sportive abuse. Mike wondered how long Gardansa would last this time as the general lifted his gaze, the fleshy folds of his chin jiggling as he gurgled with delight.

"Draconian Harrison, much time without sight as you offworlders say, eh? How long has it been? Three whole

days?"

"Something on that order," Mike smiled and found himself a seat, placing the helmet on a corner of the desk.

"You're surprised to see me, aren't you?"

"Like this," Gardansa tilted upright, "who wouldn't be."

"Forget the costume. It isn't important. Forget even why I'm here, and why you're behind that desk instead of hiding away like some snake."

Gardansa's eyes widened for a moment, as though he were contemplating calling his guards. Then he leaned back again, letting the gravitic waves catch his fall.

"An angry gatherer, eh? I am really the one who should be angry, you know. Did you see what they did to my car? To my driver?"

He continued with a feeble shrug, "Even though you are angry, and have every right to be maddened by rage, you must believe that I had no idea that ISIS wanted you dead. I guessed only that they wanted to talk to you and that they would catch you sooner or later despite your best efforts. You remember how I tried to convince you to leave the planet? But no, you would have none of my advice. So what was I to do? Let you slip between my fingers? Let you walk into their arms without even the gentlest of nudges?"

"Why not?"

Gardansa smirked, then sat upright as if to make an important point.

"Because like your friend, Mister Dulin, I was rotting. Deprived of all freedoms, I was less than dead. You asked me to free him, and yet you expected me to do nothing on my own behalf?"

"I trusted you."

"Then you made a mistake. And so did I. Here, let us drink to the hope that we will both make many more before the fates claim us, eh?"

Gardansa opened a desk drawer and pulled out two glasses of white brandy, already poured and ready for drinking. That was the sort of alcoholic he was. He didn't merely get drunk. He planned for it well in advance. Mike accepted the glass, placing it on the edge of the table without taking so much as a sip. The general watched him with a curious stare.

"Go ahead. It is not poison."

"I don't believe in fate," Mike explained.

"Then believe in luck. Worship her, my friend, for she worships you like no man I've ever known." And with that, the general's eyes widened again as he downed his glass in one, fitful gulp. Mike smiled, sipping his own.

"You also, General. And remember, it is not often, on Calanna, one is granted a reprieve. I assume you've been briefed by my associate?"

"Johanes. His name was Johanes, yes?"

"If that's what he told you."

"He told me you are looking for a bio-synthe and a psyche. My people are watching for them, although I make no promises. Smuggling has been elevated to a form of art on Calanna, and my resources are already stretched to their limit. It is more than conceivable that they could slip through."

Mike shook his head, "It's not the finding part that I'm worried about."

* * *

Dilly breathed a sigh of relief as the inspectors steered the flat-top back down the loading ramp. What they lacked in efficiency they had more than accounted for in thoroughness. Back in the hold, Wendell was opening up his special box, the one that would double their profits and pay for some much needed repairs. He helped his Captain get the top off and fetched a pair of blankets out of the locker.

By the time he returned, a tall blonde woman had slipped out from beneath the numerous sacks of half-frozen quagga livers. She pulled out her companion with a determined yank, and he fell to the floor, clutching his sides and shaking from the cold. Dilly had to chuckle to himself as he held his nose before the wretched and exceedingly smelly pair.

Wendell handed over the blankets, trying hard to sound official, "Welcome aboard the very independent freighter, *Louise*. This here is my first mate, who's going to check you folks out whether you like it or not, so I suggest you just stay put and be friendly."

Dilly slowly inched the metal scanner up and down the woman's sides.

Beep

He didn't feel her swipe his feet off the floor until he was laying on his spine, clutching the back of his head and making angry faces. Her silver eyes flickered with something between hatred and amusement, and he felt his legs

inch him back along the steel plate floor almost of their volition. The Captain, automatic pistol in hand, looked only moderately impressed.

"Not a wise move, lady."

"Frisking was not part of our contract."

"It is now. Show us what you've got, or there will be no contract."

Several strands of snowy white hair fell across her face as she tilted toward her silent companion. For his benefit, or so she made it seem, she extracted the object of interest, a small metallic cylinder, its golden head shimmering in the dim actinic light of the hold. Wendell studied it from afar, motioning his first mate to once again preform his duties.

"You hand it to Dilly now."

"And if I don't?"

"Look lady, I'll transport you and take the risk of getting caught, but I'll not strain my luck with my own quiet cargo."

"You are straining your luck, Captain. And my patience. This is a personal item. It does not concern you."

"What is it?"

"A transmitter."

Wendell squinted his eyes, finally waving his mate to continue the scan.

"Except for that one thing, she's clean."

"Fine. Now try this one."

Her companion tried to crawl away as Dilly approached.

"Don't worry. It doesn't hurt."

"No..."

Beep

* * *

Gardansa arched his eyebrows, an incredulous smirk traversing the width of his face.

"Friends of yours?"

Beep

Mike grimaced, "One can never tell."

Gardansa watched, the petulant folds of his fleshy chin jiggling at the slight as his neghrali friend placed the helmet over his head.

"What's up? ...okay... consider it done." Mike whisked off the helmet, "Sule's on the Merchant Vessel *Louise*. She knows she's been spotted."

Gardansa nodded, pushing a button on his desk. "This is Gardansa; get me Colonel Fen immediately."

"...Fen here, General."

"Where is the vessel *Louise*, Colonel?"

"...Parked on platform eight."

"Seal off platform eight. Nobody comes off it."

"Yessir."

He pushed the button twice more, this time seeming in no particular hurry.

"Get me Kano Magor."

He turned to Mike, "Platform eight is a parking lot, Michael. She isn't going to have time to escape us on foot, and if she takes to the air, we will shoot her down."

"...Magor reporting, General. What seems to be the problem?"

"You have been restless and eager, Commander. Now it is time to prove your competence. I need an air strike on the *Louise*, a vessel on platform eight."

"Ah... an air strike, General??"

"I also need you to float whatever you have in the air over that platform to make sure that nobody gets off it alive. Am I clear?"

"Very."

"That will be all. Oh... and do not worry about peripheral damage. It is expected."

"Yessir."

Gardansa pushed his button again, a smug laugh escaping his lips. Mike could easily see why he liked having power. It meant he could overkill with complete impunity.

* * *

"This channel is restricted. If you wish to reach Commodore Reece, I suggest you leave a message with the Imperial embassy on-planet."

The voice on the other end coughed.

"Look, whoever the hell you are, I don't have time for this shit!"

"I'm sorry but..."

Tabor swore and pulled the reception cap off his head, drawing more attention than he cared for, particularly with Captain Dunham less than ten paces from his station. Dunham regarded him with that peculiar, ebony-eyed stare that he hated so much.

"Problem, Ensign?"

Tabor shook his head, then nodded, then opened his mouth to explain.

"Captain," Lish looked up from her station, "I've been monitoring the starport as you requested."

"One moment, Lieutenant."

"Sir, there's been a disturbance."

"Rioters?"

"Unknown, sir. My readings show surface explosions."

"Explosions?"

"Yes sir."

The dark creases along his forehead wrinkled in consternation.

"Give me that, Tabor. Hello?"

The channel yielded only static, then a cough, then a voice, as ragged and coarse as a sander on flesh.

"Who... the hell are you?"

"I am Captain Dunham of the *Crimson Queen*. And who the hell, may I ask, are you?"

"ISIS... operative."

"ISIS?... Hello?!"

"Tell Commodore... hurt. Hurt bad. Get off this planet alive... mission success. Need air support."

"Wait. Mission... what mission?"

"Tell her. ISIS out."

Chapter Eighteen

Mike watched from the platform deck as emergency crews advanced in teams, quenching the burning blaze. Magor had done a thorough job with his air strike, taking out not just one ship but two. That left fifteen unscathed; he'd probably get a medal for precision.

From the *Louise* they'd pulled out fragments of a least three bodies. Fortunately, the other craft had been empty with not so much as a goldfish on board, at least according to starport records. Despite its crew's luck, however, Mike was sure they'd have a few choice words for the General. He'd be in a cauldron of hot water, and so far, he had nothing to show for it.

Johanes was still busy chewing the bull with a pair of inspectors while Korina sat quietly beside a burnt piece of fuselage, her long, dark hair obscuring the left side of her face as her cheek and forehead glistened crimson against the fiery blaze. Mike walked over, doffing his helmet, his knees still wobbly from the senseless destruction. She stared directly at them, but didn't otherwise acknowledge his presence. Above, the stars seemed to fade as the billowing clouds of smoke settled amongst the black of night.

"You're trying to sense for Sule, aren't you?"

She blinked and looked up. Mike sat down beside her, the cold, damp air layering a blanket of chill along his jacks.

"And you're not finding anything."

Kori looked down at the cement pavement.

"For a moment..." she struggled to find the words, her eyes narrowing into thin slits. "I thought I'd felt her laughter." She smiled, probably at how stupid it sounded. "I guess I just feel cheated. I wanted to kill her myself."

She stared back at him through the flickering, smoky light, uncertainty clouding her green eyes, and Mike gave her his thought, if only for the humor's sake. She smiled, then tittered at the edge of the joke, and then frowned again.

"Yes, Mr. Harrison. She was capable of laughter. But it wasn't the kind of laughter you or I know. I'd first felt it when she kicked Erestyl's burnt corpse into my father's moat. It was the sort of victory laugh that has nothing to do

with anything anyone normal would call funny."

"Are you sure you felt it... here?"

She stared into the flames, but wouldn't answer. She didn't need to. Mike stood up, sliding his helmet back on.

"Keep trying."

Johanes, having finished with the inspectors, was busying himself by nosing around the ship's shattered cargo hold. He picked up a piece of smoking meat, smelling it and finally taking a bite.

"Devouring the evidence?"

"Quagga liver. This stuff is great. You ever try it?"

Mike shrugged, "My dad used to love it. What did you find out?"

"There were supposedly two crew members on board when it happened. That makes four corpses, one unaccounted for. You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"This place is a mess, Jo. Three may not even be the correct body count."

"Don't kid yourself. I'm a professional, alright? Three is correct." He handed Mike an automatic pistol.

"Where'd you get this?"

"It was on the floor. Check out the clip."

Mike opened it up.

"Fourteen of fifteen isn't bad."

"Only the difference between life and death, or being healthy versus feeling like slog shit." He smiled.

"Why would she leave it behind."

"Exactly. I don't think it's her's at all. But somebody did fire it for one reason or another. This here may be the reason." Johanes pointed toward a small, metallic, gold-tipped cylinder, still gleaming in the light of the flames. "Look familiar?"

Mike leaned over to grab it.

"Don't, Michael. Look at it. Does it look like it went through an explosion?"

"No."

"Which means that it's probably a little going-away present. For us to go away. Permanently. You understand? I had the worst time steering the fire crew clear of it when they came in here, so I'll be damned if you set it off."

"You sure you're not just being paranoid?"

Johanes smiled, "Just because you're paranoid, Michael, doesn't mean they aren't really out to get you."

Johanes kept poking around, chewing quagga liver, hoping to find some shred of evidence to prove himself wrong. Not too far away, Gardansa was talking on a portable phone.

"You say to them that their petition is under consideration, however, if they violate our airspace, they will face the consequences of their trespasses. That is all."

He hung-up, wiping his forehead with the back of his sleeve, and Mike put a hand on his shoulder.

"What's going on, General?"

"Trouble."

"Of what nature?"

"Of an Imperial nature. Commodore Reece sends her malevolent tidings, a delegation of inspectors to assess the damage."

"So what's the problem?"

"They will be accompanied by the *Crimson Queen's* escorts to ensure interstellar peace and the sanctity of Imperial property."

He added a flowery emphasis to the last part. If Xekhasmeno was Imperial property, then the starport was even more so. The planetary government's treaty with the Empire made that point abundantly clear. It was the very reason the city was under siege, and it was also the reason the Imps would float a dozen armored gunships over the starport, regardless of airspace.

"How long do we have?"

"A centim. Two perhaps." Gardansa shrugged, "I hope we have finished our work here."

"You're going to back down?"

"I have no choice. They know, and I know it. The situation is, in short, frightfully plain."

"Then we've achieved nothing."

"Can you prove that?"

"No, but I'm working on it."

"Do it, and I will destroy every vessel on this platform just to be done with her."

Mike blinked, "I take it you've met Sule?"

"She visited me before you arrived three days ago. Told me that ISIS would be watching, and that if I didn't

cooperate, she would emasculate me and have my testes for breakfast."

"So it was love at first sight."

"Hardly."

"Admiration perhaps?"

He sighed, "Admiration and love are two distinct creatures, sometimes confused, occasionally compatible, but otherwise the one has absolutely nothing to do with the other. No my friend. It was something more akin to dread and dishonor mixed together with a touch of avarice, the sort of complementary qualities a man can sink his teeth into."

"She made you an offer."

"She made me betray you, or at least I chose to."

Mike smiled, though Gardansa could not see it through the helmet's face plate.

"You'd better get inside, lest Sule make good her promise."

"She is dead."

"She wants air cover so she can get out of here."

"You are hallucinating, my friend."

"Just do me a favor."

Gardansa laughed, turning around, "What is it now? Shall we scorch the entire platform on a gatherer's hunch?"

"That's not a bad idea."

"And start a war in the process, not to mention putting my neck on the chopping block? No, I think not."

"Just do a ship by ship search and try to hold off the Imps as long as you can. That's all I'm asking."

"There are fifteen vessels here. What you propose will eat more time than we are served."

"What do we have to lose by trying?"

Gardansa shifted away, making a guttural sound somewhere between annoyance and acceptance. Mike had to smile. He knew he would get his way. It was easier for the General to give in than sift among the hypothetical arguments, and Gardansa was basically a lazy person.

Mike started to pace the vessel's circumference, watching the work crews extinguish the last of the flames. One of Gardansa's officers stood among them, pulling groups of two off the work at hand and pointing them toward the other vessels. Several meters away, Korina stood upright in the smoke veiled darkness. With the light intensification, she looked almost ethereal, walking toward Mike through the patchy, grey mist.

"So what's the verdict?"

Mike sighed, "Well... you still feel cheated?"

"Sule's alive then."

"Probably. Can you track at all?"

Kori shook her head, "I'm a telepath. I get in people's heads."

"Can you read impressions from non-animates?"

She nodded, "Most psyches can somewhat."

"A friend of mine once honed her ability to the extreme by wandering around my house, picking up my things, and scolding me for whatever was going through my mind when I last handled them."

"I'm not that good."

"Considering who your parents are, one would tend to think otherwise."

"I'm not that practiced."

"We'll see. C'mon."

Johanes was still poking around the deck, a piece of quagga liver in one hand and a short, metal rod in the other. Kori regarded him with a mixture of apprehension and curiosity.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to find the bullet."

"What's he talking about?"

Mike showed her the clip.

"Jo, I'd like Korina to take a look at Sule's going-away present."

"Why?"

"To glean some impressions off it."

"That means touching, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

"She moves it a centimeter and we could all be organ donors."

"You can stand back if you want."

Johanes sighed and stepped back about a dozen meters.

"Why take chances?" he grinned, lengthening the distance a little further.

Korina didn't look amused.

"I take it this is going to be dangerous?"

Mike shrugged, "Crossing the street is dangerous. Breathing smog is dangerous. This... this is a cakewalk."

She rested her pinky against it, closing her eyes for a long moment during which Mike remained frozen still, all except for his knees. They jiggled back and forth, barely supporting his weight.

Kori looked up, "She feels very dumb."

"So do I," Mike added. "Why don't you take your hand away from it now?"

"One moment."

Kori didn't close her eyes this time. Instead, she just let them become enveloped by that glassy sort of gaze Mike was growing used to.

"Pain."

Kori withdrew her hand, and Mike let the breath out of his lungs in one, steady withdrawal.

"That's it?"

"Her pain was the strongest thing there. Once I found it, there was no point in continuing. It will mask or distort everything beneath it."

"What kind of pain?"

She reached out, and almost without thinking, Mike placed the automatic into her hands. Johanes was back, a smug look on his face.

"Where's the boom?"

"Your hypothesis about the gun is amassing evidence."

"Of what sort?"

They both looked toward Kori. She handed it back, uncertain.

"It's too polluted. Like I said, I am not as good as your friend, Mr. Harrison."

"Well, we shouldn't have handled it. Jo, quiz time. Where do you go on a ship when you're hurt?"

"Medical Bay."

"There is none."

"Ship's locker."

"Where would that be?"

"In front of the airlock, most likely."

Considering a missile had slammed into the ship, the locker was remarkably intact.

"What a mess."

"Well, at least we won't need a key to open it."

They began shoveling through its contents, most of them burnt or foam covered, scattered in front of the open iris valve. There were vacc suits, communicators, canned rations, and even a few weapons, all standard fare for an independent freighter. There were even medical supplies.

"Oh my... look what we have here."

Mike looked over Johanes' shoulder. The gauze towel was stained a deep red where it wasn't carbonized.

"Looks like somebody didn't want to bleed all over the pavement. Kori?"

"Can I move this one?"

"Be my guest."

She took it in both hand, closing her eyes.

"Lots of pain."

"Get past it."

A look of concentration fell across her features.

"There's too much."

"You're trying too hard. I've seen Kitara... that's the friend I was telling you about... at first she used to do what your doing, and it never worked. Just relax and let it come."

Kori, through drained and disheartened, looked somewhat amused. "I'm am the psyche here, Mr. Harrison."

"Just try what I'm saying, okay?"

She closed her eyes again, this time wandering amidst the pain without fighting it. Somewhere in the corner of her mind, she felt the worry and strain of failure engulfing her. It was like a wave, drowning away all hope.

"I can't..."

"Yes you can."

"...need help... Reece." She re-opened her eyes, seeming weary and withdrawn. Confusion cluttered her green eyes.

"Who's Reece?"

Johanes answered as he continued sifting through the articles on the deck. "She's the Imperial Commodore on the *Crimson Queen*. It arrived in-system two days ago. I'm sure you've both heard of it."

Mike nodded, "She just sent a message to General Gardansa. They're bringing in a team of Imperial inspectors, along with the *Crimson's* defensive force."

"You didn't think to mention this to me before?" Beneath the overcoat, he was still wearing a Draconian insignia. Mike realized that his own was even more blatant.

"Sule must have reached her. Could any of these communicators have talked to orbiting craft?"

"Uh, this one."

He reached for one which was so large it came complete with a back harness. Mike held him back before he touched it, motioning Kori forward. She looked bushed.

"You're kidding, right?"

"You want to find Sule or not? Just give it a shot."

She took a deep breath, grabbing the harness in both hands. Immediately she felt the pain, and underneath it the hopelessness and anger. But there was more, something she couldn't reach. Kori looked up, exhausted.

"I can't."

"We're putting you through a workout, aren't we?"

"I was close to something. I'm just not trained for this."

"C'mon," Mike lifted her up by her shoulders. "It's more likely that she would have made the transmission outside. She wouldn't want a bulkhead blocking the signal for one thing."

"And it's not in a burning freighter for another," Johanes added.

"The surface emotions are too strong anyway."

"We're just asking you to try, okay?"

She sighed, holding it again as they stepped outside. She could feel them depending on her. And yet there was more, Sule's dependence on her people, her need to find someplace to hide. Kori considered each in turn. They were both obvious facts and thus constituted potential figments of imagination. If she could not get below her own prejudices, how could she hope to discriminate Sule's? Kori stared at the various vessels, trying to imagine them as Sule might have seen them, without the emergency workers knocking on doors, brandishing firearms. They would be better off with someone else, someone neutral and non-immersed. All she could concentrate on was her exhaustion. Her anger and desire for revenge could no longer contain it.

"C'mon, Korina. You're not even trying."

She stared upward toward Mike, but instead of seeing him, all she could see was a huge ball of fire where the ship had been, its flames engulfing her, searing her skin as she rolled on the ground in agony. For a long moment, she couldn't breathe, and then she felt hands on her, pulling her gently toward the sky.

"Kori! Come out of it!"

"Wha..."

"Put her down, Mike."

Mike complied, though he wasn't sure why, and as though in a trance, she crawled back to the communicator, grabbing the receptor in a crouched position.

"Who the hell are you?!"

Several of the guards turned, distracted by her tone if not the content which only a few could understand."

"...get off planet... alive."

She then crawled back toward the ship, tossing the communicator back into the pile where they had found it and began searching her pockets in obvious anger. Johanes handed her a lightpen, which she threw into the ship's hold through the airlock. Around her, Kori saw nothing of the audience she had attracted. She knew only the fire, burning her hands and legs as she stumbled, half-crawling from the blaze.

"Kill you... Harrison."

Mike stepped back as she staggered toward the far end of the deck, clawing in vain at one of the vessel's airlocks and fumbling open the outer comm-unit, the ship's doorbell, in effect. Johanes stopped her from opening a channel, pulling her back and dropping her soundly on the cement. Mike picked her back up, dragging her several meters from the congregation that had now formed.

"Kori... come out of it."

"I'm sorry... I can't do it."

"You did do it."

But she couldn't hear him. Nor could she hear the crowd of soldiers lined up outside the ship, nor Gardansa telling Mike how he always picked the craziest women, nor even the Imperial gunships screaming overhead. Her world was a haze of smoke and fire and illusory burns, powdered wet by an icy veil of morning mist.

"No! Hold fire!" Johanes held his hand up against the anticipated spray of bullets, as though his flesh and bone would constitute a serious deterrent.

"This is an airlock! We need something big! You!"

He pointed toward the adjacent ship. One of the crew was peeking out the dorsal hatch to see what all the commotion was about.

"Who, me?"

"Fire your aft laser turret at this door!"

"What?! Are you crazy?!"

"Do it!"

"I'm not even a gunner!"

"Harrison, take over!"

Mike felt his heart drop down to his stomach as Johanes darted toward the adjacent ship. Immediately, all the soldiers spread out, and Mike felt the ground rumble as the vessel warmed up its engines.

"Jo, she's gonna bolt!"

"Just grab something and hang on!"

The vessel slowly lifted itself off the ground, a thin row of hand holds convenient for zero-gravity repairs extending from the airlock down along its ventral surface. Mike leapt forward and grabbed one, feeling all vestiges of sanity slowly slip away as the vessel ascended further, hovering several meters off the platform with a considerable roar while leaving his body dangling beneath, like a bug about to be squashed.

He had to avert his eyes as the crisp beam of laser light cut a jagged hoop in the airlock's outer door. In its wake, it left a black ring of molten slag, and more out desperation than design, he felt himself crawl toward it, pounding open the smoking circler and sending it crumbling inward as a pile of gutted scrap metal. Below, the emergency personal steadily shrunk to the size of toy soldiers, and Mike clawed his way inside, the deck shaking like an earthquake, sending him rolling against the inner door. Only its window had been fully serrated by the laser, and the opening mechanism refused to respond even to the coercion of an automatic pistol.

Mike reached through the window, recklessly clawing for any knob or button that would open it from the other side. He finally found the appropriate switch at the very end of his reach and nearly took his own arm off as the door slid open, the window's compartment disappearing into the bulkhead. Then the vessel lurched from some impact, throwing him forward and into the deck, and for several moments all he could hear was a deafening thunder. When he opened his eyes, the sky was as bright as day, and he found himself draped over the corpse of a woman, her bruised neck twisted almost completely around to the point where her spine had been severed. Mike rolled off her, the sky darkening as the airlock door closed behind him and several nozzles on the ceiling began emitting a grayish fog.

Through the helmet's face plate, he could see a patch of red Galanglic blinking in the upper-left corner of his field of vision. "Contaminant detected. Switching to internal oxygen supply." The next several breaths felt strange, producing a tingling sensation in his hands and feet. He sat down and consciously slowed his respiration. Meanwhile, the fog began to thin out, flowing through the air lock's shattered window and into the cold, dark night. As the moon rotated from view, Mike could barely make out the walls or the floor, even with the light intensification the helmet provided.

Mike waited a minute, letting his eyes adjust. More medical supplies were scattered on the floor, and in the dim hallway he could barely make out the aperture to the ship's locker. Its latch was broken, and he slid the opening manually. Two vacc suits rested on the floor, their rack broken, and a pile of seal-it patches lay scattered about beneath. Mike grabbed a handful, bumping his helmet into something solid. He yanked out the offending piece of equipment to get a better look. It was a power pack, its thin black cord anchored somewhere within the gloomy confines of the locker.

He reached back inside, pulling out a laser carbine. Its metal barrel glinted dimly in the icy starlight, and Mike donned the power pack over his shoulder, switching the weapon to "ready" mode and pulling off its safety guard. He then crouched down, slowly inching his way down the corridor. It was crossed by another, and Mike peeked left, toward the prow. The new corridor terminated with an iris valve, and Mike guess it led to the bridge, to Sule. The door would be locked, and he was holding its key.

Mike positioned himself on his knees directly in front of the door and leveled the carbine to begin sawing. The valve's metal frame seemed ever more sturdy than the airlock, its numerous, interlocking layers refusing to yield against the laser light which was emitted from the barrel in short pulses rather than a steady stream. Another minute or two passed, the carbine's power running low, and his only consolation as gravity began to disappear was that he didn't have to worry about a kinetic kick each time he fired.

He stopped, looking for some power socket in the wall when the valve twirled open, Sule standing in the open aperture with a fully automatic rifle. She began firing before the door was even open, and Mike ducked down as the

first several bullets whizzed frictionless and silent above his head, the next several impacting with the top of his helmet, his face plate, and his upper chest. He toppled backward, the numerous collisions tumbling him down the corridor end over end while he watched his own blood seep into the vacuum in the form of little red bubbles, floating freely in the cold, breathless corridor.

He fought the rushing noise in his head, pulling the seal-it patches out of his pocket and tearing them one by one off their spines while placing them all over the fleximesh and the side of his helmet. The liquid adhesive hardened in moments, and in less than a minute, he could feel the pure oxygen rushing into his lungs, his hands tingling with excitement as the corridor seemed to swirl this way and that. He pushed off, with a grunt, floating himself back toward the bridge. Sule was no longer in the corridor, and the open iris valve beckoned him to enter.

Peeking inside, he half-expected to see her at the controls, as if nothing had happened. Instead, he saw her writhing in the corner of the room, a virtual pool with hundreds of little red bubbles floating about the room. They continued to flow in a steady stream from her arm, and Mike could see her desperately trying to cover the burnt hole with her other hand. She didn't have any patches, and as she looked toward him, she seemed to scream, soundless waves of anger stealing the last of her breath until she finally succumbed to the frigid vacuum.

Mike continued to watch, floating without momentum, as a small red spec drifted in front of one eye. It was from inside the helmet, his own blood, and he knew he had no way of binding the wound. Slowly, the cold began to wash over him, and he shivered silently in his private abode. The ship was his, such as it was. For all he knew, it would stay that way forever.

Chapter Nineteen

The morning sun's delicate rays curved across Calanna's sloping horizon, blues and reds mixing together in a strange and beautiful tapestry of seas and continents spinning gently in the vastness of space. Erik watched from the open airlock, his eyes full of the gorgeous vista. It had been a long time since he'd seen a world from orbit with nothing between his nose and vacuum save for a thin layer of plastic. It had been a very long time, though it was even longer to fall.

"A little closer."

Below them, the target vessel waited in impassive silence, its starboard aft gaping and gnarled like a crippled beast immersed in deathly slumber. Slowly it grew, until they were practically upon it.

"Hold us here, bridge. Okay, Beckerson at my back. Gringer and Saloris, next."

Erik pushed himself into the void, the orange tether his only assurance of returning. Splintered open by laser fire, the vessel's port airlock seemed the best entrance. He slipped inside, reaching the inner portal. Its opening mechanism was obviously damaged, though laser scoring didn't seem to have anything to do with it.

"Beckerson. What do you make of this?"

The enlisted man stuck his gloved hand in the broken electronics compartment, fishing around until he found what he was looking for. When it re-emerged, he was holding a small, flattened piece of metal. Erik studied it apprehensively.

"What is it?"

"Kinetic projectile casing."

"What?"

"A bullet, sir." The others smiled, obviously amused by the exchange.

"Don't give me attitude, Mister."

"No sir."

Erik reached through the door's smashed window, gently pawing the opposite side for a switch. When the door finally decided to move, he wasn't ready for it and ended up obstructing its egress into the wall with a padded arm.

"Damn it... stop it!"

Saloris fired his laser into the groove between the door and its compartment until the mechanical apparatus agreed to surrender its quarry. They successfully dislodged his arm moments later.

"Well, at least that got it open."

Beckerson nodded, "Good job, sir."

The others managed to keep straight faces this time, and Erik found it hard to forge a reply, particularly when he saw the corpse, her skin frozen and eyes sunken inward, the fluid beneath them still boiling away in the silent vacuum.

"My God."

Beckerson turned against the bulkhead in agreement, for once without a wise-crack to share as Saloris stepped cautiously over the body, Gringer at his back.

"Hold, people." Erik squeezed past them, "I'm sorry I didn't warn you. This wasn't entirely unexpected."

"What the hell are we looking for, sir?"

"Survivors. Exactly as you were briefed. But I remain in front."

Saloris let a wry smile escape his lips.

"By my guest."

Erik shook his head, "I wasn't asking your permission, Saloris. You're at my back. Everyone turn on your head lamps."

They reached the intersection in the corridor and turned left. The laser carbine scuttled silently along the floor as Erik gently nudged it, and the half-open iris valve showed heavy laser scars. Inside, two bodies rested in a corner, their vacc suits smothered beneath hundreds of flattened, red, bubbling spheres. Erik slowly inched forward, inadvertently kicking the globules of blood this way and that, as he bent over, shining his head lamp into a pair of brown eyes.

"Pupil reflex positive. We've got a live one, people."

* * *

Touch-downs and take-offs were always the best parts. Those few she experienced reminded her of life as a young girl, always getting a window seat so she could see the darting scenery. As a Commodore, her treatment was much the same. She was cloistered by her aides, pampered by her servants, and each world she visited seemed like no more than a montage of elegant architecture and postcard panoramas, not so much because of the worlds themselves as because of her remote and incredibly detached perspective. Somehow, after decades of tireless work, she had finally come full circle. That was the bitter taste of success: to have accomplished all of one's goals, yet to have ultimately changed nothing.

They treated her as a child, albeit a child to be obeyed. In a strange sort of way she rather liked it, but it was too rare that she could visit the fun spots on a planet, even those where the Empire was respected. Instead, her aides kept her cooped in orbit, tantalizing her with selected scenes from various travel videos so as to give her the illusion of adventure. She'd seen the Undercity, the Runyaelin, and even the Palace of Snagarth over and over again, though to have actually visited any of those places could have meant her life. Of that, she had little doubt.

So used was she to her sheltered existence, that if it wasn't for the cool, fresh breeze sifting her hair, she could have imagined herself in an entertainment booth back aboard the *Crimson Queen*, watching the local star's amber rays scatter carelessly across an illusory, purple horizon. A great risk it was to breathe fresh air beneath a wild, open sky, she thought to herself, as the guards formed a protective circlet around her.

"Lieutenant."

"Sir?"

"Is it dawn or dusk?"

"Dawn, sir."

"Good."

It meant that real sunlight, not artificial radiation, would touch her for the first time in weeks. She smiled in anticipation. First, however, she had business to attend to, and the sooner it was over, the better.

The starport administrator's office was about as plush as Imperial specifications would allow. General Gardansa sat behind the mahogany desk, standing and saluting at she entered. It was their first meeting in person, though she had grown rather used to him during their electronic meetings.

"Commodore, what a glorious occasion. Please be seated. I must warn you that your visit comes as somewhat of a surprise. What, with the civic unrest, we have not been able to take all the security precautions..."

"Forget about my security, General. We both know why I'm here."

"Ah... yes. The starport. I assure you, no harm has come to it."

"I noticed you people are without power."

"We shut down the main generator as a precaution. With the nuclear incident, it was not inconceivable that the rioters would try to take an eye for an eye."

Reece nodded, "I understand that you had some sort of incident this morning."

"Incident?"

"...that you ordered an air strike on an unarmed merchant craft which was harbored at this facility."

The general laughed as he leaned back.

"Ah... of course. As I expected, your information is less than complete."

"Do tell."

"The craft you speak of was smuggling a suspected felon off-planet. It was in the process of departing when we discovered the crime in-process and acted accordingly."

Reece arched an eyebrow, mildly amused by the story.

"What sort of felon?"

"I will make all our information available to you in due time."

"Did you manage to catch the person?"

Gardansa frowned, "Unfortunately, no. This was the reason I was so insistent that our airspace not be violated. By sending down your inspectors at such an inopportune moment and having your gunships fire on us as we attempted to pursue our suspect... ah... we we're unable to deal effectively with the situation at hand."

"I am told that your vessels harassed ours first."

"A misunderstanding, I am certain. However, now that we have cleared the smoke between us, I hope that you will return our suspect, especially in consideration of the fact that the vessel we intended to pursue is still in our airspace."

"It's in orbit."

"Technicalities, merely. May I interest you in a drink?" He opened one of the desk's drawers, ushering forth two glasses. Commodore Reece was about to decline when a subtle knock came from the door.

"Commodore, you have an urgent call."

"If you'll excuse me, General. This will just be a moment."

"Take your time," he smiled, a glass in each hand. "As you can see, I am in good company."

She stepped onto a balcony with her private aide, snatching the radio from his hand and shooing him back inside.

"Wait. Is this coded?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. Leave me. This is Reece."

The static on the other end was fairly fierce.

"Hello?"

"Commodore, this is Lieutenant Torin."

"Go ahead Lieutenant. I read you."

Erik took a deep breath, the communications officer leaning beside him catching the hint and getting up to fetch a highbowl of zardocho.

"We've recovered one survivor from the target, sir. The doctors say he'll be fine but that he'll need time to recuperate before we can get any information."

"Have you confirmed that he's ISIS?"

"Not yet, but considering the wavelength he chose to make initial contact, I'd say it's pretty much a sure thing."

"What about the craft? Did the local's damage it badly?"

"Well, they shattered the fuel tanks. According to our engineer's, the drives are still in working order, but the thing just ran out of pep before it could really break free of the planet's gravity well."

"You mean it's coming back down?"

"Yeah... well, they've been telling me that we should either tow it to a safer altitude to make repairs or rig up an independent fuel supply. If we want to keep the ship, that is."

"How long until it falls low enough to burn-up in the planet's atmosphere?"

"Umm... we've been getting jolted up here by scattered clouds of gas, but disintegration is probably a week away, at least."

Reece chewed her lower lip, weighing the options.

"This is the problem, Lieutenant. Our friend up there committed some crimes down here, and the local representative is already talking about extradition. They're not going to sit on their hands for even a day while their suspect is floating only a few kilometers over their heads."

"We can assume custody, can't we?"

"Probably, but there would be a stink, and the locals are restless enough as it is."

"Then what do we do? I'm sure they've already scanned us making contact."

Reece shook her head, "Two vessels in the same place, one an Imperial gunship and the other an independent merchant, and beyond that, they know nothing. So this is the story. Instead of allowing himself to be captured, their suspect turned his nose directly into the gravity well and hit full throttle."

"That's suicide."

"And from what I understand, far safer than Calannan justice. As far as we are concerned, this rescue never happened. How's it sound?"

Erik blinked, "You're asking my opinion?"

"Lieutenant, right now you are the closest, healthy thing I have to an ISIS representative. Yes, I'm asking for your opinion."

"Well, although it's unlikely, I can't rule out that the initial transmission Captain Dunham received wasn't monitored, and if it was..."

"I can live with a small risk. Anything else?"

"Um... we've been practically coupling ship-to-ship up here. Considering the proximity, they're probably not going to believe us."

Reece smiled, "I'm not asking if they'll buy it."

"Well, some will, and some won't. But they can't prove we're lying. That's what diplomacy boils down to, right?"

"More or less. Anything else?"

"Not offhand."

"Then you know what to do."

"Yes sir."

"Good. Do it. Reece out."

The communications officer returned with the zardocha, floating a highbowl in Erik's general direction as he fidgeted with the various knobs and dials. Erik took a sip and then downed the icy liquid in one shot. It was already well past his sleep shift, and he knew he'd need the jolt of wake-up and several more like it just to keep going.

"How do I get engineering?"

"Here."

"Cooper, you down there?"

"Right here, Erik." Her voice sounded crisp and almost perky, one of those workaholics who enjoyed any chance to get out and play with a new piece of machinery. They'd met at the officers' club some four months back during a surprise birthday bash for one of the fleet's retired admirals. Thereafter, he'd been found hanging around engineering a little more often than he'd like to admit. She caught on pretty quick but seemed more amused than interested, so he put away his notions before they ever got around to becoming more than notions.

"Erik, you there?"

"Yeah. Sorry. I'm gonna have to take you up on that offer."

"Which one?"

"About the collapsible deuterium compartment. Time is an issue."

"Oh, sure. Inside two hours. No problem."

"Good."

"You want to forward Arch the specs on our new toy?"

"No. We aren't taking her back to the *Crimson*."

There was a short pause on the other end.

"Then what are we doing?"

"Your new toy's taking the big plunge. Hate to be the one to break the news." He smiled.

"Any special reason?"

"I'd tell you if I could, but I can't, so I won't. Okay?"

Another pause, and he could almost see the dejected look in her eyes.

"Oh well. Fireworks from orbit, I guess."

As far as fireworks went, they weren't particularly exciting. They even went out of their way to make sure nobody got hurt. Erik kept his eyes open and alert, however, right until the very end.

"Impact confirmed."

Traveling at several hundred kilometers per hour, an impact with the Aeluin meant instant destruction of whatever hadn't disintegrated on the way down. The locals had kept clear once they realized what was going on, and from their radio transmissions, it didn't sound like they were going to investigate. At a depth of several kilometers, who would?

Erik entered his quarters, exhausted but very satisfied with a job well done. Almost done, he reminded himself, as he keyed in the strongbox's combination. Though blurry-eyed, he was careful. One slip of the finger would mean incineration of the records, not to mention his life. The vault opened, and he found the folder he was looking for, slapping the door shut with a stern swipe of his hand.

"Computer. Access medical records, John Doe."

"Done."

"Display picture, facial, forward."

The chiphead's picture emerged on the far wall. Erik leafed through the personnel folder. All it's information could

easily be contained on one flimsi, but for security's sake, ISIS insisted on using a lower, more combustible technology. He knew what was really going on, of course. They just wanted to scare the hell out of him, and at that they usually did a good job.

Ding

He lifted his head, his mind so fuzzy that he wondered if he was imagining noises.

Ding

"Computer, open channel visitor."

"Hey Erik, you in there?" It was Cooper. He was about to tell the computer to open the door when he bit his tongue before the words could drop out."

"Yeah, sort of. What's up, Lieutenant?"

"I was hoping we could talk."

"Sort of late for a social visit, isn't it?"

"The way you were guzzling zardocha, I figured you'd be wide awake."

"What's this about Lieutenant?"

"Well... I was wondering why we destroyed that ship back there. I'm sort of confused as to who's making the decisions, and I was just hoping you could just clue me in a little."

Erik snorted, "The decisions come straight from the top. It's better not to question them, okay?"

"Yeah, I sort of figured you'd say that. You gonna let me in or what?"

"I'm really tired."

"Don't brush me off, Erik."

He winced. He wanted to let her in, but he knew it'd be a bad idea. She didn't have a need to know, which meant telling her anything could spell his court-marshal. Better to just piss her off all at once than bit by bit, he figured.

"I'm sorry. I can't talk to you right now."

"What's the matter? You got somebody in there?"

He thought about it.

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. Be good and go away, and maybe it'll be you next time. Computer, close channel."

Erik felt like the ultimate weenie even though he kept reminding himself that he had no real choice, not unless he wanted to do time for being a nice guy.

Ding* *Ding* *Ding

"Computer, modify defaults, channel visitor, attention off for one hour."

"Done."

Erik leafed through the folder, looking for the face. The image of the chiphead on his wall might have looked strangely familiar, but all he could focus on were the metallic head tricks and Cooper's little visit. No doubt she already suspected something. She was the type of person who would start asking questions. He dictated a quick request to have her transferred, finally leafing through the folder a second time, focusing on every detail in its proper order.

It contained typical restricted information: all sorts of facts, none of them useful, except one perhaps. The chiphead wasn't mentioned anywhere. Erik groaned, a sickened feeling sloshing over him. There was one more problem with the Commodore's plan, now painfully obvious. Destroying the ship meant destroying evidence about who this character was.

"Computer, open channel, voice only, medical section, Dr. Hunter."

The line clicked open with an audible pop.

"Sickbay, Sosrodjojo speaking."

"This is Lieutenant Torin. Is Dr. Hunter in?"

"Um... I think she just stepped out. Can I take a message?"

"I really need to speak to the patient."

Erik could almost see the nurse smiling on the other end, his voice lathered with amusement. He'd called before and talked to the same nurse at length. He knew what to expect.

"No can do, Lieutenant. He's still resting."

"When will he wake up?"

"Ah... you'd have to talk to Dr. Hunter about that, but I'm sure she'll tell you try back no sooner than tomorrow."

Erik sighed, "Okay, but there may be a problem with the patient. I want him moved to the cage."

"The cage? You really think that's necessary?"

"I don't know, but I'd rather we took the precaution."

"Ah... very well. I'll call security."

The line closed with the same pop it made while connecting, and Erik scratched his head, staring at the image

on the wall.

"Computer, locate person. Captain Dunham."

"Done."

"Say."

"Captain Dunham is on the main bridge."

Erik leaned back on the couch.

"Open channel, voice only, main bridge."

There was a short pause.

"Bridge."

"Get me the captain."

Erik sat back up when he heard the captain's deep, resonant voice.

"This is Dunham."

"Captain, this is Lieutenant Torin. I'm Commodore Reece's special attache."

"I know."

"I need to talk to you."

"You can find me on the bridge. I'll arrange for your clearance if that's a problem."

"Clearance isn't a problem, Captain. I need to speak with you privately. There's a little discrepancy in the records we need to clear up."

"Ah... I doubt I can be of any help to you there, Lieutenant."

Erik rubbed his eyes, trying to think of some way to push nicely.

"It could be important, Captain. When can I meet you?"

He heard a heavy breath on the other end.

"Alright, Lieutenant. My quarters. One hour."

"Thank you, Captain."

Erik spent his spare time walking the passenger decks. Without his uniform, he drew little attention and soon ended up in the Slippery Whisker, one of the *Crimson Queen's* less ritzy canteens. Cooper was probably down in engineering, he figured, reminding himself that he felt like dirt, though he knew he'd made the right choice.

The crowd was fairly thick, so he just ordered and drank, sitting alone in an alcove with his back to the wall. He preferred his little corner to the bar where masses of people pressed together without any semblance of order or civility. On this occasion, one rose above the rest, not so much in stature as in head gear. Erik watched the tall spokes on the man's head jiggle back and forth as he nodded to one of the bar wenches. It reminded him of John Doe, helping to focus his mind on the matter at hand, and the more he thought about it, the more it irked him.

Erik made his way back to officers' quarters and hung around in the lounge until Dunham showed up. The captain was early as well, though the bored look on his face didn't portray a man who was looking forward to this meeting. Rather, he seemed to just want to get it over with, as quickly as possible, and Erik wondered if his own presence on board represented some sort of threat. Over the years, he'd learned that many of the naval and quasi-naval officers didn't like ISIS, though they were the very people most often made to cooperate with the service. Erik had always figured it was because the Navy had it's own intelligence division, but nothing about the captain's mood betrayed professional jealousy.

"Enter."

Dunham's cabin was fairly unassertive. It could be called spartan, if not for the shimmer-sketches upon the wall. They were unsigned, though each revealed a similar style. Erik recognized one as being of the commodore. The picture depicted her on the observation deck, looking longingly into the studded darkness of space and at a world turning gently below.

"Your work, sir?"

"A hobby of mine. It helps me relax."

Erik turned around.

"My reason for wanting to speak with you concerns a conversation you allegedly had with our lucky guest."

"Before you continue, Lieutenant, I must confess that it was hardly a conversation."

"Nevertheless, you did speak with him."

Dunham nodded, "I've already reported that to the commodore."

"And you also reported that our guest told you that he was an ISIS operative."

"That's correct."

Erik paced to the corner of the room.

"Captain, this may seem a trivial question, but it's extremely important that we be absolutely clear on this."

"I've told you what I can."

"Think again. Try to remember his exact words. Did he say he was an ISIS operative or did he say that he was working with one?"

"Lieutenant, you've got to understand that our lucky guest, as you call him, was not especially comprehensible. He was wounded. I could hear that his voice, even amidst the static, was fatigued. He was coughing between his words, and beyond that he was rather upset. In short, he was just barely making sense at all."

"You're telling me you don't know what he said."

"I'm telling you that what he said and what he meant may be two different creatures entirely. I asked him who he was. He replied that he was an ISIS operative, not that he was working for one. However, considering his physical state at the time, it wouldn't surprise me greatly if I was misinformed."

* * *

"You sure this is such a good idea?"

Johanes looked up, a little peeved that Cecil's spoke-headed disciple was having second thoughts.

"What are you bitching about? I'm the one who's drinking it."

Spokes shrugged and continued stirring as Johanes turned up the particle stream, watching the bottom of the bowl with an increasingly intense stare. If it stopped simmering evenly it would be useless, and if it rose to a boil it would make him sick for at least a day. The trick was in getting it just right; such was the nature of Draconian toe-jam.

It was a temperamental and unusually fragile drug. Johanes remembered one instructor telling a class of recruits how home-made batches were held to spoil on the side of caution nine times out of ten, hence the Realm's enormous profits on their peculiar version, which was widely regarded as having the best trade-off between safety and potency. What naturally resulted was a "get 'em hooked and milk 'em dry" external revenue policy, while inside the Realm itself, the drug was taxed to extinction. Meanwhile, competitive operations were encircled and incorporated via the corporate state's ruthlessly legal policy of economic barbarism, or so Mike might have called it. Johanes gritted his teeth. He would find out soon, one way or the other.

"You'd better hurry on that," Cecil murmured from his corner of the room, his meditation seemingly concluded.

"You have the frequency and encryption set-up?"

The cameras nodded, as he flicked the little, communications package into the air, its metallic casing no larger than a walnut. Johanes caught it in one hand, hoping sincerely it would come of some use.

"A little slower. You're cooling the outside too fast."

Spokes shook his head, "We should just fix some hellacious flamebowls and be done with it."

"I need some semblance of lucidity while I'm in there. If we do this right, I'm as sick as an Alfrinian marsh slog for half a cent, and after that, all I have to deal with are the vibes."

Spokes grinned, "Lucky bastard."

Johanes nodded. His first two years of training included a fairly substantial appreciation of the drug culture, and the vibes were one of the loosest highs he had ever experienced. They were brought on by the interaction of the toe-jam and the body's own defense chemistry. They never encouraged paranoia, made him hyper or hallucinate, or even put him on planet nine. It was different. It was like being totally healthy, completely aware, and remarkably resonant to reality. In short, it was like not being stoned at all, except you were, but you wouldn't know it, and after a few times, just when you thought you'd gotten the hang of it, you'd wake up to the facts of addiction. He'd seen an acquaintance almost kill herself by quaffing an obviously burnt batch on purpose. Good ol' Souxie, she thought she could handle it, and here he was, practically thinking the same thing.

"If I don't come out of there after two cents, you tell the nurse on duty what I did, okay?"

Spokes nodded, not taking his eyes off his stirring, "Sure. No problem."

"I'm serious."

"I know."

Beep

"This is Captain Dunham. Before we enter hyperspace, I want to take this opportunity on behalf of myself and the crew to thank you for traveling with Royal Fleet. At this time, I would advise arosthoros sufferers to begin heading toward sickbay if they haven't done so already. We will be arriving at Tyber in roughly twenty-six standard hours. Until then, if we can do anything to make your voyage more pleasant, please do not hesitate to inquire with our attendants."

Johanes shut down the heat, throwing a fist of ground ice into his highbowl.

"Okay. It's time."

* * *

Feso grinned and made the mandatory jokes as he handed out the space sickness capsules with little, paper cups of water. As usual, most of the passengers who showed up were over twice his age. They drank and smiled, nodding and thanking him for his trouble. One old lady even complimented him on his nice, white, lab coat. In short, all of them seemed happy, all of them except for one. He was roughly the same age as Feso himself, yet his face seemed ashen and worn, as were he psyching himself up for the black plague. Feso put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry. You'll be just fine."

Being a nurse, Feso saw that sort of reaction all the time. In every batch of passengers, there would be at least one who would start getting sick scarce minutes before the jump into hyperspace. Dr. Hunter explained it away as being some sort of psychological, anal-retentive thing, but Feso could never help getting worried. Maybe they were carrying some dread illness. After all, it was impossible to screen everyone thoroughly.

Dr. Hunter always laughed his distress off as though he were making a joke. She thought he was funny and told him so, barking a string of new orders during the very next sentence. Fret was the natural consequence of an idle mind, in her book. Still, this guy looked different.

Concerned undertones reverberated within the sickbay as everyone felt the disorientation. Several clung to the hand holds as their knees quaked back and forth, and one man, possibly in his nineties, sat down on the floor, blinking in confusion as the room swirled around him. Feso smiled, leaning next to him.

"Still with us?"

"Eh?"

Some laughed, others leaving as they realized that the worst was over, and Feso helped the old man back to his feet who was now smiling at his part in the joke.

"Eh... I was just taking a breather."

"Yes. I noticed."

Four of them stayed, the young man he was originally worried about included. Feso looked them over, feeling foreheads with his bare palm.

"How are you feeling?"

"I still feel dizzy," one replied.

"That's normal. Here, sit down. We have a medicinal compound already prepared that should get you back on your feet in no time."

He administered four injections, three of them seeming to have some small effect. The young man wasn't responding, however. He fidgeted in his seat, perspiration soaking his shirt as his face turned a rosy hue of red. He squinted up with dilated pupils.

"I'm gonna be sick."

"It's okay."

Feso gave him another injection. The man started to lean over and drool on the floor.

"Ugghhh!"

"Umm... okay. You're gonna be just fine."

"No I'm not."

"Just wait here."

"Where are you going?"

Feso ran to the office. Dr. Hunter was on the comm board, arguing with the bureaucracy as usual.

"There's a problem with one of the passengers."

She looked up as though expecting his outburst.

"Acute arosthoros?"

He nodded.

"What code is the patient?"

"Green."

She nodded, "Double the injection."

"I already tripled it."

Dr. Hunter put the bureaucracy on hold and started across the room when she heard somebody vomiting on the floor. The man had fallen out of his seat, his face smeared with the contents of his stomach, while the other four passengers were alternating between looking away and sneaking peeks, their faces masked by utter revulsion. Only Hunter seemed unaffected.

"This isn't arosthoros."

"Then what is it?"

"I don't know... yet. How long as he been doing this?"

"About a minute."

She dragged the man to his feet, pulling him inside intensive care.

"Stay with the others. Don't let them leave."

Johanes felt like he'd been turned inside-out and left to rot as she dumped him into the gravitic recliner. She immediately turned her back to him, turning knobs, pushing buttons, as he let loose with another volley from the interior of his stomach. The room seemed to turn around on him, flipping and flopping as blood rushed to his mouth, exiting through his nostrils and lips and washing itself over his face.

Hunter examined the readings, a perplexed look crossing her face. The man's defensive system was going wild. She held him down with a grip only taught in medical school and took a blood sample, stepping back to the analyzer with her trophy. The man continued to shake, his hair now soaked with sweat.

"Help..."

"Quiet. I'm working."

The analyzer broke down the blood into its constituent parts, and the machine spat back readings she hadn't seen since the music festival on Satyr IV. She switched the IC open and groaned.

"You can let the others go, Nurse."

Feso came darting in a minute later.

"What was it?"

"See for yourself."

She put a pulse monitor around the patient's arm as Feso studied the output.

"Artificial contaminant of some kind."

"Yep. We've got ourselves a druggie."

Feso breathed a deep sigh of relief, then turned around hoping she hadn't noticed. Hunter smiled up at him.

"It's okay. At least it wasn't a contagion, right?"

He nodded and smiled, somewhat embarrassed, "The possibility had crossed my mind."

"You always think that..."

"And so far, I'm always wrong," he confessed, finishing the sentence for her. She pressed the ice pack to the back of the patient's neck as he continued to groan, trying in vain to force out the emptiness in his belly.

"He already has a lot of chemicals in his system, but I want you to administer a stabilizer. It may draw out his body's reaction to whatever he took, but at least it should keep him from getting any worse."

Feso nodded, "Somebody should watch him, right?"

"You watch him. I don't have time for baby-sitting. I've got a call on hold."

"You want me to stay with him alone?"

Hunter looked her nurse over, a slight frown creeping down her face.

"He's a grown man on drugs, Feso. He's harmless, not to mention pathetic."

"What if you're wrong?"

"About him being harmless? Then you load up the hypo-rod and punch him with a canister of Teramethenol-12. That should keep him happy."

"If it doesn't kill him, first," Feso muttered, but she had already left. He prepared the stabilizer and administered it, though putting one drug on top of another was more his idea of recklessness than medicine. Hunter just wanted the bozo to suffer for a while longer. She knew that he wasn't in any real danger, and the pulse-monitor would keep an eye on him better than any human could.

Johanes turned over, particles of vomit resting at his sides in the gravitic field. The noise of his breathing sounded parched and ragged behind the thumping in his ears, and the nurse stood over him, a concerned though unsympathetic look on the young man's face.

"How are you feeling, Mr. Smyth?"

"Terrible. Is it over?"

Feso shook his head, "I gave you a stabilizer. It seems to be bringing your pulse down, but you'll probably be sick for a while."

"Great."

"What did you take?"

"Huh?"

"What drug did you take?"

"Drug?" Johanes tried to laugh, but it only made him feel worse. "I thought I was space-sick."

"No. The doctor found some sort of drug in your system."

"Damn. No kidding. Must have been in that drink I had. Those Calannans sure do have a wicked sense of humor."

Feso blinked, "You mean you didn't even know?"

"There was this little pre-jump party on the promenade deck. I guess things got a little out of hand. Uh oh..."
Johanes turned over and opened his mouth to heave. Only a rotting, stinking belch came out, the sort that gets holed-up in some damp recess of the stomach and refuses to poke its head out for weeks at a time. Feso leaned back once he got a whiff, squinting in extreme displeasure.

"Uh... I guess I can leave you alone for a little while. If you get into trouble, just call through the door. I'll leave it open, okay?"

"No problem."

Johanes switched off the gravitic recliner, settling to the sticky, white floor, now polka-dotted by various yellow and red particles of an origin he didn't wish to recall. Meanwhile, the computerized gadgetry continued to beep in time with his pulse. He walked over to it, toying with the dials as blood seeped from his nostrils and onto his lips while his tongue waggled back and forth, trying to avoid the awful taste.

"Remember, Jo. You gotta eat apples. They taste the same coming back up as they do going down. Two meals for the price of one." It was Souxie's voice in his head, as clear as the last time he'd heard it. Good ol' toe-jam.

He was relatively familiar with the operating system. He'd once used something remotely akin to it in a lab on Estin, except that the Draconian equipment was far more advanced. This was cruise liner material, a paltry product by any comparison. The medical console reported that a job was still in process: blood sample analysis, unknown compound recognition. He removed the sample tray, pocketing it and dumping the job out of queue. He then recalled the last minute of pulse readings from memory and set the playback into an infinite loop, tearing the pulse monitor off his arm as quietly as haste would allow.

The intensive care chamber was long and rectangular, the far wall coated with long, plastic windows. A narrow corridor ran behind them, cutting a path between the antechamber and a row of laboratories. Behind the clear plastic barrier, Johanes could see someone dressed in a long, white coat walking down the corridor, holding a stack of flimsies under one arm. The person seemed to be whistling, through from the behind the plastic, Johanes couldn't hear the noise, yet from the movement of the man's lips, he could still pick up the basic rhythm. The lips were cherry hued, like the front of his shirt, though that used to be white. He remembered how it had been so thoroughly cleaned at the Arien estate. Kori had shoved him into the moat just for kicks. She'd later asked him how he'd felt when the mansion's mascot dragged him beneath the water in one, swift, tug of a tentacle. It was only playing, she tried to explain, and they laughed, though he'd been rather annoyed at the time.

Johanes blinked, ducking to his belly. He'd probably been standing there looking stupid for close to a minute, maybe longer. He tried to focus his mind, but it kept on going off on tangents. The intrusion of the stabilizer, he figured. Planet nine would pass by, he reassured himself, as he started noticing the little cracks in the tile, the variations in the shape of one from another. He crawled about the chamber, his eyes examining everything in sight, as he investigated his new surroundings cubicle by cubicle like a cockroach in search of sustenance.

At the far end he found what he was looking for. The pulse monitor made no noise, but from the little, jumping dot on the console, he could tell that somebody in the bed was alive. He drew Mike's fiberglass pistol, a little memento he'd been saving for a special occasion, and standing over the bedside, pulled the sheets down slowly with his free hand. The headjacks came as somewhat of a shock, as he fully expected to find a white mane instead. Holding his breath, he pulled the sheet a little further.

"Michael."

There was no response, and Johanes grinned as he re-concealed the firearm, shaking the gatherer by the shoulder.

"C'mon. Wake up."

From the antechamber he could hear voices, one of them a woman's, strangely familiar.

"We'd rather wait until he's awake before we start moving him around. Besides, he's safer in intensive care. If something goes wrong, we can treat him better in there than in the cage."

"Look, doctor. I have direct orders to make sure he gets moved, so he's getting moved. End of story."

"I understand, but he's still at a very critical stage in the healing process. Why is it so important that he be moved now?"

"Right. Let me try put this as succinctly as possible. He gets moved now. We are not having a discussion about it. If you want to stomp on me, fine. Call my commanding officer and bitch. I don't care. I have my orders. Nothing personal, okay?"

"You people haven't even given me his medical records. We have no idea what sort of prior conditions might exist. If he's not inside intensive care, I can't assume responsibility for what might happen."

"Fine. That's great. Like I said before, I don't really care what happens to him."

The security officer entered the chamber, turning first toward the beeping noise and then to his left.

"My oh my. What happened to this fella?"

"Ah...."

"Space-sickness," Feso interrupted.

"No. Really?"

Hunter stood quietly, watching her nurse beneath an arched eyebrow. The security officer just laughed.

"I never knew it got that bad. I mean, not on a ship like this, anyway. Back when I was serving in the navy, one of our engineers had to crawl outside while we were in the middle of hyperspace. Very serious repairs. Okay? And he puked his guts out after we pulled him back in. Just between us, I don't think he ever really recovered, neither. And the janitors! I mean barf-o-rama, okay? And they were just a bunch of robots, and they still got pissed. You know when your robots start getting pissed off, you've got some serious..."

"How fascinating."

"Yeah, and this other time..."

"The patient is over there. Please, just move him."

Johanes let the pulse monitor fall again from his arm as they walked past, dumping the playback job and the rest of the computer's soft-memory with a silent turn of a power switch. He then stopped the nurse, who was trailing behind the other two.

"Real sorry about the mess."

"Aw... don't worry about it. We have nicer robots than the navy."

"Great. Look, I'm gonna get back to that party."

"No. You can't leave."

"Sorry. Got to. We ordered a hermaphrodite stripper, and I really don't want to miss it. Thanks."

"But..."

Johanes scampered out of sickbay before Feso could utter another word. Spokes was sitting on a bench nearby, trying desperately to hide inconspicuously behind a king-sized flimsi and a pair of mirrored stick-on shades. If not for the head jacks poking above the flimsi leaf, he might of succeeded, but as it was, he made less than the perfect spy. For starters, he was too honest.

"You look like garbage and smell like stomach swill."

Johanes grinned, "Compliments will get you everywhere."

"Damn. You must be having a good high."

"No, it evaporated, which is fine because it was pretty rotten while it lasted. They injected me full of stabilizers."

"Tough luck."

"Agreed."

"You take care of business?"

Johanes shrugged, "I think Michael beat me to the punch. They're moving him right now."

"What do we do?"

"You keep your eyes peeled. I'm going to take a shower."

Chapter Twenty

He liked the sound it made, twirling on the counter top, and the way it made her hazel eyes open wide with glee.

"Lemme see."

Mike's first impulse was to clasp his hand into a tight fist. She tried prying back his fingers one by one, but each time she got one where she wanted it, she'd have to let it go to work on another. "Dummy," he thought, as it would snap back down, and she'd scream and then laugh, frustrated and easily amused.

"Mike... please. I'm gonna tell mom."

"Tell her what? I found it."

"I just want to look at it."

He held its edge between two fingers, its coppery color reflecting the late afternoon sunlight. Some sort of profile lay etched on the side, a man with a beard, all distinguished and stately. She squinted, trying to make out the details as he jiggled it back and forth, forcing her eyes to constantly refocus. Finally giving up, she tried to grab it.

"Slowpoke," he thought as he felt a snickering smile form on his lips.

"I have all. You have none."

"Mike..." she started to whine.

"Oh, don't cry baby. You want it?"

"Yes."

"I bet you do."

She ended up chasing him around the flat, underneath tables, through the shower, over their parents' bed, until she finally cornered him at the balcony, hazel eyes deadly serious.

"Gimmie it or else."

"If you insist."

He made as if to hand it forward, but just at her moment of triumph, he flicked it backwards over his head. It was over twenty stories down.

"Mike... I'm telling."

She never did, of course. She never told about anything, while he would tell about almost anything, even the stuff he made up.

"Mommy already knows you're a big fat liar."

"Does not... uh... Am not."

He didn't know why she held her tongue. He never really thought about it. He knew it was a good thing though. She'd certainly collected enough dirt over the years to put him on life-long restriction.

"Where you going?"

He froze, his lower torso hanging out the ventilation shaft. It wasn't the first time she'd pretended to be asleep. He looked down, uncertain.

"Nowhere."

"I'll tell."

"Go ahead."

He stopped once he reached the roof. She was at his heels, hazel eyes shimmering faintly in the starlight. Mike scowled. A tag-along was just what he needed.

"Where do you think you're going?" he queried in his most accusatory voice.

"Where are you going?" she chirped in reply.

"Nowhere."

"I'm going nowhere too."

He gritted his teeth, walking over to the old staircase. He'd busted the lock on the door with his father's gun while nobody was home to hear the noise. His dad never even noticed the bullet missing.

Mike told her to go back at least twenty times on the way to the ground floor. It wasn't that she'd get him caught. Sneaking past the security-bot wasn't a problem. The thing was stupid, and he'd learned long ago how to distract it with a pebble. It was just the idea of her company which irritated him.

She walked behind him once they were outside, picking up funny shaped stones or bits of metal. She even found a coin, probably the one he'd tossed over the balcony. They ended up going into one of the deserted buildings at her insistence. She wanted to find something hard and flat to spin it on. Mike suggested her head, which she didn't find funny.

They must have sat there for hours while she twirled it with glee and wouldn't let him touch it for all the false promises in the world. He watched her, his eyelids growing increasingly heavy as he reminded himself that they couldn't fall asleep. Without her in the room, there would be nobody to cover for him in the morning. Still, she seemed too happy to budge. She finally looked up, waking him from his pseudo-slumber.

"Remember Dana?"

Mike looked at her and yawned, "Haven't seen her in awhile."

"Mom said her family must've moved, but I went over the other day, and her older sister answered the door. Said she wasn't living there anymore."

"Maybe she got the bug."

That made her pause, but then she looked up again, "I don't see how she could have. She hardly ever went out. Her Dad wouldn't let her."

Mike sat upright on the floor, crossing his legs.

"Sounds almost like Jason."

Lei twirled the coin again.

"Yeah. Before his parent's moved, he said they were leaving because of him and that I should go too. Because we were both second-born."

"Second-born?"

"I know. I asked mom what he meant. She said they were really leaving because his parents couldn't face their chores."

A goo-spitter crept beside her leg while she was talking. Mike flicked a string of pebbles at it until it got the hint and crawled away. She didn't seem to notice and just kept twirling the coin.

"Mom said some people just hide from real life. Isn't that weird?"

"I guess."

She was quiet for a while after that, and Mike closed his eyes wondering what the big people were up to.

"Mike. Wake up!"

His eyes snapped open but saw nothing save for a blue dot in the distance, jumping like the beat to a really slow song. His mouth felt strange, almost swollen, and his body felt warm and numb, as though he'd melted into the concrete. It took about a minute before he realized there was something in his mouth. He spat it out gently, feeling it brush by his arm several moments later. With considerable concentration, his hand found it somewhere in the darkness. It was about the size of a walnut, cold and metallic. He closed his hand into a fist as a beeping noise rose somewhere in the distance. Then the lights came on, and he squinted, barely able to see at all.

"Good morning."

It was a woman's voice, detached yet strangely familiar. She sounded a little tired as her face blurred in and out of focus.

"How are you feeling?"

She wiped his eyes with some sort of sticky, gauze pad, and Mike could see her short, dark hair as she leaned forward again, looking into his eyes with an elongated, metal instrument.

"Do you know where you are?"

Mike thought about it.

"No."

"You're on the *Crimson Queen*... Royal Fleet passenger liner. You're safe."

She put something on his head and then pressed a few buttons. A twisted red line appeared on the display, sparking to mind images of floating bubbles, crimson and boiling. Mike blinked as she turned back around.

"Do you remember anything?"

"Umm..."

For some reason, he found himself imagining her with long, white hair. Her eyes were light brown, like a tiger's. Not silver, like Sule's. He blinked again as the memories came rushing with neither heed nor invitation.

"Do you know who you are?"

"Mi..." he bit his tongue. "My head feels... kinda woozy."

"It's okay. Just rest. If you need anything," she tapped a red button beside his fist. "Lights dim."

They obeyed, and she seemed to have to play with the door, making it beep several times before it would open. A man wearing a holster stood on the other side, smiling and sneaking a peek. Then the door closed again, and Mike saw a small number pad nested into the wall beside it.

The object in his hand was metallic with two small holes set into one face. A moon-shaped etching lay beneath them, making a smiling face of the trio, and the words "try me" were carefully etched along the adjoining side. Frowning, Mike raised it carefully to his head, using his fingers to find the appropriate jacks. His arm felt strangely disconnected, as though half the nerves were deadened, and it took considerable fumbling before the device agreed click into its proper place. The lights seemed to stutter for a moment, and sitting somewhere within one wall, he could see the pair of dancing yellow lanterns.

"Cecil, what's going on?"

"Speak with your mind, my friend. You are in the gravest danger yet."

Mike tried to shrug, but his shoulders barely responded, so he just sat still as the lanterns continued to swirl, beckoning attention.

"The Imps believe you are working with ISIS. They think it is you who summoned them to Sule's rescue. It is only a matter of time before they learn the truth."

"Where am I?"

"The cage, the *Crimson Queen's* high security section of sickbay."

"Are we in hyperspace?"

"En route to Tyber."

Mike took a deep breath, "No wonder I'm having weird dreams."

The lanterns halted their dance, mid-stride.

"Dreams?"

"Realistic, actually. Ever hear of delayed action re-play?"

"Ah... understood."

Mike sighed. Cecil knew him too well.

"What's our ETA?"

"Fifteen hours."

"Anybody with you?"

The lanterns danced again, "The whole team, Pooper-dumper included."

"Does anyone have any ideas for getting me out of here?"

"Brain cells be burning over it. Trust in that."

"Could you be more specific?"

"Locks on doors, for starters. Codes to enter, unknown."

Mike smirked, "Unknown? To the ultimate hack?"

"Hack Cecil could, but not quietly. Not on this boat, and certainly not concerning their prize jewel."

Their prize jewel. Mike savored the sound of it as his smirk decomposed itself into a sullen stare.

"I'll get the combo. You guys figure out how to use it. Okay?"

"Agreed."

Mike disengaged the radio from his jacks, using several minutes debating where to hide it. Precious little was sacred in a hospital null, particularly one in which your every bodily function was monitored by various medical gadgetry. Even a woman doctor would have to get intimate from time to time. He finally settled on wedging it beneath the upper-torso sheath between his armpit and the castfoam, pressing the red button almost as an after-thought. A young man entered the room a minute later. He wore a white coat with snake insignia and had a soft, friendly face.

"Ah... Lieutenant Feso Sosrodjojo at your service."

Mike tried to grin, "Lieutenant, I can barely move."

"That's just the regen compound doing its work. It contains a mild paralytic."

"Take me off it."

"Ah... I can't do that."

"Lieutenant, don't make me pull rank here. Can you at least take me off the paralytic?"

He sighed, "If you don't mind pain, sure."

Mike nodded, "I'd also like to see myself. If you have a mirror somewhere..."

"No problem. I'll be right back."

A minute later, Mike discovered the nurse true to his word.

"Why are you being so nice to me, Feso?"

"Ah... you're Mr. Important, right? I see Lieutenant Torin always asking about you. He's very tight with the Commodore, I hear." He grinned knowingly, his eyebrows arching as if to say "nudge nudge... wink wink." Then he smiled, sort of shyly. "No, I'm always nice to the patients. It helps people heal, and you need all the healing you can get."

"What I need is to be able to move."

"Ah... you can move your arm and head."

"I want to be able to move my body. I want to be able to do my own digestion and defecation instead of these machines. Can you take me out of the body sheath?"

"Ah... I don't think that would be such a good idea."

"Please?"

* * *

Erik knew he'd overslept even before he was moderately conscious. He'd woken at his usual time several hours earlier, and recalling the previous night's excitement, promptly closed his eyes. It was a nice change, he decided, though a little too habit forming.

"Computer. Reinstate program wake-me."

"Done. You have messages waiting."

"Say messages, list."

"Commodore's quarters. Medical department, check-in desk. Custodial department, laundry section. Done."

"Laundry?"

"Illegal command ignored."

"Say messages, all."

"Lieutenant, I am eagerly awaiting a report concerning you-know-who. Make sure I am fully briefed by the time we arrive at Tyber."

He groaned.

Blip

"Hi. Lieutenant Torin, this is Sosrodjojo over at sickbay. In case you haven't gotten word yet, I figured I should let

you know before my shift ends. That patient of yours has woken up, and he seems completely cognizant as far as I can determine. You know, because the first thing they do usually is to start complaining. Anyway, I just thought you'd want to know as soon as possible.

Bye now."

Blip

"Hello. This is Chief Ater. We had an interesting time removing those seal-it patches off the fleximesh you sent us. I just wanted to let you know, Lieutenant, that there was a Draconian service insignia underneath. Showed up on the computer as external intelligence branch. I took the liberty of forwarding a memo up the chain of command, but I figured I should at least clue you in as well. Oh, and by the way, we figured out that we can't repair it on-board, but I'd like to shuttle it down to Tyber when we arrive and see what we can do with it on planet."

Blip

"There are no more messages."

"Erase messages, all."

Erik crawled out of the null tube and showered, whipping out his clearance badge as he entered the cage's guard room scarce minutes later.

"Hold it there, Mister."

Hunter's hair was slicked back from perspiration, and Erik guessed that she probably just finished her mid-morning workout. Rumor had it she kept a pair of grav-weights in her desk, and though he'd never confirmed it one way or the other, he'd read that some of the new-school, hands-on surgeons were taking up martial arts for their nerves. Either way, she looked pumped-up enough to belt him one.

"Where do you think you're going?"

He put on his best smile, "Where's it look like I'm going?"

"It looks like you're trying, rather foolishly I might add, to sneak into the cage."

"How observant of you."

"Don't even think it. I have a patient in there who needs his sleep."

"Doctor, this will only take a moment. Open the door."

"Don't open it. Lieutenant, the answer is emphatically no."

The guard looked between them, obviously befuddled. Erik knew she out-ranked him, but he also knew that he had the power of God to call upon for all the guard was concerned. He pulled the writ from his shin pocket.

"You see this?"

"Yes sir."

"You see the seal?"

"Yessir."

"You recognize it?"

"Yessir!"

"Open the door."

Dr. Hunter stood behind, her mouth gaping open with a string of saliva ready to spill to the floor.

"Nobody ever told me that ISIS was involved!"

"You never asked, and keep your voice down."

The guard began punching in the access number once they reached the cell.

"The door can only be opened from this side. The number is two-four-one-five-three. You key it in from the other side, and it'll tell me that you've entered it correctly. Then I key it on this side, and the door opens."

"Keep it open until I say otherwise."

"Yessir."

The cell door slid into the wall, and Erik entered, followed by a pair of irate footsteps. Her patient was reclining diagonally in the gravitic null, his body sheath laying along the wall behind him. A short, folded chair rested against the near corner, a mirror propped against one of its legs, and another chair, unfolded, sat facing him directly as though he were fully expecting the intrusion. He smiled, his head jacks gleamed in the eerie, turquoise light.

"Lieutenant Torin, I take it."

Erik sat down, Hunter preferring to stand and look threatening.

"Why are you out of your body sheath?"

The patient shrugged, a pained wince traveling the length of his face, "I no longer required it."

"I'll be the judge of that. I can't believe Feso didn't tell me he did this. Has he been administering the regen compound?"

"More or less."

"More or less?"

She examined the playback for all of two seconds.

"What happened to the paralytic?"

"I needed to move."

"Moving is exactly what you don't need. Mister... Mister Doe, you have been shot several times."

"Twice. Only two got through."

"Only two?! Look Mister... whoever the hell you are! If you saw yourself yesterday dripping in blood..."

Erik broke in, "Doctor! Please."

"Lieutenant..."

"Doctor, this is a very unusual patient. Please allow him a moment or two of insanity. I can assure you, it comes with the territory."

"I will not put up with..."

"Due to security matters, I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

"What?!"

"I am asking, Doctor. Please, don't force me to go further."

Tiger-eyes glared down on him, "I don't care what kind of connections you have, Torin. This is coming around. You hear me?"

"Fine. Get her out of here."

She left before the guard could muster the courage, and Erik made a toothy grin, the sort he used to practice in front of a mirror just to break up his buddies during oral exams.

"Guard, you can close the door now. So..."

"So..."

"How was Calanna?"

Mike frowned, "Difficult."

"Really. I would never have guessed."

"Lieutenant, why am I being locked up?"

"Precautions. For your own safety, mainly. After all, how often do we get a genuine ISIS operative on board? And that's not even considering the valuable information which you carry... yes?"

Mike nodded, "Yes, but you may be under a misconception. I'm not an operative."

"Who are you?"

He took a deep breath, hoping his scratchy, wounded voice sounded convincing.

"The name's Mikaelis Caiton. I was originally one of John Clay's men."

"DSS?"

"No. Far from it. I was working only for John. He brought me over from Tizar to keep an eye on Ambassador Kato, but somehow one of your operatives, her name was Sule... no last name, I guess... somehow she found out about me and basically made an offer I couldn't refuse."

"What sort of an offer?"

"Initiation into ISIS."

"She doesn't have that authority, Mr. Caiton."

"Call me Mikaelis."

"She lied to you."

"I'm not surprised. Do you want to hear the rest or not?"

"Please."

"First, what are you willing to offer me?" Mike grinned, his question a little too direct. Erik grinned back.

"Look, Mikaelis. If I wanted to, I could just burn the information from your brain."

Mike dropped his grin, "Well, if you put it that way... I started working as a liaison between Clay and your people and managed to escape when things eventually went down on Calanna."

"What happened?"

"Clay turned triple agent on us. He sacrificed his own life in that nuclear incident you no doubt heard about and managed to kill Erestyl and destroy the ISIS headquarters in a single, calculated strike."

Erik sat back, utterly befuddled.

"How did you escape?"

"Luck. Sule dumped a copy of our mind scanner readings to crystal. I then accompanied her to the starport to deposit them into an interstellar postal envelope. She doesn't like to take chances; that's one thing I liked about her."

"How did you get wounded?"

"Two of Clay's goons tried to make short work of us at the starport. They were locals. Real temporary hires. They didn't even know their source of income had already reduced himself to a jumble of sub-molecular particles."

Really tacky way to go, if you ask me."

"And what about Sule?"

"She was wounded also. We managed to get to a starship, but its occupants weren't too crazy to have us there.

She fought well, but..."

Erik took a deep breath, trying to digest the story as quickly as Mike had made it up.

"Where's the envelope addressed to?"

"If I tell you that, what keeps you from just killing me?"

Erik shrugged, "Nothing. You're going to have to trust me."

"I don't think so."

"Perhaps you should. It could be your last opportunity... to think I mean."

Mike nodded, "I'll take you to it, but not until I have a chance to at least introduce myself to your superiors. If you find that unreasonable, then take your chances with the mind scanner, and I'll take mine."

Blue light shifted along the Lieutenant's features as he considered the offer. He finally stood up.

"I should warn you that insolence is not tolerated in ISIS."

"Neither is stupidity," Mike countered, "at least according to Sule."

Erik keyed in the combination as he reached the door, oblivious to the shift in his prisoner's gaze. After the door closed again, Mike stumbled over to the folded chair, taking the mirror and placing it flat against the metal deck. Amidst all the gleaming silver, it had either gone unnoticed or been disregarded as trivial. He took a deep breath and re-attached the radio. It took a minute before Cecil's dancing, yellow lanterns returned.

"Greetings."

"Greetings yourself. I got it. It's two-four-one-five-three."

"Copy that. You'll be out in no time."

The lanterns disappeared, and Mike disengaged the radio from his jacks, hiding it again while wondering how long "no time" would take.

* * *

It was just a little blinker. To anyone else on the bridge, it would have been beneath notice, but Tabor knew what it meant. He'd just barely finished re-configuring his display for that one little light. His personal message board began scrawling letters almost immediately. "There. See that?"

He opened a channel to engineering. Nakaguchi was talking on the other end even before the line opened.

"...just like I said. Did you catch it?"

Tabor smiled, "I see it," though he had to admit to himself that he could scarcely believe it. "What do you think is causing it?"

"You're the communications genius. You tell me."

Tabor imported the section of hyperfield fractometer readings which his configuration had obligingly saved narrow seconds before they would have been consigned to electronic oblivion with the rest of the computer's standard erasures. With a few key strokes, he converted the data to a graph, and his eyes grew wide at the puzzling image. Nakaguchi was right. It was pure chaos, except for those few seconds where a series of peaks and troughs appeared with perfectly equidistant delays.

"You see it?"

"Yeah. I see it, alright. I just don't know what it is."

"I do."

"What?"

Nakaguchi laughed, "It's the slogs of space."

"You're doing this, aren't you? This is a joke."

"A sick and dangerous joke."

"Well, somebody's doing it. This does not happen naturally."

"That's what I've been telling you. You should have seen it last time. It went on for more than a minute. I wish I was ready for it. I would of saved it."

Tabor nodded, "I wish you had. A few seconds isn't much to go on. I'll get back to you if I figure anything out."

"You do that."

The line closed with a fitful pop, and Tabor began running the standard code-cracker routines. Lish looked up, yawning contagiously. They'd both got on duty less than an hour ago, and her sleepiness had been infectious until now.

"What's up?"

"Got a little mystery."

* * *

"Well, it's no mystery to me. I know how men are. Oooh, you think you're tough, don't you?"

Carla retaliated with a full round kick, knocking Hunter back at least four feet. The doctor didn't even seem fazed.

"I'm telling you, it was infuriating."

"Well, don't take it out on me, sister."

"Why not?!"

Carla had to duck and then some, finally retreating to her safe corner.

"Alice you bitch, you are in a bad mood."

"Don't call me that."

"Hey, it's okay. I'm one too. I freely admit it. Now if only we could get all men to admit they're assholes, the universe might be an honest place to live."

"No... I mean don't call me Alice."

"It's your name, ain't it?"

"Stop gabbing and fight."

Carla kept to the defensive. She could tell her favorite karate student was out for bloody, no-holds-barred aggression, and it was a beautiful sight.

"You keep on like this, and I'm gonna have you in the tournament. Talk about focus. The only problem is that you're so pissed, you aren't thinking."

She dished back just what the doctor ordered, except that Hunter didn't know it until she was already on the floor, dazed and with Carla's foot scrunching down on her nose.

"Damn."

"Ha! And you thought you had me. Didn't you?"

Hunter stood up, rubbing the leg which took the brunt of the take-down.

"For maybe half a second."

"Longer than that. You were getting wicked, woman."

"I have good reason to be wicked."

"Yeah, well... you have to think and be wicked at the same time. Once you have that down, all men better run and hide."

Hunter smiled. It had taken a while, but Carla was finally getting to her. She always knew the doctor's weak spots.

"I didn't say all men."

"No, but that is what you mean. C'mon girl. You don't have to pretend different. I know."

Hunter shrugged, picking up a towel, "It's just that they're so stupid."

"Ain't that the truth."

"They refuse to listen to reason. They're pig-headed."

"I heard that right. Hey, where's that come from, anyway?"

"What?"

"Pig-headed."

"You never heard of pigs?"

"No."

Hunter started to laugh, except that she was too angry and couldn't sustain it, so it just came out like all wrong, like a pig's snort. Carla watched her, a hurt scowl crossing her cheeks.

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm stupid or something? Listen girl, just because not everybody goes to college for ten years..."

"No... I didn't mean it like that. Pigs are proto-slogs. That's just the sound they made."

Carla looked at her again, that strange sort of smile forming along her lips like she figured she was being lied to for the fun of it.

"I can do that. Listen..." *snort* "Hey, this is great." *snort* *snort*

"You're a real natural."

"I've always been able to make that noise. That's a pig noise?"

Hunter nodded, "I friend of mine was doing her dissertation on some of the old DNA samples. They were supposedly brainy animals for their time."

snort *snort*

"You should have been a science major, Carla."

"I'll pass on that. The closest I ever got to science was a psychology class they made me take. It was real cheesy. For the final project, we had to find some sort of phenomena and explain it, okay?"

"Uh oh..."

"So, this guy in our co-op, he was my subject, except he didn't know it. See? Every time he got hungry, he would go over to the cold food locker, open it up, and just sort of stare inside like some meal was going to jump out at him all of a sudden and make itself. You ever see men do this?"

"Not really."

"Well, they do. If you ever bothered to just watch people, you will notice a lot of men exhibiting this sort of behavior. And it wasn't like it wasn't his food. It was everybody's food."

"Okay. So what was your explanation?"

"The cold."

"Huh?"

"The cold air hitting his stomach caused it to shrink, and so by standing in front of the thing while it was open, he actually reduced the amount of free space in his stomach. How ya like it?"

Hunter smiled sympathetically, "What grade did you get?"

"It went down as an incomplete. The professor advised me to forget about the sciences and take some trig to cover the slot. Can't say I'm sorry. I'm pretty damn good at what I do."

"When do you use trig?"

"When is your friend ever gonna meet a pig?"

Hunter pondered Carla's eccentric sort of logic on the way back to sickbay. It was already an hour into her sleep shift, but she felt determined to immobilize her patient even if it meant chaining him to the wall and whipping him with warm squash, and ditto for Lieutenant Torin if he was unfortunate enough to still be loitering in the general vicinity. Her thoughts were cut short by the door, however, or more specifically, by it's remaining closed as she tried to walk through it. She picked herself off the floor, holding her bruised nose in one hand as she looked around to see if anybody had witnessed her comedic display of dexterity.

Sickbay was never locked. She slid her ID through the scanner slot, but the door refused to budge, defiant and imposing as never before. She considered kicking it, but buried the notion in her list of unspent aggressions.

She finally hit the white comm-switch on the right.

"Can somebody open the door, please?"

The security button beckoned. She hit the white switch again, closing the line and hit the red switch with an angry jab of her thumb.

"Security?"

The door slid compliantly into the wall, and a tall, lanky figure stood before her. Behind the black face mask, soft blue eyes seemed to rotate within their sockets. She didn't even feel the two darts hitting her stomach until a pair of gloved hands caught her fall and carried her gently inside.

"Who... what..."

The doorway began to spin and blur, and as the walls closed quietly upon her, she heard a grainy voice reverberate somewhere in the hazy distance.

"This is security.... Please identify yourself. Hello?"

* * *

The Commodore leaned back, seemingly impressed with the story, and Erik hoped she wouldn't ask about specifics. He was still fuzzy on the details, himself.

"Let me get this straight. He wants an interview?"

Erik shrugged, "He wants into ISIS... or so he purports."

She frowned, glancing at the wall image of Roxanne's Palace on Tyber. Computer generated banks of orange, acid smog blew past the structure's summit, somehow clouding her eyes with memories of the sunrise on Calanna.

"Commodore?"

"Even had I the clout, I wouldn't use it. It's not like the Navy. ISIS doesn't take applications. Besides, he's too attached to Clay, who already proved himself a traitor after we had trusted him."

"According to Caiton."

"The more I think about it, the more difficult I find it to believe this Mikaelis Caiton. Why did Clay expose his entire network on Tizar if he was never with us? As a sacrifice?"

Erik nodded, "Perhaps."

"No. Even were they all discards, what did he have to gain by risking Erestyl?"

"He managed to destroy the operation of Calanna."

"A minuscule victory entirely beneath mention. He won nothing. This prisoner would have us believe that he sacrificed his life and risked Erestyl for nothing. Preposterous."

"Maybe Clay had second thoughts. That's the only explanation."

Reece cast him a cool stare, "There is another. He could be making the whole thing up."

"Too many pieces fit. He knows a great deal. He must have been on the inside."

She nodded, "That is all he has told us. Nothing more."

"Still, given the possibility that he's telling us the truth, shouldn't we at least humor him?"

"Yes. We should. Regardless, I do want to meet him. If nothing else, a more thorough questioning might serve to reveal who he really is."

Beep

"Reece here."

"This is Dunham. There's been an incident at sickbay. Your John Doe has escaped."

Reece looked up, eyes cold as ice.

"On my way."

Chapter Twenty-One

Hunter awoke in the infirmary, a swarm of stewards and part-time medics darting frantically from null to null. They dressed the patients with neurogram napkins and monitored pulse rates, such was the extent of their training. She heard Feso's voice somewhere in the back of the room, delivering instructions while donning a white service coat over his red and pink striped pajamas, the only calm voice in amidst a babble of cacophony.

"Well look who's among the living." He quickly stepped over, reaching for her arm as she tried to sit upright.

"There, doctor. Just let it pass."

"The living?"

"Don't worry. Everyone seems fine."

"What happened?"

"You tell me. I just got here."

She glanced over his shoulder as the haze slowly dissipated from her mind. Commodore Reece stood with the Captain and Lieutenant Torin near the main desk, a first-class power-huddle if she'd ever seen one.

"You didn't tell me we had guests."

"Doctor..."

"C'mon."

She tore the napkin from her forehead and began traversing the distance with Feso's shoulder in tow, not a mean task considering his reluctance. It wasn't that he minded substituting for a pair of crutches. On the contrary, he'd do anything to help a patient. His hesitation was founded in cowardice, the prospect of interrupting an impromptu executive conference rating somewhere between jamming his finger in an iris valve and taking a long walk out a short airlock.

"Doctor, this is not such a good idea. You should lay back down and rest."

"Steady, Feso. You drop me and it goes on your permanent record."

The Commodore was spitting out orders left and right, her voice crisp and determined and more than a little peeved.

"I want his image circulated among the crew. Also, post armed stewards at the lifts and escalators. Shoot to maim."

Shoot to maim?

"Excuse me, sir. Might somebody tell me what's going on?"

"Your patient has escaped, Doctor. What do you last remember?"

Hunter took a deep breath and let go of Feso's shoulder.

"I was trying to enter sickbay, and the door was locked for some reason. I opened a channel to security. Then the door opened and... everything went black."

"Hypo darts. You took a double tap in the belly. Did you get a look at him?"

"I... remember a face mask."

"We found this in your hand."

Reece handed her a flimsi, glowing pink letters scrawled across its face: "If you ever want to see me again, don't

conduct a search. It's tacky, and you'll only inconvenience the passengers, particularly if you get too close to me."

Erik broke in, "Commodore..."

Reece put up a steady hand.

"Do you have any idea why this was left in your hand, Doctor?"

"I was the ranking officer."

"Did anyone besides the medical staff and guard have access to the prisoner?"

"Lieutenant Torin."

"Any passengers?"

"No sir."

Reece pressed her lips together, "One more question, Doctor. Is he well enough to survive without medical attention?"

"That depends, sir."

"Give me an educated guess."

"Assuming there are no complications, yes."

"Complications?"

"He's very weak. When the regen-compound wears off, his condition will worsen. How badly, I can't say."

"How soon?"

Hunter glanced toward her thumbnail chronometer.

"He's already past due, but there's a two to four hour grace period on the compound."

Reece nodded, "There will be a meeting in the executive conference lounge in two hours. I want an account of inventory losses."

"Aye, sir."

Hunter about-faced as well as her wobbly legs would allow before the Commodore's words hit her.

"Inventory losses?"

The medicine cabinets hung open, boxes of various drugs and chemicals scattered haphazardly on the floor. Feso pulled a chair out of the mess, offering her a place to sit down. She ignored the gesture, bending over to sort through the contents of some of the emptied boxes.

"What did they take?"

"Haven't had time to check."

She sat down in the middle of the floor, starting to pick up and sort the miscellaneous bottles, jars, and canisters into tight, alphabetical rows.

"We'd better find out then, Feso. We've only got two hours."

* * *

Johanes administered the injection with all the delicacy of a marsh slog in heat.

"Oops, missed the vein again."

"Ow... you sure you know you're doing?"

"Don't worry."

If not for Cecil and his bottle of miruvor, Mike figured he'd be heading back to sickbay on account of his health.

"Told you you'd be out in no time."

Mike shrugged as Johanes withdrew the hypo, placing the empty plastic capsule in his pocket.

"You're certain about Sule."

"Positive."

"You saw her dead."

"To put it mildly."

"And what about the body?"

Mike accepted a highbowl by way of congratulations, pausing before taking a sip.

"The body?"

"Anything on it?"

"I don't know. She was wearing a vacc suit."

Johanes shot Cecil a worried glance as he caught the next highbowl, its course erratic as it teetered, languid, from side to side. Spokes received the next, and Cecil finally sent his own spinning on a collision course with the others until it clinked gently against each in consecutive sequence.

"To freedom."

"To freedom," everyone concurred, everyone except the Draconian.

"I don't want to disappoint you all, but we're not out of the asteroids yet. We have about enough time for one drink."

"Two drinks," Spokes took another sip and started reattaching his headgear.

"One drink. If they decide to conduct a ship-wide search, I'd like to know about it before it's too late."

"That would be uncouth."

"That never stopped ISIS before." Johanes gulped down the last of his drink like a man stranded in the desert.

Then he smiled. "I hereby conclude this celebration. Cecil, you stay here and monitor their communications. Michael, go to sleep. You've got six hours until the next injection."

"Terrific."

"Don't bitch. Spokes, you're with me."

"Okay, just a sec."

Mike poured himself another highbowl.

"Thanks. Everyone."

"Save your gratitude until we're dirtside. C'mon Spokes, we haven't got all millennium."

"Okay... jeeze."

Mike floated his half-drained highbowl toward the corner of the room as the door closed behind the dynamic if ill-disciplined duo. Cecil, meanwhile, leaned calmly beside his multi-wave radio, sipping miruvor and warming a left-over chili pita in the portable cooker. When it came out, the cheese oozed between the cracks in the flat-bread like a wad of snot leaking out the folds of an overused hanky.

"Want some?"

Mike winced, "I'll pass."

"Suit yourself."

"I'd rather stick to liquids for now."

"As in miruvor?"

"Whatever's being served."

Cecil's single camera danced a bit, the cat taking notice and pouncing on it with claws outstretched, "Your problem is you don't know when to quit."

"Untrue. I haven't gotten drunk for over a week... unless you count being force-fed by psychopaths."

"Well, congratulations," said almost like he meant it.

"Give me a break, Cecil. I'm on my second highbowl which is nowhere near my face."

"Why the sudden fit of restraint?"

Mike shrugged, "Maybe seeing that old weasel Gardansa slurping it down..." he grunted, crawling into the null-tube, "I dunno. I was shot recently, okay?"

"Good excuse as any."

"Besides, I want to keep clear-headed for a change. You check this place for bugs?"

"You calling Cecil a fool?"

Mike sighed, "Just do me a favor. Check again."

Setting the pita beside his multi-wave, Cecil dug a small box out of his suitcase. It's antenna telescoped out, and he proceeded to wave it around the room, switching off the light and then his multiwave as he scanned.

"Light on. You see. Nothing here but us chickens."

"Meow?"

"What's it key on?"

"Electrostatic emissions. Do us a favor and switch off the sleeper."

Mike complied, and Cecil waved the antenna over the null tube.

"Interesting," his friend commented, as though he'd found a strange insect on the bottom of his shoe.

"What? Something on the sleeper?"

"No. On you."

Cecil poked him with the antenna a few times, finally stopping at the belt by which Mike's loose-fitting robe was held shut.

"Johanes find this for you?"

Mike untangled it from around his waist, inspecting the stiff fabric until he found what he was looking for. The bug was flat and circular, like one of those old coins he used to find in the barrens, only a little thicker and without a stately, bearded profile on the side.

"One down."

Cecil kept looking, this time even more diligently than before, but the one was all they found. Cecil finally cracked it open.

"It's just a recorder. Looks like cheap crystal."

He put it back together and dropped it into the portable heater.

"Cheap crystal fries easy."

Mike smiled, "Now that we're alone, you can start by telling me everything."

Cecil sat down, his camera taking a thoughtful, sidelong pose as it dumped Pooper-dumper back to the carpet in a fitful of snarls and hairballs.

"Not much to tell."

"Humor me."

Cecil sighed, leaning himself backward until the multiwave became a makeshift pillow.

"Spokes showed up at the Sintrivani after you left, and we heard about the air strike over the three-vee. Assumed you were somehow involved, knowing your aptitude for mischief."

"I'm flattered."

"You should be. One of the offworlders waiting for transport must have sneaked near the landing platform with a camera, because next thing we see is Tizar's favorite gatherer hanging out the airlock of an orbit-bound vessel. Then some explosions in the sky. Made for an amusing show."

"I was on three-vee?"

"More or less. The back of your head was, at least. We knew who it was. Johanes dropped by a few hours later and basically confirmed what we saw."

"And so you guys decided to rescue me... just for kicks."

Cecil thought about it before answering, as though he was deciding whether to be polite or honest.

"Johanes gave you less than even odds against Sule. He wanted our help to finish her off."

"Assassination. This is getting even better."

"One might remind you that you're hardly virginal, Michael."

"I wasn't in it for money."

"Neither was I!"

Cecil spat the words out, pronoun included, pausing briefly to regain his composure. The cat darted to the corner of the room, certain a voice of that volume could only be directed at four-legged personages.

"We agreed to aid him in what he wanted, provided that he aid us in what we wanted."

"Which was?"

"Your rescue, given the unlikelihood that you would still be kicking after a confrontation with Sule."

Mike smiled meekly, a little embarrassed.

"That's it?"

The camera nodded, "In verbose totality."

"If it was just you, I'd buy it. Why's Spokes here?"

"Like Cecil said before, he seems to like you. We chipheads stick together."

Mike smirked, "That's pretty weak."

"Then call Cecil a liar. It won't be a first."

"What are you giving him? Free wedgies?"

Cecil chomped another bite from his cheese pita as he pondered the question. In the hackers lingo "free wedgies" equated to a gratis apprenticeship, master to novice, wizard to user, or between any other combination of disparate proficiencies: in short, Cecil to just about anyone. Before, Spokes was just the aspiring pupil. But now, given the risks involved, he was encroaching to the point of earning his keep, making the so-called "wedgies" not entirely free.

"What's it to you, Michael?"

"Well... I guess I'm just curious how this all came about. I've never known you to team-up with people, much less take on a long-term student."

"Life brings newness."

"Is that what you told Spokes?"

"Not precisely."

Mike laughed, then coughed.

"Try me."

"Get some RL." Real life, he meant.

"C'mon Cecil. Just the main points. You can spare the slogshit."

Cecil smirked, "Courage as an aspect of knowledge. Necessity of the will to seek. Proof of intents..."

"You waste my time, I waste yours?"

"Stop whining. It got you out, didn't it?"

Mike shrugged defensively, "I'm not whining. I don't really care that you're using him. It's merely a transaction as

far as he's concerned. I just wanted to know here everyone stands. For some reason," Mike tried to laugh, "I just couldn't picture you three guys coming all the way out here. You maybe. I mean, now we're more or less even again. Right?"

"More or less."

"But Johannes and Spokes... I thought I was dreaming."

"Maybe you are."

"No... I've got other dreams. I guess we both do."

Cecil was silent for a bit after that, finishing the pita and sucking down the last of his miruvor. Maybe he didn't know what to say. Mike tried closing his eyes, but sleep wouldn't come.

"Y'think we're gonna get out of here, Cecil?"

He didn't answer. Mike wondered if he'd even heard the question. With eyes glossed over, Cecil was already in the other world.

* * *

"See 'em? Self-replication detected. Zoom."

Chief Tuto looked from one monitor window to the other, his brown eyes narrowing on the detection pings as they appeared, divided, and vanished in short order. It was just as before, only quicker, as if they knew they'd been spotted.

"Where are they coming from?"

Dira shrugged, a tangle of amber hair falling over one eye.

"Tracer says medical, but look at the entry log."

"Could be stealthing. Run a CPU verify."

One hand danced over the keyboard, "Yeah... no... well, something was there. A difference of two percent detected for about... half a second."

"Run a full heads on exit channels, quick."

It was a waste of time, of course, and by the time they got around to checking out the entry logs, there were no entry logs. Tuto studied the blank screen with an equally blank expression, finally releasing an irritated grunt.

"This is getting rude."

"Maybe not."

Her hand did another dance, "Port 129 shows simultaneous closure."

Tuto glanced toward the wall-chart. 129 was one of the public aether ports. It could be accessed via wireless terminal, open to virtually any person on board.

"Entry logs?"

"Nope."

"He's not taking chances. And he's too fast to lock in place." He chewed on the thought. Speed usually bred sloppiness. "Do a frequency comparison on the ports."

Dira tapped a few more keys, her dark blue eyes scanning the row of frequencies as they scrolled off the monitor window. "Got it. Here's the band they were using, and here it's being used on Port 182. Same exact frequency."

Tuto nodded, not terribly surprised at their trespasser's lack of precautions. Too bad. The game had just been getting interesting.

"Feed in a command stop. We'll lock him in place and check the entry logs."

Her fingers complied, and the keyboard locked up as though somebody had yanked it off the desk.

"Huh?"

Tuto went to another console. Same story. He slammed a fist on the keyboard in frustration. Dira put a hand on his shoulder.

"That won't help."

"It makes me feel better."

"Look at the port display."

One-eight-two flashed all the way from the command console to the security desk, as cruel a set-up as he'd ever witnessed. Dira seemed to smile at their predicament.

"We got re-routed, sir."

Tuto pushed the air from his lungs and began pacing around the room, re-booting each of the consoles in turn. It would be several minutes before they were back online, and somebody out there was making the most of the time, probably laughing hysterically.

"This is getting very rude."

* * *

It felt a little like free-ditching off the Aerial Palace, the rush of adrenalin and anxiety clawing at the will's outer shell. He could break a sweat just thinking about it, because every time the possibility of fate catching up was both real and expected. They had a place called "Gyron's Fall", named after some poor sap whose grav-restrainer failed. Not his fault. It just suddenly decided to up and quit in mid-air. Became the biggest joke halfway across the Realm. Gyron ended up bouncing, and they dug a little crater and buried him head-first, his feet sticking up with a pair of boots that had foggers in their soles, such was the Draconian sense of humor. Johanes remembered laughing out loud at the time, wishing he could have been there.

"It's locked."

Spokes waved his hands in an apparently arcane gesture as the door slid open. Johanes regarded his triumphant expression with all the amusement it deserved.

"We're on a schedule here, okay?"

"Sorry."

Spokes followed him inside with a casual waltz, a sharp contrast to his crisp-collared maintenance uniform. That was okay. It made him look like he knew what he was doing. Johanes paced about the room, flipping a power screwdriver end over end.

"There are fire sprinklers in here."

"So there are."

"Here, hold this."

The chiphead still regarded the canister with a mixture of curiosity and ambivalence. All he knew was that it held clear liquid sandwiched between white powder and a fan, each separated by a sheet of impacted polymer with radio-controlled shutters. Enough information for the average ten-year-old, Johanes figured, opening a vent.

"There's a sensor in here also."

"So?"

"Tell Cecil we'll need to deactivate it just before this is triggered. All of them. This has to work perfectly or we all get caught. Understand?"

"I still don't know what you're talking about."

Johanes bit his tongue. Spokes knew, all right. He just didn't want to admit it, the perfect conspirator, hedging all bets by feigning ignorance.

"Relay the message. Can you do that much?"

The tall one sighed and finally nodded, soft blue eyes seeing no ready alternative.

* * *

"First of all, we're going to find the escapee. There are no alternatives. There will be no excuses for failure."

Reece stared around the chamber, slowly taking in all their expressions. Every officer in the room knew that organizing a shi-wide search on a ship the size of the *Crimson Queen* was no mean task. The deadline only increased the challenge.

"As you all know, we'll be dropping back into normal space in about nine hours. The traffic situation at Tyber will be enough of a problem without an fugitive to worry about, so it would seem that time is of the essence. Keep that fact in mind while you make your reports. Captain?"

Dunham leaned forward, nodding to the Commodore as his broad mass shifted. With the press of a button, Mike's image materialized over the conference table in three dimensions.

"This is the man we're looking for. Pictures have already been distributed to the crew, several of whom have noticed a likeness with this man."

He pressed the button again, and the jacks were replaced by an unkept mane of long brown hair.

"His real name is Michael Harrison. He's a gatherer with the Tizarian division of Galactic Press. We believe he has two allies on board. They used hypo guns with a short-duration sedative in order to incapacitate the guard stationed at the cage. They also tranquilized Dr. Hunter and two specialists."

Reece interrupted, "Has the hypo compound been identified?"

Hunter nodded, "Senthinol-3. It's a consumer product made at a number of systems in this sector. Been in circulation for the past three centuries."

The Captain looked around slowly, drawing presence from the silence before continuing.

"Harrison is wanted for homicide on Calanna. He is also suspected of impersonating an ISIS operative in order to

get aboard, a felony under interstellar law."

"He's wanted for homicide?"

Dunham nodded, "Apparently, but we don't have any details."

It made sense. The Calannans were generally private about such things. But that didn't explain why he wasn't caught.

"They must of sent us his image recognition code."

"Yes, but because of the unusual way he attained passage, he was never checked out."

Reece bit her lip.

"Any idea on how his associates got the cell combination?"

"We have a theory. Security ran a level two diagnostic of the ship's computer after the break-in. They found a number of recon-worms. We've been attempting to trace their source, but so far, no luck."

"You're saying they broke into the system and just read the combination?"

"So it would seem."

Reece bit her lip again.

"Those combinations are well protected. Why wasn't an alarm activated?"

"We don't know."

"How are they avoiding our trace?"

Dunham turned toward a petty officer at his right, "Chief Tuto?"

"They're using a variety of means. Stealth, entry-log erasures, misdirection tactics. They've also found out how to slip into unused frequencies unobserved."

"I thought all unused frequencies were observed continuously."

"They've managed to draw out our observation routines and are sending data packets between the check points. We also believe they're using above-board frequencies for voice transmissions."

"Have you conferred with communications about this?"

"Actually sir, they were already aware of it." He nodded across the table to another officer. Tabor shifted in his seat, realizing he was suddenly on-stage.

"Uh... six hours ago..."

"Who are you."

"Tabor. Ensign. First Class. Communications Officer, sir."

He looked raw, like a typical navy recruit, the coppery-orange hair cropped so close to his head that his appearance reminded her of a turnup. She guessed that his problem had more to do with nerves than hair. He seemed so scared it made her jitter just to look at him.

"Go ahead, Ensign."

"Six hours ago, one of our engineers noticed some very interesting readings from an instrument which measures fractures in the normal-space bubble around the ship. The device operates by bouncing a short-wave signal along the bubble's area perimeter."

"Excuse me, Ensign," Reece waved from the other side of the table. "Is this going to take a while to explain? We don't have time for a lecture in astrophysics."

"Umm... I'll be brief, sir."

"Very brief."

"Yes sir. The gist of it is that this radio frequency is being used continuously while we are in hyperspace, but to someone unfamiliar with engineering, it looks like normal line noise between usable bands, thus qualifying it for exploitation by a tight frequency transmission."

"You're telling me that they're using a voice frequency which is already in use?"

"Anyone sufficiently skilled in communications can compress transmissions into data packets, fire each one off several times, then decompress the packets, check for inconsistencies caused by the line noise, correct, and presto; they're using a frequency which also happens to be in use by a non-sentient system, and their transmission goes through entirely undetected. But in this case, it didn't."

"I think you just confused me more. Try the gist again."

Tabor took a deep breath, "Okay. Prior to jump, they must have been looking for an above-board frequency with residual noise. Something that wasn't being used, but that had enough random noise on it that it wouldn't be scanned like a clean frequency where their transmission would be picked up in an instant. This frequency qualified perfectly. The computer was running tests on it by generating random noise, transmitting it externally to the sensor, and making comparisons to see whether or not the sensor was operating within its safety parameters."

"So you're saying this particular band was ideal for their purposes?"

"Very much so. If this had been an older craft where the comm system isn't as tight and clean as it is on this ship,

they would have had a lot more to choose from, but on this vessel we don't really have any junkie above-board frequencies, so their choice was very limited."

"And our engineers caught them when their transmissions interfered with the operation of the sensors."

"Correct."

Reece nodded, "I understand, but why wasn't this reported immediately?"

Tabor took a deep breath, "I didn't learn about it until I came on shift about three hours ago, and at that point I didn't believe it. By the time the second transmission rolled around, I was convinced, but..."

"There were two?"

"Three, sir. The first six hours ago which lasted for a minute or two. The second, a little over two and a half hours ago, which lasted only few seconds. And the third began a little over two hours ago and has been continuous since then?"

Reece bit her lip yet again, this time hard enough to make her reconsider the action.

"Let me get this straight. Harrison has been using a restricted frequency for the past six hours, the past two hours continuously, and this is the first I hear of it?"

"Sir, we didn't even know what we were dealing with until news of the prisoner escape started to circulate. For all we knew, it was some sort of localized hyperspace phenomenon or even a prank."

"A prank?"

"Yes sir."

Reece regarded Dunham with a sinister stare, and the Captain's dark cheeks grew rosy under her scrutiny.

"Well, it's a relief that the crew has grown proficient at entertaining themselves. We wouldn't want morale to suffer. Ensign, can we pinpoint the signal source?"

"Not with the equipment on board."

"Can you at least tell us what it's saying?"

"The instrument's readings are used and removed from computer memory in a continuous cycle, so we lost the first transmission entirely. That's gone forever. The second one lasted only for a few seconds, and I've already tried around a thousand standard decryption routines, none of which has worked. I wouldn't put too much hope on us ever deciphering its contents, at least not any time soon, and certainly not without very powerful computer support. The current transmission is still being saved, but I expect that we'll find the same problem we're having with the second."

Reece took a deep breath, "So in other words, no."

Tabor just sat there looking pale.

"In the future, Ensign, when I ask you a question, don't give me a speech. A yes or no will suffice."

"Aye sir."

"Can you jam the frequency?"

"Yes sir."

"Do it. Immediately. You're dismissed."

"Aye sir."

He saluted and exited.

"Chief Tuto, I want all passenger access to the computer stopped and aether port access restricted to preverified frequencies. You're dismissed."

"Aye sir."

Reece waited for him to leave as she studied the stony expression on Dunham's face. He seemed to be waiting for some comment, or perhaps a pat on the head. She might have obliged him had she a sturdy club.

"Pranks?"

"They do happen, sir."

"We could have spotted this hacker hours in advance if there hadn't been such leniency. Now that they've had hours to feel out our system..."

"It makes them all the more dangerous," he took the luxury of completing her thought.

"I want one of your people to run through the passenger lists and see who looks like they might qualify. Unless those have already been erased."

"Will do, sir."

"Also, see if any of the passengers are mentioned in our library records as being associated with this Mr. Harrison."

"Of course."

Reece leaned back, seemingly examining the ceiling.

"I'd like to order a re-boot as well."

Dunham smiled, "Not a good idea, sir."

"No, not while we're in hyperspace," the Commodore reluctantly agreed. "Lieutenant."

Erik snapped to attention, "Yes sir."

"Give me a scenario."

He took a breath, "Gatherer in search of a story. He learns more than is wise; breaks some planetary laws. He decides to turn tail but gets cornered at the starport. He calls us, pretends that he's an ISIS agent, and we obligingly offer him a ride. His friends figure out what happened easily enough. They rescue him."

"A great deal of risk on their part. And what about Erestyl? What about the information we so ardently desire?"

Erik bit his lip, "More than likely it is gone, blown to bits by Clay. Perhaps he wasn't lying except about his own role."

"If he is simply a gatherer, then how did he happen upon Draconian fleximesh?"

"Bought it at a Calannic yard sale?"

"Right," Reece smiled, then frowned again, looking back across the table at nobody in particular. "It seems to me this whole thing reeks of the DSS, and who more willing to take such a risk, provided the pay-off is right? Which would suggest that Harrison is important to them alive. All the more reason for us to take him alive. Commander Simms?"

"Sir."

He had broad-shoulders and a square jaw, the sort that made her wonder if he spent his free time doing push-ups in three-gee while chewing down carrots and ironweed.

"Are we prepared for a top to bottom?"

"Yes sir."

"Word to the troops?"

"Shoot to maim, sir."

"I don't want him dead."

"Aye sir."

She began to wonder if there was a half a brain in there. Then she noticed the look on Hunter's face, half way between fear and urgency.

"Doctor, you look like you have something itching up your backside."

"Yes sir."

"Spit it out."

"Well, first of all, I think this Mr. Harrison is in trouble... to put things mildly, sir."

The Commodore's eyebrows arched playfully.

"Enlighten me."

"We found several vials of Torogon-66 missing from our stores. It's a wide-spectrum regen-formula common to the outer worlds. We've kept it in stock for patients who are unsuited or prove allergic to the in-house compound."

"So?"

"The Torogon formula is never injected directly following use of our in-house compound without an intervening stabilizer and a twelve hour waiting period. If this isn't done, the interaction of the formula and our compound will cause a high-potential for misreads of the patient's DNA."

"What, he mutates?" said with a smirk.

"I doubt he'll live long enough for that. It'll begin by wiping out the delicate systems, two critical ones being the immune and nervous systems. He'll lose control of his lungs in a day or two, and he'll have invent and new way of fending off opportunistic viruses sooner than that."

"Did they take any stabilizers?"

"I haven't found any missing."

Reece nodded, "We can only assume that our thieves are pharmaceutically inept. They have probably already injected him. Is there any treatment?"

"Yes, there's a compound called Anamesa."

"Go ahead."

"It'll stop the interaction between the regens and boost the immune system so the body has time to restore itself, but if it isn't applied within the first six to twelve hours, you can forget it. It'll be too late to do anything without extensive medical resources, much greater than we have on-board."

Dunham sat upright, "How soon until he gets sick?"

"Like I said, it varies, though usually by the time the patient is seriously ill, it's too late to apply the Anamesa. You can still artificially boost their immunity to specific diseases, however, the damage to their system, per se, is already there."

"And restoring it is not easy."

Hunter shook her head, "Some might say impossible."

The Commodore grinned from ear to ear, "I hate to be celebrating another person's misfortune, but all in all, that's excellent news. I want our supply of Anamesa destroyed, and I want our mind-scanner readied for use."

"Sir?"

"You have moral reservations, Doctor?"

Hunter averted her eyes, "Sir, we have never used the mind-scanner."

"You don't have trained staff?"

"No, it's not that. I just... it's over ten years old. I don't even know if it'll work. And as for destroying the Anamesa, if you do capture this Mr. Harrison, that may be the only thing you have to bargain with."

"Oh, don't worry Doctor. We'll capture him. I just have no intentions of serving him the opportunity to live, and besides, this way it isn't anyone's fault." She smiled, then frowned.

"What is it, Doctor?"

"They took more than the Torogon-66."

"Such as?"

"Hydrochloric acid and potassium cyanide."

"Enough to pose a threat?"

"Not to the entire ship, but to a small section, yes. I would like poison filters circulated to the crew and passengers."

Reece shook her head, "We don't have enough except for the senior officers. I wouldn't worry about it too much Doctor. It's a lame threat. He's asking us what its worth to catch him. The answer is yes... it's worth a few lives."

"I am prepared to declare quarantine."

"That won't be necessary." Reece shrugged, "They probably won't use it. They would have nothing to gain and everything to lose. I could see them smuggling it to Tyber, but..."

"And that sits well with you?"

"The Tyber corporation is just barely Imperial aligned as it is. We owe them no favors."

"Sir, the Tyberian population is extremely impacted. In such an environment..."

"I know doctor. Look, cyanide gas is easy to make; its components are easy to come by. Nobody will trace it to us, and even if they do, we can simply deny involvement."

"Commodore..."

"Don't argue with me, Doctor. There's more at stake than you may realize."

"Sir... with all due respect, human life is at stake."

Reece felt her cheeks flush red with anger. What did she think this was? A playground?!

"Doctor, I can see that you've been under a great deal of stress lately. I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but I'm relieving you of your post until we leave the Tyber system. I want to you get some rest, and under no circumstances are you permitted to discuss any of this with anyone. Understood?"

"You're relieving me of duty?"

"Affirmative."

"Sir..."

"Don't argue with me, Doctor. I'm made up my mind. Now go to your quarters and get some rest."

"But sir..."

"That's an order."

Hunter took a deep breath, "Yes sir."

* * *

The bridge seemed immersed in slumber as Tabor exited the lift. The reason was fairly apparent. Most of the officers took their sleep shift during the ship's final hours in hyperspace. It was a common practice. Everyone wanted to wake up and be ready for sightseeing. That was the real attraction to working on board a liner.

Of course, somebody had to stick around. The Captain didn't want people calling the bridge to end up talking to a computer. It would leave a bad impression, and people would start wondering if anybody was ever up there in the proverbial nerve center. It was such a joke. The computer was in charge while in hyperspace, and everyone knew it. They just refused to accept it.

So while everyone else was dozing, he and Lish often had the whole place to themselves. A communications officer had to be there. Communication still went on, hyperspace or normal space, it didn't matter. But she was a sensor operator. She could go to sleep, though she seemed to prefer the solitude, fiddling with the equipment during the wee hours, programming new image recognition routines, skimming library files, and generally being a nuisance

or a quiet companion as the mood suited her.

"How'd it go?"

"Oh... not so well."

She grinned, turning back to her work station.

"Lots of questions?"

"Yeah. A few too many. Oh, terrific. What are they doing now?"

She turned around again.

"What is it?"

"These bastards. I don't believe this. Just when I'm about to jam their frequency..."

Lish studied the monitor from over his shoulder, "Why is everything blinking?"

"They using the clean bands, must be switching continuously. They're not even trying to disguise it anymore."

He hit a switch, listening for the familiar pop signaling a channel opening.

"Bernie?"

"Huh? Oh, hi."

"Bernie, have you been watching the free lanes lately?"

"Yeah. Did you just freak the system? I think it's space sick."

"It's working fine. Look, I'm gonna need you to hook up our wide-band transmitter."

"The shouter?"

"Yeah. We need to jam all the free lanes."

"All of 'em? What's up?"

"Freeloaders."

"Ah... so we've got a little war on our hands, do we? Just gimme a minute or two to get it online, and we'll have 'em sending smoke signals."

* * *

"Okay, open sesame."

The door complied, and Johanes peeked inside, spraying a canister of air-freshener from ceiling to floor. The Lieutenant's cabin was decked out more nicely than he probably deserved. Queen-sized null tube, a full length wall monitor, and the sort of fluffy red carpet that suggested Imperial royalty.

"Hmmm... cozy. A trifle insecure but very cozy."

"Don't you think you're over-doing it?"

Johanes turned around, "One can never over-do it."

Beep

"Attention all personnel and passengers. By order of the commodore, all radio frequencies are to be restricted for the remainder of this voyage. Obtain clearance for all vital transmissions through channel two. This order takes effect in one minute."

Johanes breathed a sigh of relief, "Important corollary. One may always count on the enemy to over-do it. Contact Cecil for me. Tell him that's his cue. Also have him jam channels one and two."

Spokes leaned against the wall, his long, lanky arms dropping to his sides, head tricks gleaming in the steady, white light as he seemed to concentrate on nothing in particular. Then in a hollow voice, "He says we have to get something for Mike."

"What now?!"

"Anamesa. Difference between life and death."

"This is getting tiresome."

"It's in sickbay."

"Later. Tell him we're busy."

"Now or no deal."

Johanes grunted and kicked the wall, "We don't have time to discuss it."

"He says this is a dead end. It was never mentioned. They don't seem to know it exists. What's he talking about, Jo?"

"They must!"

"He says it probably got trashed in the air strike. Or they left it on the *Louise*."

"I don't believe this. Look, just tell him to activate the canister or it'll be too late. We'll get this Anamesa now. Tell him... ummm... tell him to change the computer records on it... make it a lust-potion... but he has to activate the canister now."

Spokes shook his head, "Everything's jammed. He was saying okay, but I don't know if he had time."
Johanes smirked, "If he said yes... he had time."

* * *

"...and at that point, Harrison's only alternative will be to turn himself in. We'll have a mind-scanner readied for when he arrives at sickb... what's that sm..."

The odor was overpowering, like a strong whiff of almond extract. She'd breathed several gulps before the bubbling noise and the gentle hum of the fan even registered, and then her head throbbed as though a vice were pushing on both sides. When she looked back up, Dunham was busying himself by body-slammng the door. His heavy mass finally crumpled to the ground, limbs still thrashing spastically as gunfire ricocheted against its metal frame and into the locking mechanism. Simms was already at the IC, hitting his fist against the audio pick-up and switching channels wildly. Presently, the room began swirling, and she felt herself drop from the chair, her communicator miraculously in one hand. She switched it to channel one.

"Anybody..." Static.

"Help..." Channel two. More static.

"Need help..."

* * *

Hunter didn't know which peeved her more, getting force-fed an unsolicited sedative or being relieved from duty, by the Commodore herself, no less. The perverse politics they were playing was only upstaged by their thoughtless endangerment of human life. Hunter shook her head, disgusted with the whole mess. At least there was a bright side. She was no longer responsible. Whatever happened would be on their heads, and as soon as she was back in bed, this awful day would be over.

She let a yawn escape as she glanced at her thumbnail chronometer, ignoring the minor sparks of pain her bruised nose loved so much to scream about. It was already the middle of her sleep shift, and her body was aching from a recent workout which bordered somewhere between spirited and raging. Sickbay was just around the corner. She decided she could stay up for a few more minutes, squinting her eyes shut as another yawn muscled its way down her throat. After all, what more could happen in a few lousy minutes?

Boxes were everywhere, reds, blues, yellows, all falling in different directions, their long, curly ribbons waving gleefully from the impact. She picked herself slowly off the floor, looking amidst all the colorful, geometric shapes as a red, sticky liquid dripped to the white, hexagonal tile. The culprit's head tricks had to take the prize for conspicuousness. They rose from his head like long, thin, needles, clearly illegal on many worlds not only for their self-destructive properties but also for their ability to skewer innocent bystanders should he suddenly flip-out and go on a bloody, head-butting rampage. He looked up slowly, the soft blue eyes strangely familiar as she helped his long, lanky body back to its feet.

"I'm terribly sorry." She mouthed the words, obedient to the ship's policy code. It was his fault, of course, but he was just another stupid passenger, oblivious to the world around him. She felt like telling him that in so many words, but his blue eyes and gentle hands, still shaky from the impact, helped stay her tongue.

"No," he smiled as she helped him up. "It was my fault. Are you okay?" Then he dropped his look of shame.
"Alice?!"

Hunter nodded, wiping the blood from her nose with the back of her sleeve.

"Do I know you?"

"What, you don't remember me?"

"Umm..."

"IASM, class of '43."

"I'm sorry, I don't..."

"Hanson's microbiotics."

"Umm," she stared back into his eyes, soft blue pinwheels coasting vaguely in her head. "I'm sorry, what's your name?"

* * *

"Well well... if it isn't Mr. Smyth."

Johanes grinned shyly as he walked into sickbay. Feso was with a patient, one of the food service workers

probably. The crew had their uniforms color coded according to section, the only problem with the system being that there didn't seem to be enough distinguishable colors to go around. Feso, of course, had found the perfect solution.

"You always wear your pajamas to work?"

Feso laughed, "I've been getting comments on this all day. No, we had a little bit of a... how shall one put it..."

"A busy morning?"

"Very busy."

The patient looked very frigid, but whatever Feso had given him seemed to be warming the blood. Johaness followed the nurse back the main desk, looking over his shoulder as they passed the office. Several boxes were still scattered about.

"What's with the mess?"

"Ah... just been taking inventory."

"I love your system."

"Yeah. Well, we're sort of disorganized at the moment. So what can I do for you? That drug been giving you a bad aftertaste?"

"I just wanted to say thanks. I don't know what would have happened to me if you hadn't been here."

"Awww..." Feso grinned, "you just got to beware Calannans bearing gifts. Oh... what's this?"

"A tip."

"Five hundred credits? I didn't know they printed denominations this high. This is very nice of you, but I couldn't."

"Please. I made a mess. I feel bad. Please take it." He looked like he was on the verge of being mortally wounded.

"Okay. You twist my arm, how can I refuse?" Feso pocketed the waxy bill with a grin. "This is a very big tip. You sure that drug isn't affecting your brain or something?"

Johaness laughed, "I think that's what she had in mind."

"She?"

"The woman who spiked my punch. Actually, she's part of the reason I'm dropping by."

"Oh?"

"I didn't really know who else to ask, but I need something."

"What?"

"Anamesa. Just a few grams."

"Anamesa? I've heard of that somewhere."

"Can you... you know..." Johaness motioned his glance toward the boxes in the office.

Feso shook his head, "Not a chance. I don't even think you can get Anamesa without a prescription. What's she need it for? Isn't it some sort of immunity enhancer?"

Johaness laughed, "You call yourself a nurse."

"What? It is, isn't it?"

Johaness leaned over the counter, lowering his voice to a bare whisper. "It's an aphrodisiac."

"No..."

"Would I lie?"

Feso turned to the medical console, bringing up a description from computer records. He blinked at least twice when he saw the classification. Johaness just smiled.

"See. What'd I tell you?"

"Wow. Learn something new every day."

"So can you?"

Feso looked back towards the boxes. The A's were long since reorganized. Finding it would be a snap. Still, he didn't like the idea.

"You know, it says it's non-restricted. You can probably get it from the pharmacy."

"Already tried. They're out. I guess a lot of people have been partying."

Feso smiled, "Guess so. Wait... what's this for? You're not thinking of getting that Calannan back, are you?"

"Hey, she drugged me. She said I could drug her back."

He laughed, "That's immoral."

"I'm going to propose."

"Then it's extremely immoral."

"Please?"

Feso smiled, "Just because I'm wearing pajamas doesn't mean I'm a push-over."

"Look... the proposal is sincere. We've been talking about marriage for the past five years."

"Five years?"

Johanes nodded, making his best honest face. Feso pondered the request for a moment. The Captain always did say to bend over backwards for the passengers.

"I never did this for you. Okay?"

"Thanks. I knew I could count on you."

"Yeah yeah... sheesh."

Feso watched him leave, trophy in fist, and not a moment too soon. Hunter came through the door two seconds later, holding her nose and looking mildly irate.

"Wasn't that our resident stoner?"

"Naw... you mean Mr. Smyth?"

"Yeah. What are you so happy about? He give you a roach to go with the jammies?"

Feso smiled, "I take it the meeting didn't go as well as planned."

"It was horrible."

"What's wrong with your nose? The Commodore smack you one?"

"In a manner of speaking. She relieved me of duty."

Feso's jaw dropped, "Why?"

"Various reasons."

"Ah..."

She forced a smirk. Feso had long since learned when to keep his mouth shut, even when it looked like his boss was defying a direct order.

"I'm just getting a bandage, Feso."

"I didn't ask."

The infirmary had all the good ones, not like the flimsy retail bandages that held just long enough to soak through with blood. She taped one under her nose, giving herself the little-mustache look. It suited her, Feso decided, going back to check on the food service worker who still sat wrapped in a warm blanket, a layer of frost melting along his eyebrows. Hunter came in, maybe to ask a question or give an order. He could never tell which was coming. Then she looked at Mr. Frosty, whatever was on her mind apparently stolen by the spectacle.

"What happened to you?"

"Huh?"

"Anyone tell you that you resemble an ice cube?"

The man looked up, a slow sort of smile crossing his face.

"Accidentally locked myself in a meat locker."

"How come?"

"Just happened."

Hunter smiled, heading back to the office with her nurse in tow. Feso felt somewhat confused.

"What now?"

"I thought that since I'm dishonorably relieved, you'd like to know that you're hereby conferred the honorable title of boss until I'm back on the job."

"Me? What about Dr. Pendelton?"

"He's a techie, Feso. He doesn't know anything about running the shop. You do. Besides, you know how he is when he gets a gram of power."

"Yeah. He likes to take charge."

"He'll be in charge... of the mind scanner."

"Mind scanner?"

"Better not to ask questions."

"Yeah, but I don't think he'll like..."

Beep

"Attention all passengers. By order of the commodore, public access to the computer is disallowed until we reach Tizar. Requests for waivers must be made in person at the computer security center on deck four."

The line popped shut, and Feso shot her an incredulous look, "Jeeze... this is getting ridiculous. First the comm-system. Now the computers. What's going on?"

"Politics. Go get Pendelton and tell him we need the scanner."

She went to the office and shuffled through the stacks until she found the carton of Anamesa. The tiny, yellow bottles were the size of her thumb, and one by one, she opened them over the sink, washing their syrupy contents down the drain. Her joints felt grainy and brittle, her skin growing increasingly coarse with every new bottle. As she reached in for the last one, her fingers met only vacant air. Feso was coming back in, a dismayed expression now transforming to the epitome of innocence.

"Feso, I'm not sure, but I think we're missing a bottle here."

"A bottle?"

"Yeah, of the Anamesa. When I counted them this morning, I'm sure there were six. There are only five here."

"Ah... that's interesting. What you want with Anamesa?"

"I'm trying to get rid of it."

She tapped a few keys on the medical console, and the database's query prompt popped into view at the bottom of the screen. For a moment, Feso's blood froze cold. Hunter finally looked up at him, her eyes sullen and tired.

"I guess I was mistaken. It says five."

"It does?"

"Feso... is something the matter?"

"Yes... I mean no... I'm fine. What's all the concern with Anamesa. People getting too horny or something?"

"What?"

Feso gulped, "Why was the Captain ordering you to destroy an aphrodisiac?"

She laughed, "Anamesa is not an aphrodisiac. Where'd you get that idea?"

"I thought it was."

"Well, it's not."

Feso looked her over like she was crazy, and she imagined she was staring back the same way.

"You don't believe me?"

Feso shrugged, "With all due respect, sir, I just happen to know for a fact that you're wrong."

"You do, do you?"

"Yes. I'll put five-hundred on it right now."

"You're on."

He hit a few keys on the medical console, staring dumbfounded at the screen when he saw the result. Hunter regarded him with a cheerful smirk.

"Pay up, buddy."

He figured that either he was going nuts or he was being toyed with, and luckily, the latter was the more likely of the two.

"This is a prank, right? You and Mr. Smyth. Very clever. Okay, here you are." He didn't care. He was tired and just as rich as when the whole thing started.

"What's this about Mr. Smyth?"

"Oh... nothing I'm sure the two of you can't figure out. Tell him thanks for the tip when you see him. It provided me with so much joy and happiness."

"What?"

"I'm going to sleep. It's the middle of my sleep shift."

"Feso, what's the matter?"

But he was gone, leaving her alone with a half-frozen patient in the other room. Two security guards emerged at the entry portal a minute later, both puffing anxiously.

"Dr. Hunter?"

"Yeah."

"Need you at the EC-lounge. Medical emergency."

Chapter Twenty-Two

He stared out the window, silent and unblinking, as the stars sparkled everywhere, thousands more than he'd ever seen before, more than in any stellar database or navigation chart he'd ever read. Each of them glistened, crisp and defined, against a backdrop of the deepest black his eyes had ever known, and as his dad tilted the stick, New Eden toppled into view, a ball of shimmering blue with puffy white patches. Nod, the gas giant, loomed behind with seemingly menacing intent, preparing to gobble up its smaller neighbor within a swirling mass of orange and yellow clouds should the life-sustaining world foolishly drift too close.

"You know what that is?"

"Home."

His dad smiled, hopeful brown eyes betraying only the faintest trace of sorrow.

"Look over there."

At first the station was just a speck, but ever so slowly it grew, its dapple-gray exterior sheltering an ever-shifting

collage of light and shadow. Inside, machines crowded against the bulkhead, some of them vibrating like washers, others sitting quietly waiting for one of the doctors to float over and poke a nose inside. The weightless was new and strangely discomfiting, and Mike held to the boarding rail for dear life. He didn't let go until a intrusive finger tickled him up the armpit, and then he squealed and soon found himself floating along the ceiling, which he found to his amazement to be not so much a ceiling as just another floor.

From the new vantage, he could see several people mulling about, quietly picking up test tubes, examining plastic trays under an assortment of microscopes, and making notes on flimsy boards. He and his father floated there, presently ignored in the distended space of shooting neurons, until a middle-aged man rounded the corner and approached. His hair slid golden and wavy along his ears, the wrinkles he sported around his eyes only serving to complement his warm voice, making him look even friendlier than he sounded, as though that were humanly possible.

"Well... I didn't know we had a new pilot."

"Tan, this is my son. Mike, say hi to Tan."

"Hi."

"Welcome aboard, Mike. You helping your dad today?"

Mike smiled self-consciously, not really sure how to reply. It turned out to be the right response, however, soliciting him a tour of the base. Tan kept talking about the equipment, what all the stuff did, how it worked, so much detail that the meaning of it all got lost somewhere within the folds of his explanations. Mike just kept nodding, floating to one of the numerous windows every chance he got.

"So are you going to be a scientist, young man?"

"A scientist?"

"Ah... a scientist figures things out, answers questions... fixes problems..."

"And creates them," his father interjected.

"I'm gonna fly a spaceship."

They seemed to think he was joking, and outside, New Eden vanished behind the gas giant, the moment of its disappearance creating a sloshy feeling inside his stomach. They ended up sitting him in front of one of the larger windows along the outer ring while the two men huddled together at a small, aluminum table, drinking zardocha with spots of a lavender rum.

Quietly they exchanged their words, Mike tuning in only for the most occasional outburst, and then listening for several minutes before the phrases became intertwined like a sullen melody, and his mind fell deeper into the dark, jeweled expanse. At one point, he thought he heard his sister's name, spoken in the sort of hushed voice usually reserved for dead relatives. It was a moment he'd forgotten, until now.

"I guess it wouldn't help if I called you crazy."

"No."

"What are you going to do about her?"

"I don't know."

They sat silent, and then his dad spoke again, as though clarifying the answer.

"It's not like they take every second-born."

"Nearly half."

"Yeah, well... she won't be on the list much longer. If she gets chosen, I guess we'll have to make a run for it."

Tan grimaced, a tired, somber stare running along the table's edge as though he were watching some insect crawl from one end to the other.

"You know how that usually works out."

"Why do you think I keep a gun?"

"You fly a shuttle, idiot. You can always try to smuggle her out. Tell them she died."

"And who'd take a girl from New Eden?"

"A good samaritan."

"Slavers, more likely."

"Well, James, there's risk with everything, even with doing nothing at all. Sometimes I think you're more motivated by sloth than concern for the consequences."

His father snorted, perhaps for lack of a decent comeback. "We could all be exiled... sent to live with the infectious. You know the penalties."

"So what are you going to do? Pray?"

"Believe me, I have."

"Oh?"

"We've been taking them up to the old church on seventh-days. It's pretty much vacant now, except for the Baxsens and Culwrigs."

"I thought Bryan Culwrig caught the bug?"

"He did. I think the whole family may have it."

Tan shook his head, "Better find a new church."

"Was thinking about a new deity, actually."

Then his dad turned sideways and saw him staring back over his shoulder, brown eyes meeting somewhere in the space in between.

"Ya ready to fly?"

Mike smiled, but when he learned the extent of the question, his emotions turned toward unbridled glee. His dad sat him down in the pilot seat, pointing to various switches. Mike's mind swam. But, he learned that taking off from an orbital station was about as easy as leaping off a diving board. Open helm access, hit the disengage, switch on the gravitics and inertial compensation, punch the aft thruster, and slowly bring it up to full. So easy a child could do it, or so he'd proved.

He dad finally shook him by the shoulder as if to say "Good work, I knew you could do it." But this time, the shaking didn't stop, and he felt the craft rumbling, its windows shattering as the hull exploded outward. He could see his dad falling toward the huge gas giant, its bright clouds engulfing him. So bright, Mike had to squint.

Johanes stood over him, shaking one shoulder while gripping the other and hauling him out of the null tube. Mike squirmed, getting himself dropped to the carpet for his trouble.

"C'mon Mike, time for another injection."

"I was dreaming."

"Congrats."

"That didn't feel like six hours."

"It was two?"

"Two?" Mike blinked, pinching the bridge of his nose, "Thought I had six."

"There's been a slight change in plans."

* * *

The headache rated somewhere between skull-splitting and brain-boiling, such was its intensity. She sat back down, cursing herself for such stupidity. Meanwhile, all the guards and miscellaneous crew members stood around panicking, only one with the self-righteousness to say it to her face.

"You gonna die?"

"No."

"Well, in that case, I told you so."

"Oh shut-up."

They had to wait several minutes for the gas masks, and Carla kept everyone away from her, providing as much air as she could fan in her general direction.

"One more dumb question sweetheart."

"Shoot."

"What's with the mustache?"

Hunter got back to her feet and tore the tiny white bandage from beneath her nose. There followed a loud cheer, lasting all of about two seconds, right until they came in with the gas masks. Then dead silence reigned supreme, cut only by intermittent squeaks and rustles as people either donned their headgear or backed into the lift. One of the techies slid the set of doors back open, again manually, and inside, it was as bad as she'd imagined.

Erik: dead, a gun in one hand, a folder full of papers in the other. Commander Simms: same status, face a light bluish tint. Captain Dunham: not much better, at least his dark pigmentation hid the deathly pallor, but the expression on his face wouldn't help morale. He must have been screaming and thrashing about right to the very end. Finally, there was the Commodore: communicator still in hand, a blonde mane of hair sweeping over her head, hiding the distant look in her hollow, blue eyes.

"I think I'm gonna be sick."

They re-engaged the air filters manually and got the room cleared out while Hunter took a browse through Torin's folder. The papers caught her interest right away, the sort of thing she'd expect to find in some archaic museum. Everyone used flimsi leaf except on some of the outlying worlds where the technology wasn't sustainable. One picture in particular caught her interest. It was right in front, a small, balding man with thin arms and a large forehead. He looked frightened, sort of wide eyed with a sallow complexion. The name "Erestyl" was printed underneath.

Brooks showed up not too much later, not that being any more punctual would have helped matters. The nearest thing they had to a commanding officer, he'd been on stand-by in the security armory and didn't look particularly

pleased by his sudden promotion.

"This the work of the escapee, I take it?"

She nodded, loading the Commodore's body into a grav-sled. The phosphorescent light shined off his dark skin as he watched her work, a sort of oily texture that made him look all the more determined. Then he picked up the folder, leafing through it until he stopped at the same picture.

"What happened?"

"Cyanide gas."

He shifted his tongue into one cheek as he looked over the corpses. His black, frizzy hair seemed to stand on end.

"Quick death?"

"Uh... about ten seconds. Twenty on the outside." She was surprised he asked. "It blocks respiration between the hemoglobin and oxygen-hungry cells." She took a deep breath, letting go of the body, "They probably felt like they were suffocating. Painless... but they knew they were dying."

"I understand you got a breath of it."

"Just a whiff, sir. Enough to tell me what it was."

"You can hold the 'sir', doctor. You're third in command now. If myself and our illustrious chief engineer hadn't been too preoccupied to attend this fatal engagement, you'd be captain, not me."

She looked down at the floor, "Not necessarily."

"Come again."

"The commodore relieved me of duty just prior to when it happened. I was just completing some final tasks in sickbay when..."

He nodded again, as though she's just answered a lingering question.

"Why?"

"A disagreement. She wanted to use our mind scanner on the escapee. She also wanted a drug destroyed which might have saved his life."

"I don't follow."

"We have reason to believe he's miscalculating himself. If so, he'll be dead within a day or so. There's a drug called Anamesa which could save his life, but I got rid of our supply of it according to the commodore's orders."

"Can he get more at Tyber?"

"Yes... but it won't do him any good. It'll be too late by then. Since he's already as good as dead, are you still going to order a full search?"

He stuck out his chin and sucked in his cheeks, probably wondering what was going through her mind.

"You think he has more tricks up his sleeve?"

"It's a possibility. If we just let him go and let the medication take its course..."

"Fewer casualties for us?"

"Also, the Commodore wanted to capture him alive. Not kill him."

"Why?"

"Apparently he has some sort of information. Torin was interviewing him in sickbay just before he escaped."

Brooks nodded, but he didn't look terribly persuaded.

"I'll keep it under advisement."

"What about me? Am I still R.O.D. or what?"

"We may need your help if there are more casualties... but until then, we'll honor the commodore's final order. Sorry Doctor."

"I understand."

She about-faced and made a bee-line for the lift. Carla was standing to one side, quietly stepping in after her friend as the doors closed behind.

"You okay?"

* * *

"No... not really," Bernie leaned back in his seat, munching down the last of a jelly donut as a self-satisfied smirk crept up the side of his face. The guard seemed vaguely disgusted.

"Why not?"

"Look buddy. I have orders coming straight through the commodore that these frequencies go down and stay down. No if's, and's, or but's from nobody."

"The commodore is dead."

"Aha... sure. That's great. You want a donut?"

"Just turn it off."

"Look, I'm under orders here!"

Tabor came in a moment later, more than little breathless.

"We have to take the shouter offline."

"This is a joke, right?"

"No joke."

"What's going on? This guy's telling me the Commodore's dead."

"Long story. Just take it off."

Bernie shrugged, getting up to pull the plug on the most fun he'd had since the time he impersonated Dunham's voice for a mess inspection. The guard seemed satisfied, heading back toward the lift, and Bernie was glad to see him go.

"Now that Captain Carnage is out of here, tell me what in hell is going on."

"Something about poison gas. All I really know for sure is that Brooks is in charge."

"Poison gas?! Sheesh, I pull a bunch of freqs for you and next thing, all hell breaks loose. You're a real pain in the you-know-what, you know that?"

Tabor stared back, an incredulous expression traversing his face like a sonic wave.

"You think you're on the receiving end? I was right there just before it happened. A few minutes sooner and it would have been me dead, Bernie, so don't give me any..."

"Okay... okay. Take it easy."

He keyed open the comm-shed, switching the shouter off with a flick on his finger.

"Look, I'm sorry, but you know that shutting this thing down... I mean... you saw the free lanes. I just don't get the logic."

"They're jamming one and two."

"So use the internals."

"No routing software. Somebody got inside the computer, killed internal routing and erased all passenger records."

"Inside the computer? You tried going to backups?"

"It locks up every time we try. Tuto figures they punched holes in the op-sys. Perfect, neat, little holes just to screw us over."

"Neat holes, eh? That's great. Just great."

* * *

Hunter picked up a chunk of swiss cheese on the way back to her quarters, biting off the rubbery corners and slowly working her way around the neat, little holes. It was salty, a taste she liked to think by. All the events of the day passed through her mind like an angry whirlwind, each somehow connected, but none of them making any sense as a whole. She finally gulped down the last of her treat in the shower, and the spray got her nose going again.

The faint trail of blood blended so well with the water, however, that by the time it hit the shower floor, there was nothing much to see even if she had been looking. She finally opened her mouth, letting the warm mist massage her tongue. The taste of salt hit her as strange, and she began to feel between her teeth for a loose sliver of the cheese. A minute later, blotting her face against a towel, she saw the red stain.

The red spot on the towel seemed to laugh at her and at her apparent inability to fix so much as a bloody nose. She went back to her work clothes, still scattered carelessly below the laundry chute and checked all the pockets for some nose bandages. The pockets were needlessly cluttered, as her pockets almost always were, a slide from some chemical analysis, a not-very-neatly-folded flimsi, a flex-glove, a lightpen, a blood-spotted handkerchief, a little, metallic cylinder.

A little, metallic cylinder?

It glinted faintly in the dim light, nothing to have a hysterectomy over, or so it seemed to be saying. She threw on a robe, the blue mendwear with one of her favorite if more offensive proverbs embroidered on the back, "Never mess with a chemist on PMS." Then she bandaged her nose. With the random segments of a hunch quietly huddling about her consciousness, she plopped down on her cushi-bag with the strange object, sinking slowly and deliberately as the warm, gelatinous interior oozed beneath.

* * *

Bernie shoved his finger through another donut, the jelly oozing down into a cherry puddle on his desk. He hated

to see it go to waste, yet he couldn't bear to eat. It was the ultimate dilemma.

"You okay Bern?"

Sandra stood at the door, just popping in to collect another two-dozen walkie-talkies for security. Without the internal comm network, they'd have to rely solely on wireless transmission, not a particularly well-stocked alternative.

"Is this all you got?"

Bernie licked the sugary filling off his finger.

"Hey Bern... you okay?"

He looked up and stared coldly, trying to look callously reserved, or so he imagined. Then it broke, and he chucked the donut across the room.

"Bern..."

"I killed 'em. If it wasn't for that damn shouter..."

"Look Bern, don't get morose now. Save it for later."

He sighed, and she nudged him in the ribs.

"Brooks has a little present for you."

"What?"

She took the mask out of her grav-cart, tossing it next to the red puddle.

"And there are five guards stationed outside."

"Five?"

"Just in case."

"Oh great. To protect the shouter? Why don't we just destroy the damn thing?!"

"Might need it."

She snatched a donut before leaving and then turned sideways before the door, looking backward across one shoulder as her hair flopped over the other.

"It's not your fault, Bern, so stop blaming yourself."

He sighed as she exited, leaving him to quietly monitor the free lanes for any sign of trespassers. It was a heck of a job, boring as all hell, and generally unimportant to boot. This time things were different, however. It was still boring, but with five guards outside, he had no illusions as to its importance. The door opened again about a minute later. He looked up, expecting to see Sandy standing there, donut in hand. Instead, it was a woman in a blue robe, her short, dark hair combed back, damp and shiny. He put a napkin over the jelly and scooted his chair backward several inches.

"Yah?"

"Comm-hardware?"

"You're in the right place."

"I'm Dr. Hunter."

"Oh... what, am I late for a check-up?"

She leaned over the desk, dropping a small, metallic cylinder to its surface.

"Can you tell me what this is?"

* * *

Saloris shrugged, swigging down another hit, "What does it matter, man? It's not cheap."

"Anything on it?"

"I dunno."

Zak rubbed his overgrown mustache with the back of his hand, eyeing its reflection for any traces of foam against the holocrystal's shiny white surface. It did look expensive, the sort of durability you could crap on and still invoke a clean image.

"Where'd you get it?"

"Look man... you gonna value it or fold?"

"Hey... I'm just curious. Five."

"What?!" spraying half his brew over the table.

"Okay, eight."

"Fuck you!"

"Ten. Ten tops, and don't say a word. You want me to report this?"

Saloris scowled, "It's worth way more than ten."

"Maybe, but it's probably stolen, or maybe you'd like me to go find out."

"Don't threaten me, man."

"It's all part of the game, Saloris. Ten?"

Shaking his head, "Like I really have a choice."

Zak ended up winning it with a pair of starbursts, the sort of hand that made him wonder why he wasn't folding, but Saloris had a reputation for drawing shit, and his luck while drinking was about as flavorful as a goblet of warm, slog piss. Zak spent the next hour or so searching for a viewer. Most of those on board were four centimeter standard. This was two, built for concealment more than convenience. It was just another aspect which intrigued him.

Just when he was about to give up and chuck it, he happened across comm-hardware, an office he'd walked past maybe a hundred times without once going inside. Five guards stood at intervals up and down the corridor, one stopping him as he made for the entrance.

"Need some I.D."

He dug it out, going inside only after the guard had a chance to run it through her portable magnetic scanner. The ship's doctor was inside, wearing a blue robe and sweat pants. She was talking with a plump guy at the desk, her voice low and serious, like it had been after "the incident".

The incident had been a minor brawl in the enlisted mess, and he'd been pretty defensive about anyone, particularly a woman, trying to help him. She responded by drawing a laser scalpel and threatening to cut off his head. It may have been crude, but the prospect of further bodily injury shook him up enough to make him succumb to reason. After he let her bandage his face and stop the bleeding she became somewhat more congenial.

"Well well... if it isn't crewman Dagler."

"Hi Doc... uh... doctor... uh, sir."

She smiled, "You're going to have to wait your turn."

"I'm just looking for a two centimeter holo-player."

Bernie pointed a jellied finger toward the cabinet on the left.

"Second shelf."

"Thanks."

"So you're sure it's a bug?"

"Uh-huh."

He inserted the crystal and flipped it forward to somewhere in the middle. The image promptly materialized in a half-meter diameter sphere, a man and a woman standing upon a mauve carpet. At first he smiled, thinking it was a sick joke. Saloris collected his fair share of pornography, some of it far from the mainstream, and on more than one occasion Zak had found himself exposed to yet another fetish he'd never dreamed existed. But instead of sex, they just talked, her strange, silvery-white mane shifting as she turned her head to speak. She'd ask some question, and he'd reply, his voice quiet and stubbornly accented by numerous stops. He looked dazed, as though he'd been drinking to the point of vomit-readiness, but his answers, the words in particular, came out more like a lecture in astrophysics, many of the phrases as technically alien as to be virtually incomprehensible.

"What have you got, crewman?"

It was the doctor, probably attracted by the convoluted lingo. He took a half step to the side, giving her some viewing room. Her eyes seemed to focus in on the man, perhaps since he was doing most of the talking, but there was more than that, and as she adjusted the contrast, her eyes widened even further.

"Erestyl."

"You know him, sir?"

"In a manner of speaking. Where did you get this?"

"Umm... it was a present."

"From who?"

"A friend."

"Can the run-around, mister. Who gave it to you?"

"Crewman Saloris, sir."

"Saloris... same Saloris that was on the away team to the *Louise*?"

Zak gulped, trying to remember whether or not anything like that came up.

"You'd have to ask him yourself, sir."

"He was. He was with the gunship medic when Harrison came aboard."

"Sir?"

"You're dismissed, crewman. I'll hold onto your present for you."

"Yes sir..."

Zak left, a mixture of anger and relief crowding his mind, and all he could mutter was, "What is this shit?"

* * *

Mike sat, stiff backed, his innards gasping and wheezing with every push. Cecil's voice curled from beneath the door.

"All fair in there?"

"I'm fine."

He pushed again, gritting his teeth, as a bloody fecal specimen forced its way from his bowels.

"You sure this regen is working?!"

"We took you off it."

"What?!"

Beep

"Attention all hands and passengers. This is Lieutenant Commander Brooks. As many of you have already heard through the grapevine, Commodore Reece, Captain Dunham, Commander Simms, and Lieutenant Torin were assassinated as of seven hundred and forty hours via a canister of hydrogen cyanide. Under R.F. protocols, I have assumed command of the ship. We believe that the culprit is a Tizarian gatherer by the name of Michael Harrison. If you have any information concerning his whereabouts, please contact security immediately. He is to be considered armed and dangerous. All passengers are requested to return to their cabins and to submit themselves and their accommodations for inspection. All off duty crew are to report to the main auditorium for security duty instructions."

Mike let the automatic flush take down his offering, hunching back to his feet as he appreciated the tumbling rudiments of terror.

"Cecil... we need to talk!"

* * *

"Hey Jo... can't we at least discuss this?"

"What's there to discuss?"

"Well, our lives for one thing."

Spokes stood still, rubbing his hands together in the chill air. Trying to wash off the blood, Johanes figured. Good luck, kid.

"I mean... this is crazy and stupid. We can just... you know... dump Mike out an airlock. We don't have to die."

Johanes smiled, fishing into the hyperfield controller's circuitry. Each of the cords were labeled by color and number, a different set of generator grids associated with each cord.

"What's the matter Spokes? Afraid of dying?"

"Yes. Very much so."

"Good. Fear is a sensible trait. Hand me the canister."

Spokes reluctantly complied, and Johanes tugged several loose cords through one end, painstakingly deliberate and all too mindful of the consequences of even the most minor fumble. The short blades lining the shutter were mono-molecular quality, the sort of technology that made cermelicon minisaws look like the little, plastic knives that came free with Siryn take-out. Cut a wire, and the ship's hyperfield would cave in, taking part of the ship with it. Cut several, and it would be worse, a lot worse.

Johanes wasn't an expert on the subject. He couldn't even begin to estimate over how many millions of kilometers the wreckage would be dispersed. He only knew it would be a very warm day in space. And Spokes seemed to know it too, absorbing the implications as though by osmosis.

"Look Jo... just tell me, because I'm confused," he backed a step, almost tripping over the body of the engineer who had been on duty. "I don't see why you're doing this."

"You ever gamble, Spokes?"

"Uh... yeah, sure."

"What do you do when you got a lousy hand? I mean, it stinks."

"Uh... you fold."

"But you can't fold. The stakes are already too high."

Spokes shifted to the side, unsure where he was leading.

"Okay, you bluff."

"But you tried that, and it didn't work. What do you do then?"

"I dunno."

Johanes closed the circuitry compartment, turning around with a spin of his heels.

"It's obvious, isn't it?"

"No."

"You kick over the table. Chips scatter everywhere. Game's over. You lose, they lose, everybody loses. But at least nobody wins."

"You're crazy."

"You see this?"

He held up a pocket, holocrystal recorder, no bigger than his fist. Spokes had to get a good look before he realized what it was, and even then, it only increased his sense of confusion.

"Where'd you get that?"

"Back at the starport. Our friend Sule left it behind with some burnt scraps of quagga liver. The liver was great. This... this, my friend, is bad."

"I don't get it."

"They've got a good hand, and we don't, but that canister is the boot that's gonna send the table flying, and if we're lucky... very lucky, we may just live through it. Now get a hold of Cecil; tell him we're set to link him to the interweave governor."

Spokes shifted, "I still don't like this."

"Just do it. I have to find a place to stuff Mr. Corpse."

* * *

"Corpses?"

"Yes sir."

Brooks leaned back at the master security console, still shy of approaching the captain's seat. The bridge lights were dim, the noises rare and quiet, leaving the chamber in a muted, melancholy slumber. With only Tabor and Lish to keep him company, and both of them keeping well aside, he'd finally had a chance to peruse Torin's papers. The subject matter was sketchy at best, most of the papers referring to others which weren't contained in the folder. There had to be more in the lieutenant's little safe, locked away with all the relentless intractability of this troublesome gatherer who seemed to attack one moment and disappear the next.

Lieutenant Anders stood quietly, probably waiting for some sort of response while Brooks punched up a visual of the main auditorium. Crew members were still filing in, each one searched, their ID's checked as they entered. It was a slow process, but with the potential for another attack, the precautions were necessary.

"Sir... the corpses..."

"Yes, what do you want me to do about it?"

"People are gawking at them, sir."

"Gawking?"

"Yes sir."

"Well, must be getting everybody pretty pissed off, eh Lieutenant?"

"Sir?"

"To see four officers dead, Dunham and the Commodore included. I bet there's gonna be some shooting first and asking of questions later when we catch this punk."

Anders blinked, "Sir... displaying their dead bodies without even the barest modicum of decency..."

"Modicum of decency? They're dead, Lieutenant. They don't need decency; they need revenge."

"Yes sir."

"I want a camera set up in front of the bodies, and I want the picture transmitted to this frequency." He pointed at the console. "I want everyone to see it."

He turned his head to the beeping of the comm console. Tabor and Lish were watching it as little blips of light danced from one channel to another.

"They're at it again, sir."

"See if you can predict their switching."

"Aye aye."

Lieutenant Anders just stood there, confused as usual.

"You're not going to jam them?"

"It works both ways, Lieutenant. We jam them, they jam us. Look, after we're done showing the crew what this Mr. Harrison did, take the bodies to a shuttle. There's no point in keeping them in sickbay."

"Aye sir."

"And tell Archie that I want that safe open yesterday!"

He looked back at the visual. Alongside the picture were displayed the names, sections, and ranks of everyone reporting, enough people to scroll off the screen and then some. It would be one hell of a pep rally, crammed full

enough with vengeful intents to make Satan himself jealous. And then, with a terrible, bloodthirsty cry, the search would begin, and the gatherer's paper would have one more obituary to report come its next edition.

Chapter Twenty-Three

She stood there, her back to the wall, pressing a switch on the small, yellow holographic recorder and dropping it to the soft, mauve carpet. Somewhere within its crystalline memory, she could imagine it etching his likeness, his bewildered stare breaking beneath fluttering eyelids, his jittering accented by sharp grunts and breathless gasps. Alister and Korina switched positions, their hands circling slowly upon his skull. Then his convulsions began, sweat pouring along his bony chest as icy blades of pale hue dodged among his ribs and face. The jagged moonlight lent the trio an ethereal appearance, and Sule, with stolid patience, forced for her eyes to compensate, until the darkness crept back to the corners of the chamber, shadows now striking the carpet as dim, hazy ghosts, and the dim purple night, blooming into a robust rouge with alternating shades of crimson and lavender. Finally, he screamed, his once hollow voice suddenly granular and piercing. Alister turned about, visibly shaken from the work he'd performed, albeit, under duress.

"Your people did quite a job."

"We prepared him to your specifications."

Alister grimaced and nodded, soft white hair reflecting the light of the moon.

"Of that, I am sure. Whoever operates your mind scanner should either be pinned with a medal or shot... depending, of course, on one's point of view."

"You disapprove?"

"His resistance was carved to pieces, Sule... a most eccentric pattern and more than a tad over-zealous, but that's just a personal opinion."

She raised her eyebrows mockingly, "Did it make your job difficult, Alister?"

"On the contrary. We had merely to separate the remains, fold them back into nice, little pockets and then tie."

"Tightly, I hope."

She knew enough about psychic knots, at least in theory. Usually fashioned by powerful Siri, they'd been described in the literature as flexible decision arrangements, curving a subject's resistance into a series of winding mental rings, one upon the other. Straining hopelessly, they would eventually collapse under their own tension. But they would not break, like the more rigid approaches. That was the key to their ancient success.

Sule had never before seen the method practiced except in hologram videos, but then again, she never before had a subject of such remarkable will. Despite being primed with the scanner, Erestyl's resolve had remained true, a rarity to put things mildly. Peeling his mind electronically had ultimately posed too great a risk. Only a psyche of the most extraordinary talent and skill could effect the task.

Alister was the best on-planet, perhaps the best in the entire region of space. Unfortunately, he was also an enemy. Sule lifted Erestyl back to his knees by his sparse hair, pulling him away from the Ariens. It seemed to be a direction in which he was happy to migrate.

"I trust his mind is undamaged?"

"Underneath the scars, a great deal has healed already... I suspect with the aid of another psi."

"Harrison's assistant?"

Alister nodded, "Without doubt."

"How far did she invade?"

"Beyond the surface, though what she got for it is another matter. She helped him sort out the remnants of his memories, I suspect, but in the state he must have been... well... I doubt it would have made any sense to her. Nonetheless, his shell is presently useless. He'll tell you anything you want to know, and all you have to do is speak his name."

She dropped Erestyl and approached the old man, stepping to the point where she could bite off his nose if she so desired.

"If you even tried to program him, I'll know."

"I have pushed upon his mind only the one suggestion, Sule, that he should trust you by the recognition of his name. That is all. You have my oath."

"Very well. Leave us."

The two psyches complied, departing via the chamber's only doorway. Sule watched them go, pacing slowly around her subject only after they had left and she had checked the room for bugs. There were none. Of that she was

not surprised. The Aliens had no need of such devices. No need, that was, unless their visitors came well prepared. She switched on her psionic dispersion gizmo, optimizing its field to a ten meter radius, more than enough space for a private interrogation. Erestyl, meanwhile, stayed perfectly still, watching her from the corner of his eyes, a quiet sense of desperation forming among the crevices of his tattered face.

"Sule?"

"Yes... it is I, Erestyl."

His fear dissipated with incalculable ease, and a warm smile embraced his lips.

"It's so good to see you, Sule."

"I know Erestyl. I know."

* * *

Bernie expected to see Hunter in sickbay. Instead, one of the staffers manned the front office. He was a heavyset man with a graying beard and a stern, dour expression, his eyes seemingly bloodshot by annoyance.

"Yes?"

"Anders told me you guys needed a camera?"

The man accepted the tripod without a word of thanks, unfolding it in front of the beds in the visitor chamber. The four corpses laid there as they died, their mouths gaping open, eyes staring into vacant space, with not so much as a single bed sheet between them. To see the captain like that was bad enough. He'd known and respected the man for years, Dunham's time in the Imperial Navy before his transfer to royal fleet being somewhat the stuff of local legend. The commodore, on the other hand, was another matter entirely. Here was a noble woman, an Imperial ambassador not to mention a company stockholder, twice decorated by the Grand Duke himself, her family name renowned and respected throughout the entire sector. And here she was. Dead. Stone cold dead. Bernie felt himself grow ill, stepping back toward the door with heart in hand.

"Umm... I'd better get back."

There was no response. There was really nothing to say. One of the maintenance workers stood idly by the lift doors as he returned, brown pants smudged by what looked like spaghetti sauce and a gray polymer power-wrench dangling from loose fingers. He rubbed his dirty brown hair with his free hand and smiled as Bernie entered the lift.

"Where ya going, Bernard?" came the strange voice.

"Do I know you?"

He pulled a gun, "You do now."

* * *

Arch studied the densitometer reading, then looked back at the electrostatigram, his thick beard flopping from one side of his face to the other as he turned his head.

"This isn't going to work, is it?"

Cooper shook sideways, then thought about it some more. The safe was well protected, but nothing was untouchable, particularly with half the ship's engineering staff hovering over the problem.

"We can use a conductive drill bit."

Arch winced, "It'll create too much vibration. Same problem with sonics, and polymer will break the circuit."

"Only if it hits the mesh."

"Look, Cooper. I really don't want to mess around with these people. This is ISIS we're talking about. We need something powerful but subtle, okay?"

She shut-up for awhile. Then something weird jumped to mind.

"Molecular acid."

He laughed, "You're insane. You know that?"

"Run a base current through it. I assume they allow a safety period for the IFP. We can monitor and switch before it expires."

Arch laughed, "The heat alone will destroy everything inside."

"We can contain it with a gravitic sequencer. We can make it as fine as any drill bit, and we can inject liquid nitrogen to control the thermal build-up."

Arch stopped laughing. It sounded almost plausible.

"What if it detects the gravitics? A densitometer scan is one thing, but for all we know, a gravitic sequencer could set the damn thing off."

She frowned, "I never said it was perfect. How likely are they to have a gravitics detector?"

"You willing to bet your life they don't?"

She studied the readings again. No, she wasn't, but she wasn't willing to be stopped cold either, especially not after what happened to Erik.

"Can we fool it into thinking it's just being scanned? Repeatedly?"

Arch shrugged, "I don't know about that. It sounds risky."

Lieutenant Anders marched in while they were bouncing the idea off the senior techs. Most of them were experts in their particular field, but had little to no experience dealing with this sort of problem. One of them finally voiced the question all of them must have been thinking about.

"Why can't we just bring in some specialists to handle this?"

"Because we can't." It was Anders who replied, his voice steady if unconvincing.

"That's one heck of an answer, Lieutenant."

"Brooks wants the safe opened. Time is an issue."

Arch smiled, lumbering forward rather awkwardly as though he was overdue for one of his infamous fresher breaks, the sort where he would end up sitting on the can for hours just thinking about some way to fix something or make something else work better.

"Lives are also an issue, Lieutenant. We do this wrong, and we could be in for some grief."

"Just do it. Minimize the risk if you can, but get the job done ASAP. I have to go to sickbay and then to the shuttle concourse, but Brooks is going to want some resolution to this by the time I return. Can you just stop plodding around and do something?"

"I dunno. We'll think about it."

The others laughed, and Anders left in a huff, marching off and grumbling something about disrespect. He couldn't say a whole lot. Arch outranked him by a light year. Still, Brooks could be a problem.

* * *

"...all aware, even those among you who have never seen war, the death of a commanding officer is not an easy thing to cope with, much less look at, unflinchingly. However, I feel it only fair to show you what you're up against. Because, if any of you find this Mr. Harrison or any of his fellow assassins during the course of our search, I want you know a few things well in advance. I want you to know what he did. I want you to know what he is capable of doing, not only to you, but to the passengers and to your crew mates. I want you to know how very desperate and dangerous he is. If you hesitate, even for a fraction of a moment, you may be sacrificing not only your own life, but the lives of those with whom you serve. I expect that... given Mr. Harrison's past actions... it is almost certain that the application of lethal force will be necessary in order to apprehend him. I know that many of you have never killed anyone before, but today, you might have to. And I want to show you exactly why you might have to."

Beep

Brooks hit the mute switch and opened a new line.

"Damnit, Anders. I'm in the middle of giving a speech here."

"Sir, Arch isn't cooperating."

"Fine, I'll take care of it."

He closed the frequency and pushed another button. Everyone in the main auditorium gasped in unison as the corpses were displayed on the large screen. Then he opened a channel to engineering.

"Engineering section."

"This is Brooks. Route me through to Arch."

"Aye sir."

"...Comm man, movin' vroomers."

"Brooks. Get me Arch."

He waited a moment, then the engineer's jolly voice cut across the line.

"Hey, I like this voice-only concept. Tabor hasn't figured out how to get the internals up yet?"

"He's working on it. Look, Arch. I need Torin's safe open."

"Yeah, we're thinking about it."

"I need it open now. Real bad."

"I'd like to help you out, my friend, but between this, engineering, and the search, I'm on a skeleton staff here."

Brooks looked back at his monitor. Some of the crew had already broken down, others refusing to look at the screen. For the first time, he started to wonder if this was such a good idea.

"Arch, just listen to me, okay? I'm about to send over two thirds of the crew on a head hunt... and I don't know a thing about this Harrison guy other than what just happened. Hunter seemed to think the commodore wanted him

alive, that he knew something of importance. Once I send these folks out, he's not going to be alive for very long. That's for damn sure."

"So don't send them out. Snag him when he tries to leave."

"And hope he doesn't slip though like he did on Calanna?" Brooks shook his head, glancing again at the crew. He could see their anger rising once grief sputtered out. Many of those who had been looking down finally pushed their chins up, eyes unflinching from what they saw, and in the quiet moments which followed, scowls of determination descended across their faces like masks, each different, yet each very much the same.

"Just open the damn safe, Arch."

"There's a risk..."

"To hell with the risk. You want me to come down there and do it myself?"

He cut the line before the chief engineer could forge a reply, then hit the mute again.

"I know that many of you probably hate me for making you look at this sight. No matter. It was necessary that you see this. It was necessary that you know exactly who this Mr. Harrison is so that your resolve to carry out this search with the utmost thoroughness is done right the first time. Sometime during the next several hours, a few of you will be in a position to either kill or be killed. Of that I am certain. How you react, however, is entirely up to you. Each of you will be outfitted with firearms, but I can't be there to pull the trigger for you, and we simply don't have the manpower to conduct this search with the security staff alone. I need your help. All that I ask is that you look at these fine officers, these murdered officers, and that you decide here and now whether or not you can carry out this duty. Those of you who cannot... you may leave now. Please confine yourselves to quarters."

Predictably, very few left the auditorium. Brooks studied the list of those who remained. Most of them were cooks, shop clerks, rovers, maintenance personnel, engineers, everything but combatants. He organized it by rank with the push of a function key, attaching at least one security person to each officer and then tacking on several enlisted personnel. The general idea was to piece people together with their supervisors, officers they already knew, keeping the techies handy for special purpose teams.

"Okay. Lieutenant Senthil, you will return to the armory and await instructions. Ensign Lascano, you will group at main engineering, forward power terminals, with Crewman Eller, Crewman Vorst, Chief Poula, Crewman Samuel Niles, and Crewman Theis. You will take the lifts off the power grid and then await further instructions. Lieutenant Carpenter, you will group at the observation deck with Crewman Peters, Crewman Evans, Crewman..."

* * *

"All those people..."

His dazed eyes seemed ready to drop from their sockets, short, shallow gasps of breath fracturing his hoarse whispers.

"We had no true grasp... we were as children playing with fire... no concept of our idiocy or the consequences of our actions..."

His whispers trailed off, finally blending with the light gusts of wind whisking at the edges of the curtains. Then his head dipped, and he just kept moving his lips, as though he didn't really care how he looked or whether or not anyone could hear his voice. She lifted him by his bony arms and sat him against a corner of the room, propping his head against the intersection of the two walls, and then kneeling to where they could see each other eye to eye. "Use the name," she thought, "while it still has power over him."

"Erestyl."

It got his attention, if nothing else, his silent murmurs halting with the utmost haste as a clear string of drool slipped over his bottom lip and down his chin.

"I'm tired, Sule."

"Stay awake for now. Tell me what happened after the... accident."

He blinked his eyes, as though accessing some data storage drive deep in his brain. Then a scowl crossed his lips, until they shuddered with anger.

"It was no accident."

"You had no way of knowing."

"Clio's equations told us everything. We simply discounted most of what they said."

"Why?"

His eyes twinkled for a moment, memories tumbling behind.

"Clio wrote them. She's... well... she's smart but a little too imaginative sometimes... or so we'd all thought. Her equations were extremely suspect, due to content as much as her reputation. In their original form, they were obviously incorrect. In order to make them agree with even the most basic logical axioms, we were forced to..."

improvise."

"Improvise?"

He nodded, more with his eyes than his head.

"Clio imagined ghost particles... particles which don't exist or, at least, which were never observed... which could not be observed due to certain peculiar characteristics."

"Such as?"

"She thought they would appear and then disappear within a fraction of stighmi-time... coming from and going to nowhere and then doing so over and over, forming loops in imaginary time, rotating gravitational vectors, performing a variety of chores which provide the gravitational phenomenon."

"And you didn't believe her."

"The spontaneous birth of a sub-quantum particle and then its vanishing right into mathematical oblivion? No... none of us believed her. We laughed. She wanted to re-vamp grand-unification and put ghosts up on pedestals, make them central to the theory on space-time. She endowed them with the characteristic of time-travel. Time-travel, of all things. Not only would it demand an overhaul of grand-unification, but we'd have to drastically revise the theory on time itself. Drastically. From top to bottom. Inside out. Of course we didn't buy it. We couldn't buy it. Nobody has that kind of loose change."

"Then what made you test it?"

He shrugged, "Despite the ghost particles, there were parts of her theory which had merit. We thought we might be able to invert a gravitic field. We tested the device on a large iron-core world and did generate some measurable earthquakes. What we needed next was something with a large mass. A very large mass."

"A star."

The string of drool slipped from his chin and onto his lap. He didn't seem to notice.

"Clio argued against it. Right from the very start, she saw the consequences."

"The halo?"

"She saw parallels between the gravitic and electromagnetic field equations. According to the revised theory, as mass rose toward infinity, the gravitic matrix would increase its intensity, eventually matching the electromagnetic, loop for loop, rotation for rotation."

"And that scared her."

"Of course it scared her. A spoonful of electronics can erect a palpable electromagnetic force. With gravity, a mass as great as a whole planet's is required just to pull a leaf from a tree. The dissimilarity in magnitude is absolutely beyond human comprehension, something on the order of a million-trillion-trillion-trillion times. It gives me headaches just trying to devise an illustrative analogy."

"I'm sure."

"And the problems it creates for anyone trying to reconcile the two forces... that's the kicker. That's why modern grand unification is such a joke. Clio had a fit when she found out where we were planning on conducting the test."

"Galen?"

"A perfect star. Do you know how hard it is to find a perfect star? How could we measure quakes on any other? The only problem was that it resided at the center of a populated system. She demanded that we stop, and went berserk when Tobie told her to get lost."

"Berserk?"

"She tried to destroy our prototype, right in front of everyone. Like we wouldn't notice or wouldn't care. I'm smashing it. You can't stop me. It was my idea in the first place. She was... berserk. Completely irrational. As loony as a toon. No nice way to say it."

"So Tobie had her locked up."

He sighed, "Her outburst had only served to spook the reps from the institute. They were making noises about yanking our funds, like that would really stop us, but Tobie was scared. The project was her responsibility. So she convinced them that Clio was a whacko, which wasn't too hard after what happened. She said there was absolutely no danger. No danger at all."

"And the staff supported her?"

"Some of us were having misgivings, but we knew that we'd be axed if we'd admitted it."

Sule smirked. Fear was the simplest means of control in humans. It over-powered its compliment, hope, by many orders of magnitude, perhaps a good "illustrative analogy" for Erestyl.

"So you went ahead, and the Halo of Prometheus was born. Why did you and Clio survive?"

"Tobie sent me back to Galen to keep an eye on Clio. She was effectively in my personal custody. After her sedation wore off, we monitored the labship from the orbital complex. She was utterly calm, as though she didn't care anymore. Then we lost contact with the labship, just as she predicted. They must have vaporized before they realized

what was happening. Clio figured that we still had a few minutes to find shelter, if I was finally of the opinion that she was right. So... we scrambled into the shuttle and ducked behind the shadow of Galen's closest moon. Not too complex a plan for even us scientists. From there we could see the planet's upper atmosphere ionizing beneath the wake of the halo. We cruised by for a closer look about a day later, after the plasma fires had burnt out. The landscape was scorched to the bedrock. Where there once stood cities, there were only pools of molten iron and plastic fumes and layers upon layers of carbon dust."

Sule nodded, "I've seen it," neglecting to add that she thought it a beautiful sight.

"I was in a daze. If not for Clio, I think that I would have just sat there and let it kill me. But then she said something strange. She said that what we'd seen was a small one. Those were her exact words. A small one. She said that with a more refined matrix, the halo would move through space at something close to the speed of light... that it wouldn't be detected until it was too late and that no fleet within ten trillion kilometers would be able to withstand its force. She knew that they'd use it as a weapon. That was her very first thought. The planets would be ravaged, everything from icy comets to gassy giants and all the little worlds in between. Utter and complete destruction, Sule, on a scale entirely unfathomable. She knew it; right off the bat, she knew. And then she cried and said something about wishing she'd become a watchmaker."

"So you took it upon yourselves to save society."

"We returned to the institute... erased our records, destroyed the backups, melted the second prototype in a vat of molecular acid. Our sponsors were understandably miffed. Years of work, millions of credits in hardware, all chucked right into a black hole for what they were concerned."

"Except that it wasn't."

His eyes turned toward the ceiling, a trickle of blood starting again from one nostril.

"Gone. Forever gone, Sule."

"Do we have to start this again, Erestyl?"

He shut his eyes, fighting it like he'd done before when she had to break his concentration with a swat to the nose. This time she tried a different tactic, edging closer to his withered body and holding it in her arms. She pressed her lips against his ear, and then ran them along his pasty cheek, down to the drool still forming along his lips.

"Don't hold back from me, Erestyl. You can trust me."

Beep

Hunter looked up from the holo-player's display before realizing where the sound was coming from. Then she raised the volume as Sule released her embrace, standing up and snatching the communicator off her belt.

"Vlep, your timing leaves something to be desired."

"The quarry, Sule. He is close."

"Harrison? You're certain?"

"Positive."

"Understood. Keep your eyes peeled and call me if you see him."

She reattached the communicator to her belt and knelt back down. Erestyl regarded her with a confused stare.

"Michael?"

"You know him?"

"Michael is a friend."

She grimaced, "You've got his psyche's memories floating around in there between your own. You know that Erestyl?"

"He is my friend."

"He's my friend too," Sule lied, in a voice dripping with insincerity. Then added, in all honesty, "I can hardly wait to see him again."

* * *

"What took you?"

Johanes smiled, "Can I help it if all the lifts freeze up? Bernard, I'd like you to meet my associate. If you so much as sneeze, he'll burn a hole in your back the size of the Stravik Nebula."

Spokes nodded, the iridium laser fitting snugly in one hand, a tangerine colored sluice stick in the other.

"Uh... they were closing down the Icy Works," he offered by way of explanation. Then he took a sip. Johanes watched him with a sudden craving.

"What flavor?"

"Citrus blend."

"Didn't you get me one?"

"I was out of change... sorry."

Johanes tried not to look too disappointed.

"C'mon Bernard. Don't mess up now. He gets trigger happy when he's had too much sugar."

The guards outside comm-hardware didn't seem too happy about the lack of identification. Four of them stood, imperturbable in their ballistic jackets, stony-faced and full of self-importance. They seemed more like mummified manikins on an ego-trip than real people, though the reason probably had more to do with firepower than personality. Somebody had outfitted them with submachine guns, very serious weaponry for a passenger liner. Between the armor and armament, they comprised a veritable army, and they knew it. But with nearly all pictures, there were problems, lack of training and combustibility of ballistic cloth being just two. Only the fifth guard seemed even remotely aware of their true situation. She wore an almost vulnerable expression. Luckily, her response was more or less predictable.

"You lost it in the laundry?"

"Yeah. Bernard can testify for me."

"It's okay. He's with me."

The chief stepped aside, her dark eyes registering a strange mixture of animosity and resignation.

"Just make it quick."

Once inside, Bernie obediently keyed open the cabinet which held the shouter. The device was even bigger than Cecil's multiwave and must have massed a good thirty kilos with the battery. Johanes shook his head, considering the problem.

"I'm supposed to carry this?"

"There are grav trays in the back room."

Jo motioned him with the gun.

"Mind if I steal a donut?"

"Go ahead. You're stealing everything else."

"Thanks. Oh, after you help me get this set up right, I'm going to need some duct tape."

"What for?"

"You."

Outside, Chief Yim was getting edgy. She paced the hall, walking over to the passage junction where a maintenance worker seemed to be fiddling with one of the lights. It had been flickering since she'd arrived on duty, and for some strange reason, he had nothing better to do than reach up and punch it with the white ends of his knuckles. He was tall, his lanky frame tilting backward as he unscrewed the face plate and poked an explorative finger inside.

"Hmmm..."

"Having a problem?"

Spokes looked toward the woman, offering her the long transparent plate with one hand. She glanced at it and snorted as though it were some sort of joke.

"You want me to hold this?"

"If you don't mind. I have to yank this unit out."

"What you gonna replace it with?"

"I'm not going to replace it. I'm going to fix it."

"Uh huh... you know that this area is restricted? Who sent you down here?"

"Nobody. I'm just doing rounds."

"Show me some ID."

A loud bang swept through the corridor, its force rattling the entire deck and wobbling the long, tubular bulbs back and forth in their sockets. One of them fell and splintered against the deck, sharp shards of glass scattering over her combat boots.

"What in blazes," Yim tugged the communicator off her belt, switching it to channel one. Everyone seemed to be talking at once, and Brooks was hollering for quiet somewhere in the signal's background. She stuck it on her belt, leaving it on low volume. Johanes emerged a moment later with his tray of goodies, his expression of utter bewilderment complete as could be.

"What the hell was that?"

"Sounded like an explosion."

"I better get these up to the bridge."

"Hold it. There could be a hull breach. Stay put until we figure out what happened. Thom, check to see if Bernie has any ideas on what that was."

"Aye aye, chief." The guard disappeared through the entrance for a moment, and then stuck his head back out, looking toward the Draconian with a confused stare.

"Where is he?"

"In the storage room."

"It's locked."

Johanes nudged the grav tray back inside, the chief at his back, and tried to make a convincing show of banging his fist against the door.

"Bernie?! Open up! I don't get it. Maybe it got shorted out or something." Yim and Thom didn't look terribly convinced, and Johanes cracked a wide grin, seizing the moment while he still had their confusion to count on.

"Hey, I have an idea."

He pulled the pistol and deposited a slug between Thom's eyes. The look of surprise was almost comical, a crazy mixture of disbelief and revelation coating that single final expression just before the head would snap back and brains go splattering against the wall. Yim tackled him at once. She was good, wrenching the gun from his hand as he tried to blow her face off. Meanwhile, screams and the smell of charred flesh wafted in from the corridor. Johanes grinned, suspecting he could overpower her. Then he felt her knee in his groin, the grin melting off his face.

"That hurt."

One hand clenched her throat, the other keeping her gun barrel away from his face. She bounced several bullets off the floor, one ricocheting into his shoulder, before he twisted her sideways and off-balance. Suddenly, Spokes was in the doorway. He stood there, taking his sweet time and aiming for the best shot he could get. A split second later, he lay on his back in a pool of blood. It was a clean shot, right through the temple, and within a fraction of a second, the gun was turned toward him.

Johanes managed to peel his one last hope from a shin holster. It was a simple plastiknife, able to score steel plate and cut through raw flesh like warm butter. And best of all, it was completely undetectable to most scanners. They'd made him practice drawing it in a number of uncomfortable positions until whipping it out had become second nature, sort of a game he would play from time to time just to impress himself. He flashed it across her throat as she turned, her gun facing him. At first, it seemed to barely leave a scratch at all, but then, as her arms fell to either side and she tried to breathe, she seemed to notice that something was terribly amiss. With a sense of impending doom, her entire head slowly slid off her shoulders and fell, eyelids still fluttering, onto the cold, hard deck. It was a simple weapon, just a game until now.

Johanes lifted himself slowly to his feet, a steady, little rivulet of blood licking down his arm. One of the guards was still kicking in the corridor. He staggered about, screaming about his eyes hurting. Johanes stumbled around the poor wretch, fully aware of the blinding effects of a wide-arc dispersion. He'd instructed Spokes on how to use the laser's first shot for just that very purpose. The others lay about, badly mauled with pockets of their flesh vaporized, the organs beneath spitting forth various bodily fluids. They must have shielded their eyes enough to pose a threat. Either that or Spokes had gotten trigger-happy. "Too much sugar," Johanes figured, "ought to be outlawed." Then he remembered his own donut, still sitting half-eaten on top of the shouter. He switched the device on, depositing the pastry in a trash chute at the end of the hall. For some strange reason, he no longer felt much like eating it. He no longer felt like eating anything.

* * *

"...just tell me what happened."

"It's a mess sir."

"Is Arch there?"

"In pieces. Cooper and Jenkins are dead too. We have about a dozen more wounded."

Brooks scowled, suddenly sick to his stomach, "Okay, just stay put. Medics are on the way."

He cut the line and switched to sickbay. The person on duty informed him that a team had already been organized and was awaiting instructions. Meanwhile, several search squads were still calling in to ask what happened. Tabor tried fielding the flood of calls along the secondary frequencies, finally yanking off his headset in surprise.

"Sir, somebody in a maintenance shop is reporting gunfire."

"Where."

"Umm... deck seven, somewhere along the starboard aft."

Brooks consulted his overhead.

"Send Nguyen's team to check it out. Also, what is Hunter's channel?"

"One sec... this is Tabor... yes... that's right, starboard aft. Um... her comm pings at thirty-one."

Brooks switched to thirty-one, sending a string of beeps up the frequency. It finally crackled open after several seconds.

"This is Hunter."

"This is Brooks. I need your help."

"I've been wanting to talk to you. I found something you should... ztztztztztzt..."

Brooks tried to reconnect, finally slamming the communicator against his console.

"What's going on?!"

"Everything's jammed. It must be the shouter."

"Comm-hardware? That's deck seven. That bastard!"

* * *

If not for the incessant pain in his chest and the sloshy feeling in his guts, Mike might have ventured back to sleep. As it was, he had to keep going back and forth to the fresher to vomit what remained of the morning's miruvor along with the pool of blood which had managed to seep into his stomach. Cecil would stir from time to time, offering him something to eat and stroking the cat as it made its rounds from one corner of the room to another. To date, his explanations were somewhat less than comprehensive.

"Shit hit the fan."

"Obviously. You mind elaborating just a bit?"

Over the course of several minutes, Mike managed to coax out a few of the basics: the assassination of the top officers, the bribery for the Anamesa, the little visit to engineering.

"What little visit to engineering?"

"Oh... forget it was ever mentioned. You don't want to know. Really. It's for the best."

"For the best?"

Cecil nodded, his head, not the camera. It made for a fine show of emphasis.

"Some things are better left alone. You'll learn that when you grow up."

"Do I have to torture your cat or something?"

"Now Michael..."

"Just give me a clue and I'll behave. Scout's honor."

Cecil knew him well enough to know he'd never been a scout. Nevertheless, the camera struck a whimsical pose, the sort that told Mike his old friend was on the verge of giving in, if only for the hate of it.

"You've killed before, Michael."

"With good reason."

"Self-preservation."

"I've had better reasons than that."

"Well, so do we." He enunciated each word carefully as though trying to convey some hidden meaning.

"What did you guys do?"

"Every ship has its Achilles' rudder. It's an old proverb."

Mike shook his head, "Never heard of it."

"Well, have you ever heard of something called a hyperfield controller?"

"What about it?"

Cecil sighed, and the camera slumped down in despair.

"That all the clues Cecil has to share."

"C'mon. What about it?"

"Leave Cecil alone, now. He's got a date with the interweave governor."

"The interweave governor?"

"Very important date. Must not be late."

Mike laid back down, finally going back to the fresher after several minutes had passed. All in all, he was feeling pretty shitty, but he figured it was better than the alternative.

"He's dead!"

Johanes barreled through the door, his shoulder seeping a steady stream of blood. He tugged in the grav tray behind him and then collapsed to his knees, panting and raving like a mad man.

"The idiot! I told him to take his time when he aimed, but not a fuckin' century!"

Mike pumped the Draconian's shoulder with a hypo of torogon regen, then wrapped it with one of the bandages from sickbay. Johanes just sat there shivering, fading slowly into shock as Cecil poked his head into the hallway, noting how the path of red dots led conveniently to their door.

"We should probably be vacating about now."

"Why?"

"He's left a trail of blood. Somewhat fitting, actually."

Mike poked his head out to look, "C'mon Jo. We're getting out of here. Now."

Chapter Twenty-Four

It smelled like Achellios, that uncanny sweet fragrance that made his stomach want to churn forth copious quantities of bile and phlegm. He was just an ordnance officer back then, a mere pawn in the essential game of life and death. Those were sweet days of youth, his only home a small tiger class tac-boat, the armament she bore, his personal toys. He remembered his first run and how giddy he'd been, his skin all tingly with excitement, like a virgin preparing for the unknown. Their work had been heralded a police action by the Imperial One, a war of compassion and honor, of duty and determination, and so they carried out their tasks with all the emotions fitting the dimwitted and brainwashed soldiers they were.

He'd been lucky on that first run, and after the stench of what he'd down soaked over his senses, the sickness came. It was the only time he'd lost control. To his credit, he'd managed to hold down his cookies until they'd returned to base. It wasn't until he was in the shower, safe from the eyes of the enlisted men, that he succumbed. He threw-up all over himself, and no matter how hard he scrubbed, he could never wash off the smell. It went everywhere with him after that, at least until the war was over.

The work became easier with time and experience. The whole crew had gelled together, each person falling into place like a piece in some grand jigsaw puzzle. Their bombardment runs were the finest, or so they'd boasted. Administering cover for the marines, transporting prisoners or casualties back to orbit, and incessantly attacking, again and again, enemy strongholds, industrial targets, it didn't matter what. They always pumped out the missiles like they were going out of season, serving a dish of slaughter with every run. Such godless butchery, day in and day out, that he'd thought he'd seen it all: death by titanium-tipped steel, death by chemical incineration, death by gas of a hundred varieties.

Brooks shook his head, trying to keep his boots out of the sticky, red puddle coating most of comm-hardware's floor. These past few hours had been like an instant replay, condensed and freeze-dried for his personal convenience. And the smell, it had followed him too, so long ago that he thought he'd forgotten. Ensign Nguyen's mech-man finally forced the storage room's door. A crewman lay inside, hog-tied and on his belly, trying in vain to gnaw through the make-shift gag. They tore the duct tape off his face, taking a bit more leisure with the electrical cable around his wrists and ankles.

"Ow! Easy guys."

Brooks let the crewman get to his feet, patience slowly giving way to some absurd impulse to burn a hole in his skull.

"Bernard Hartley? Petty officer, first class, comm spec?"

"Yessir."

"There's a blind man on his way to sickbay, mister."

"Sir?"

"And four others, dead. I understand that you aided the enemy."

"They had a gun on me the whole time, sir."

Brooks gripped the iridium trophy in one hand, patience dissolving into the sweet stench. He settled his impulse by kicking the man in the face. Bernie's nose made a squashing sound when the boot landed, and then he fell backwards, dazed and half-conscious.

"You two... take this gutless piece of trash to the brig."

* * *

"You panicked, Jo."

"N... no."

"Ye... yeah. What's the matter? Never been shot before?"

"F... f... uck you, Har... rison."

"Another time, perhaps. C'mon, get up."

"I'm s... so c... col..."

"Cold... I know. You've lost a lot of blood."

"...co... cold."

Mike felt a kick to his thigh. One heavily laden Cecil stood to his rear, a camera in one arm and a rather

aggravated cat with very sharp claws in the other.

"Is he coming or not?!"

"Dunno yet."

"Leave him or drag him. We can't wait."

Mike hauled the Draconian over his shoulder, ducking into a public fresher at the end of the hall. Cecil followed with camera, cat, and grav tray, not the least bit satisfied as to their present direction.

"This isn't safe, Michael!"

"Ssshhh..."

"We're going to be captured unless we find some place to hide."

"We?"

"Fine. You'll be captured. Or more likely killed. Happy?!"

"Overjoyed."

Mike felt himself getting sick again, sweat forming in patches along his forehead and cheeks.

"Look. You go scout around. If anybody sees you, they'll just think you're some blind guy who got lost. Tell 'em your camera's on the fritz."

"And what about you?"

"I'll wait here. Cross my fingers."

"Dumb."

"Don't argue. It's a waste of time."

Cecil dropped the cat to the white, polyvinyl tiles, a pathetic grimace forming along his lips as it began stalking the shadows from stall to stall.

"Wish Cecil luck?"

"I'll think it over."

After he was gone, Mike pulled Johannes against the wall and helped him into a sitting position, injecting him with a cylinder of some generic, short-term stimulant, the last of their supply. Jo finally looked up, his eyes sunken and heavy.

"Y... You're right."

"About what?"

"Never been sh... shot."

"Well, there's a first for everything."

Johannes looked down between his legs, still holding his shoulder as though his hand could do some good there.

"They'd never... trained us to get wounded. It was always assumed... you get shot, you die."

"Yeah, well, that's sometimes how it works."

"Th... thanks."

"What for?"

"Not letting... me die."

Mike smiled, "I didn't stick you full of chemicals just to listen to you get mushy. What the hell is going on, Jo?"

"Cecil... didn't tell you?"

"He told me some. He didn't elaborate on engineering."

"Ah... you don't... want to know that."

"Yes I do."

Mike could see him smile, as though he had some mischievous plan racing through his mind, something to do with a hammer and a big, sealed pot of chocolate-chip cookies.

"Stop grinning and just tell me."

Johannes shuffled a small object from his pocket, something yellow and scratched-up like it had on the receiving end of a very long cat fight. Mike picked it up, looking at it from three different angles before he realized that it was a holocrystal recorder, smaller than any he'd seen in a good long while, and he was supposedly proficient with such devices.

"Where'd you get this?"

"Calanna... in the *Louise*."

"Sule's? Her interview with Erestyl?"

"You... catch on fast."

"So where's the crystal?"

Johannes dropped his smile, eyes widening as though he had something particularly profound to lay out. Then he shrugged and looked back to the white tiles, an expression of desperate futility and total confusion.

"Meow..."

At least he had the cat's affection. Mike wondered if he'd been sneaking it munchies.

"C'mon, Jo. You must have some idea."

"I thought I did..."

"Tell me."

"Torin's safe... went boom... maybe you'd heard," he smiled, as though it were a secret joke.

"Yeah, I heard. I imagine the whole ship did. You think the crystal was somewhere else on-board?"

"Possible."

He pulled about a dozen holocrystals from the same pocket, laying them on the deck between his knees one by one. Mike regarded them all with a mixture of fascination and contempt.

"Which one?"

"These are blanks... Unformatted."

He peeled the little stickers off several. Mike figured that he must have found them in the same vicinity as the shouter. Johanes nodded, as if reading his mind.

"Such things... have a strange way... of arising from the grave."

"Jo..."

"Cannot be left to chance... must find the one."

Then he started shivering again, and Mike felt a sudden urge to prostrate himself before the temple to the proverbial porcelain god. A few dry heaves later, he found Johanes fast asleep. It was just as well. It would give the regen a chance to do its work. Mike pilfered the Draconian's hypo gun, loading two darts and seating himself, cross-fingered, on the floor beside the entrance.

"Meow?"

"Don't worry PD. Cecil knows what he's doing."

* * *

Cecil didn't have the slightest idea what he was doing, at least in his own not-so-humble opinion. Luckily, however, he looked about as witless as he felt.

"Hey you!"

The guard's face had a fuzzy feel to it, probably something to do with the overgrown mustache.

"You're blind?"

"Eh?"

And fairly deaf, or so he'd opted to pretend. The guy he'd run into seemed to take genuine pity on him, speaking slow and loud and making sure to enunciate all his words with the utmost care.

"What is your name?"

"Cecil."

"You get lost? What's your room number?"

"Eh?"

"Room number."

"Forgot."

"Okay... c'mon."

His team had situated themselves outside the stairwell not thirty meters from the fresher. One of them must have been a vending machine custodian, because they sat, passing cards, around a pile of choc-bars, sluice sticks, and fruiti-pops, all low-end hacker-sustenance. The guard who found him nudged Cecil gently in the right direction.

"Hey guys. Meet Cecil."

"Smell foodage."

"He's lost."

The officer in the group looked up from his cards, a curious expression forming along the rims of his eyes.

"Well, he came to the right place. Have a seat."

"You'll have to speak up. He can't hear too well."

Several scooted to either side, freeing-up some floor space. The game was "Chaos", all luck and no brains, so it didn't really hurt too much that he couldn't see his cards. Of course, it didn't help much either. Cecil let the lieutenant look over his camera, getting various close-ups of his nose and eyes and the dimple on his chin.

"I don't see anything obviously wrong. You getting anything from it?"

"Fuzzy."

"Might be a problem with the cord."

He disconnected it, and for the first time in a good while, Cecil felt truly blind. They continued the game for several more hands, Cecil picking up a fruity-pop and scarfing it down in a flash. He heard the lieutenant's laugh amidst the shuffling of cards.

"So what are you doing out of your cabin, Cecil? Aside from looking for free food."

"Need my pill."

"Pill?"

Cecil sent a nod signal down the line to his camera, waiting several seconds while somebody sneezed before he remembered it was no longer connected.

"Steev, you better take this guy up to sickbay and see if they know what he's talking about."

"Sure, you guys gonna be here when I get back?"

"We're not going anywhere until we hear from Brooks."

Steev didn't bother reconnecting him, but he could hear the long cord scrape against the steps every now and then as they climbed up the stairwell. Cecil found the handrail to be more than just a convenience. Without vision, it was sheer necessity. He was also pleased with the stairwell's lowered gravity, the next best thing to divine assurance that should he somehow stumble, no harm would come to him.

A minute later, the echoes of agonized moans off cold, smooth linoleum dominated his senses. Steev found him a seat and told him to wait. It was one of the non-enhanced variety, nothing more than a soft plastic pad to cushion the tush. Meanwhile, the traffic of footsteps and miscellaneous voices crowded his ears, none of them particularly discernible, and just as he was about to slink in the direction he guessed the exit to lie, one voice caught his ear, a voice he recognized, though he had never met nor even seen her except for a single digitized mug-shot in the personnel files.

"...the hell were you trying to accomplish?! We've got six more dead, and another nine hanging on by prayers and regen!"

"It was important to..."

"...to find out more about Harrison?"

"Absolutely. The Commodore wanted him alive, right?"

"Brooks... just forget about him."

"Forget about him?"

"There's a certain holocrystal in my cabin that I'd like you to take a look at. But call off this search."

"What are you talking about?"

"C'mon... it's a long story."

Cecil froze as their voices passed in front of his nose. Then he got to his feet and made toward the exit as best he could manage, bumping into one or two people along the way.

"Hey, watch where you're going."

"Thousand pardons."

"Hey Cecil! Where ya going!?"

He gritted his teeth and allowed himself to be turned in the direction of the cyberoptics lab, also doubling as a morgue from the smell of things.

"How pleasant."

"Oh, don't mind them. They're gonna be moving along any minute."

"Moving?"

"To a shuttle."

Cecil raised an eyebrow as Steev found him another seat.

"I've got to get back to my team, but a doctor will be here any sec. You just hang tight, okay?"

"Hang tight."

"Good."

The door slid shut, leaving Cecil in a room full of corpses, not the most scenic location to keep a patient waiting, but then scenery didn't matter too much to blind people. He stood up, pacing slowly about the chamber and feeling underneath the plastic bed sheets for a skull with jacks. Spokes was quite dead, sure enough, laying on his grav-stretcher so freshly slain that rigor mortis hadn't even set in. His toes stuck out the end where the sheet wasn't large enough and bobbed slightly as Cecil brushed against them. He finally found a stretcher of his own, laying himself on top and then pulling its plastic cover over his body.

A moment later he heard the sound of a door sliding within its grooves. A woman's voice said, "Hello?" to all the corpses, as if expecting one of them to mysteriously rise from the dead. Then there was only silence. Several such minutes passed in dark solitude until the door slid again and he found himself on the move, the gentle hum of gravitics taking him away from sickbay while the footsteps of some unknown passage bearer clacked monotonously

against the deck. With assured anonymity, the person began to whistle, at first off-key, until slowly and quite unexpectedly the tune evened itself into a pleasant if impromptu melody. Cecil kept still, daring to breathe only in silent and measured whiffs, listening, absorbed in the music as he imagined the rest of his fellow corpses to be, until it crept ever so carelessly into the realms of some ancient lullaby, its gentle threads cut only by the sliding noise of powered doors and the steady drum-roll of the whistler's footsteps. After several minutes, they came to a halt, and the footsteps and tired whistling receded softly into the distance from whence they came.

He waited with the silence, a mixture of relief and disappointment finding shelter within his mind as he strained his ears for any sound of the whistler. Finally, casting aside all semblance of death, he threw the plastic off his body and toppled from the stretcher to the floor below. The place was cramped, so full of other stretchers that he couldn't walk so much as a step without bumping into one or another, sending them jiggling against their neighbors until the quiet was consumed by a cacophony of clacking noises.

Cecil finally resorted to crawling on his hands and knees until his head tapped against something solid. The wall's metallic surface betrayed nothing of interest until he'd edged his way against what seemed to be the door of an airlock, its distinctive, hexagonal frame shunning all entrance. Blindly fiddled with the lock's controller switches, he found the bolting mechanism as much by chance as by design. Then the beast opened, and he crept forward to the second door, finding the override switch and opening it as well. For all his technical expertise, Cecil had never claimed to know much about starships or creeping around unseen inside one, but so far, he had the definite impression that somebody out there was wishing him luck, a gatherer's luck to be more precise, and a kindly, generous sort it was proving itself to be.

* * *

"Actually, just finding it was a stroke of good fortune. You sure you don't want a drink?"

Brooks accepted the holocrystal with tentative apprehension. If it really was from the *Louise*, it would be ISIS property, and even knowing of its existence could prove rather unhealthy. Viewing it seemed more and more like a declaration of insanity.

"You've actually played the whole thing?"

"Most of it. Why?"

"Uh... I think I'll take that drink."

She left as he loaded it up, and from the kitchen, he could hear the soft sound of her footsteps and the clink of two glasses meeting carelessly. Other strange noises seemed to reverberate off the tile floor, until her voice rose above them.

"Was that OJ or JJ?"

"JJ."

Jungle juice, any mixture of multiple intoxicants, and doctors always stocked the best. His finger still lingered over the play button as she re-emerged. She carried a smile with his drink, as though she had something funny to say.

"You know... you might want to save your sobriety while this is playing. Some of it gets fairly technical."

"Opinion noted and logged," said with all the sincerity of an amphisbaenic snake. At least he'd could fall back on drunkenness. They'd understand.

* * *

Mike didn't understand. It had been in the whereabouts of an hour, and Cecil still hadn't returned.

"Meow?"

"I know."

He almost fell over from surprise when the door finally slid open. Cecil was the first to enter. Behind him a stranger followed, the look on the man's face one of astonishment.

"Shoot."

"What the?"

And that was about all he managed to vocalize between the time the darts hit his chest to the time he hit the floor. Cecil reached down and dragged him the rest of the way inside, then groped his way to the wall.

"Lost my camera."

"Obviously. How did you know I had a gun?"

"Intuition."

Mike breathed an aggravated sigh, "Whatever. Did everything go okay?"

"Oh... perfectly. Got caught twice. Had to sneak my way out of sickbay with a bunch of corpses."

"Corpses?"

Cecil nodded, "You know... cadavers, carcasses, stiffs, dead people. Oh, Spokes was there. Said hi."

"Spokes? He was....."

"Dead... yes, you need a definition for that also?"

"No... I'm familiar with the concept. Did you find a place we can hang-out?"

"But of course. There's a shuttle docked off loading bay twelve, deck seventeen. Doors are wide open."

"Good work."

"There's more. The holocrystal."

Mike blinked, "What about it?"

"So Johanes told you."

"He told me enough."

"It's in Hunter's cabin. Deck three."

Mike smirked, not sure how to take the news. Even given the knowledge, he was surprised that Cecil would mention it. More than surprised, he was fairly amazed.

"How did you find out?"

"Overheard a conversation in sickbay. It's astounding what people will say in a room full of strangers."

"Well, I guess I'll meet you at the shuttle. If I'm not there by the time we're out of hyperspace, you can assume I won't be showing up."

"No problem."

"You're not gonna try talking me out of it?"

Cecil shook his head, "Would you be hurt terribly that we spared ourselves the formality this once?"

"Not at all," Mike stripped the guard's holster, communicator, and ballistic vest, throwing them on more as a means of disguise than protection. "Well, maybe a little. Just tell me... why the sudden change of heart? Don't you love me anymore?"

Cecil winced, "Passionately, darling. It's just that... didn't Johanes tell you about engineering?"

"He told me about the holocrystal."

Cecil nodded, "It's important that it not fall to ISIS."

"Obviously."

"Sometimes, desperate times call for desperate measures."

"What did you guys do to engineering?"

"Only what was necessary. Just get the crystal. If not, then none of us are making it out of here. There's just too much at stake. Kapesch? C'mon lazy boy. Time to wake up."

Johanes still lay crumpled beneath a haze of healing slumber, moaning slightly as Cecil shook him back to semi-consciousness. Mike watched as his old friend hauled the Draconian to his feet, not a mean task considering where Cecil had been during the past year. Under other circumstances, the two of them might have made a comical sight, one blind, the other so lame he could barely walk.

"This boy needs a jolt."

"I already used the last upper."

Cecil made a curious expression, as though he couldn't quite get his facial muscles to cooperate.

"On Jo, not me," Mike clarified.

"Ah... sorry. Just had difficulty picturing you taking stimulants. Depressants perhaps. They're more your style."

Mike smiled, uncertain as to whether or not he should counter the slam.

"You're not exactly a barrel of chihuahuas yourself, Cecil."

"Yes... well, knowledge brings despair."

It was one of their old college proverbs, one of many Cecil had collected and archived somewhere inside that diabolic database in his skull.

"What sort of knowledge?"

"Obstacles, tools, and moral qualms, the last of which are being temporarily suppressed."

"Talk galanglic."

"We have to kill the guards. They're blocking the stairwell."

He pulled a small, clear canister from the grav tray. White powder occupied one end separated from a pint of clear liquid by a thin, transparent barrier. Mike regarded it with as much enthusiasm as he could muster.

"Say that isn't what I think it is."

"Afraid so."

"Cecil..."

"You want to get out of here?"

"Yes."

"Then we have no choice."

Mike shook his head, "There's always a choice."

"Such as?"

Mike scowled, certain there had to be another way. Then he noticed his hand resting on it. The communicator fit nicely on the holster. Mike withdrew it from its sheath, and examined the dial.

"Turn off the shouter for a sec."

"What are you planning?"

"Just trust me, okay?"

"I'm blind, remember?"

"That's a weak excuse, and you know it."

Mike reached over to the grav-tray, finding the shouter's power switch without too much difficulty. He pressed the bell button on the communicator a moment later, and the line snapped open as if on cue.

"This is Flowers."

Mike blinked, "Uh... status report."

"We're positioned at the stairwell on deck five as ordered. Why haven't we received any instructions?"

"There's been some trouble with the comm system. We need you to check out a disturbance on deck six. Go downstairs and run a full sweep immediately. Bridge out."

"Hold on... what sort of disturbance?"

Mike closed the channel before they could ask any more questions. Then his communicator began beeping. He switched the shouter back on and hauled the guard into one of the stalls.

"They're probably calling their friend here. Get into a stall, quick."

Cecil pulled Johanes and the grav tray into hiding. A few seconds later, the door to the fresher slid open.

"Steev!"

"Meow?"

"There's just a cat here, man. C'mon."

Mike waited, heart still pounding, as he slowly counted to fifty. Hopefully they'd think their friend had switched off his communicator. By the time Mike poked his head back out the door, the coast looked clear, nothing at the stairwell except a mess of cards and few stray fruiti-pops. He was back at the fresher in a flash.

"It worked."

"Meow?"

Cecil emerged, a little shaken.

"That's right, Pooper. He says congratulations on almost getting us all killed."

"Hey, what are you complaining about? It worked, didn't it?"

"Barely."

"Don't bitch."

"I like to bitch."

"You gonna have any trouble making it to the shuttle?"

Cecil frowned, hauling Johanes back to his feet, "As long as Mr. Sleepy here keeps his eyes open, none whatsoever. C'mon Jo."

"Huh..."

"Good luck, Cecil."

"Same to you, for all its worth coming from hacker. And try not to get yourself killed for once, eh?"

Cecil offered him the canister, finally reaching over when he wouldn't accept it voluntarily and securing it with blind but uncanny accuracy into the communicator sheath on Mike's holster.

"There you go. Little starburst in the hole."

"Thanks... but I'd really prefer not to have this."

"I'd prefer you to have it. Just twist the top, and when you hear it start bubbling, don't breathe for the life you."

"Cecil..."

"Don't argue. Just go, and don't get comfortable for even a moment."

Mike smiled, though his friend couldn't see the expression.

"Don't worry. I'll be fine."

* * *

He'd grown very comfortable, his head leaning against the corner of the room as though it were rooted to the

spot, deriving all its essential nourishment from the pale, waxen moonlight trickling from the window, cool waves of starlight splashing across his weary, pallid face. With eyes dashing to the curtains and dwelling upon some distant star, he'd remark on parameters of composition, luminosity, bolometric magnitude and various other statistics. It was a diversion, nothing more, and as the night continued and another injection was administered, he seemed ever more pleased to answer her queries, his withered voice now picking up to the rhythm of his mind, tossing out fragments of speech as quickly as he tongue could fashion them.

"The problem with organizing anti-gravity into a self-imposed matrix had always been conceptual, like chasing the speed of light... just as space had been the enemy prior to interweave technology, so too did time become our enemy. The trick was not in over-powering it, but rather in learning its true nature. Such a fundamental breakthrough is significant, not only for gravitics technology but for other disciplines also."

"What sort?"

"I'm no an expert on such matters, but I imagine that communications technology could benefit. If it is possible to rotate gravitational fields inside of stighmi-time, sending quantum pings across great distance should also be possible. It is just a guess, of course. There will be have to be tests in order to delineate the probability amplitudes for optimal space-time paths, and we will have to re-define the entire theory on imaginary time, more than a standard lifetime of work, but at least now there is a place to begin."

He went on like that, talking at one moment about spontaneous photon emissions, then about the time-symmetry of subatomic processes, then about systemic dis coherence and re coherence and on and on and on as though they were the most fascinating subjects ever conceived. She listened to him ramble about the requantization of gravity with its functional integral over space-time geometries, watched as he described unitary evolution operators, nodded off while he discussed the essentials of gravitic matrix propagation. In short, he was talking gibberish, yet miraculously, it all seemed so clear to him, as though he were simply explaining what happened to him at the market or how he'd stubbed his toe while climbing a flight of stairs.

Sule's mind began to swim just trying to keep up with the words, let alone trying to grasp their meaning. She finally gave up and just let him talk, until he seemed to wind about on himself, mulling over the same words in different combinations, again and again, like some preacher talking about god. She would interrupt with a question every now and then, usually sending him off on a whole new tangent. She finally decided that she had to find some way of breaking the subject so his mind would flow to where she wanted it without questioning her intents.

"Did the Clio understand all this?"

"Clio?" His voice suddenly lost its budding vitality, and he stared down, sunken eyed, at the mauve carpet. "Poor Clio. She had a great mind."

"She still does."

"You honestly expect me to believe that?"

"Why not? Why would anyone want to hurt her?"

He shot back an incredulous scowl. Sule leafed a hand across his shoulder, letting her fingers brush lazily along his neck and then down his gaunt chest. It was a mistake to bring up her name again. Every time he thought of her, he grew more careful with his words.

"Trust me, Erestyl. Her mind is far to valuable to put under a mind-scanner."

"Perhaps, but what use is it, unless it is willing to cooperate?"

"If you thought she was going to die then why did you leave?"

His face contorted into a pained and desperate expression, as though aching to curl upon itself and disappear. Sule edged closer, resting a hand on his shoulder, letting her fingers brush lazily along his neck. She knew she'd already blown it. Better to just give rake him over the coals, she thought to herself.

"Was it difficult, Erestyl? Leaving her to face the scanner alone?"

He sat there, unable to answer, one moment the babbling idiot, and the next, a very laconic one. Sule could see him resisting, the strain in his eyes, bulging against the suggestion Alister had implanted.

"She didn't know... did she." It was a statement, not a question. "Poor Clio. She never did have much of a memory for formulas. She could weave them like nobody I've known, but she couldn't remember much of anything, even when she wanted to. That's what happened, isn't it? Your scanner devoured her mind for nothing? For nothing, Sule? A difficult thing it is to capture one's intuition. And when I die, she'll rest in peace. Does that scare you?"

Then he held his breath. She'd seen him do it numerous times, forcing himself to pass out over and over, until finally his body would slink quietly toward death. Such was the extent of his will. Given enough time in solitude, he would have his way. But we wasn't in solitude now.

Lucky guy.

She put a fist in his stomach, forcing a gasp of breath. It was a game they would play, until she'd prepared another injection and gummed-up a bit more of his short-term memory. Then she would try again. It was only a matter of

time.

Ding

Hunter raised her chin.

"Computer, open channel, visitor."

"Error... cannot route channel."

"From one side of the wall to the other?"

Ding

She lifted herself off the cushi-bag, opening the door with a flick of her finger. She didn't realize it was a mistake until she was on back the floor, her nostrils spitting forth a heady stream of the red stuff. Brooks dropped a moment later, hand still on his holster as he sluggishly tried to draw the weapon. By the time Hunter climbed to her knees, she found the last remaining hypo-dart pointed at her chest. Mike stepped fully inside, letting the door slide shut behind him.

"Hi Doc. Remember me?"

Chapter Twenty-Five

She stayed there, motionless, as it dribbled down from her nostrils, spilling in thin trails over her lips and chin before settling in a dark, red stain along the front of her jersey. She didn't seem to mind at all, as though a little blood was beneath her notice. Mike stripped off his shirt, tossing it in her general direction, but she ignored it, her light brown eyes watching his every movement like a tiger preparing to strike. The man he'd shot lay crumpled on the carpet, the hypo-dart concealed somewhere underneath. Mike turned him over gently, extracting the tiny projectile.

"Sorry to interrupt. Friend of yours?"

She just stared back.

"Not much a conversationalist, eh? Oh... I found some Anamesa. Thanks for asking."

Her eyes registered only the barest trace of surprise. Mike patted his hip with his best expression of honesty.

"Look Doc, I have a real gun here. And a can of chemicals a friend loaned me. You wanna see how it's used?"

"I expect I'm going to find out."

"Just tell me where the holocrystal is."

Her eyes betrayed her, either by choice or accident, it didn't matter. The crystal was there, loaded in a player. Mike pushed a button, and Erestyl's image, gasping for breath, appeared in three dimensions. He hit it again and unplugged the unit, pocketing it with as little hesitation as he had clobbering her in the face.

"Real sorry about your nose."

"Just tell me one thing, Harrison," said with her blood still trickling. "Why did you kill all those people?"

"Doctor, no insult to your medical skills, but do I look like I'm in any shape to go running around on a murderous rampage?"

"But..."

"I didn't kill anyone. The most violent thing I've done since I've been on-board was hit you just now... and I'm sorry."

"Then who did?"

Mike thought about it. He couldn't very well tell her about Johanes. He finally aimed the hypo-gun.

"No... not again."

"Sorry Doc. Been nice chatting with you."

She was unconscious a moment later. He found a bandage for her nose, cleaning the blood off her face with his shirt and dropping her squarely on the cushi-bag. Outside, the hall area was deserted. Mike sprinted barefoot to the stairwell as best he could manage, ducking inside almost too quickly. Some idiot had turned the gravitics down to somewhere between point five and point seven. It made rapid maneuvers fairly interesting.

Hopping the steps two by two, Mike descended as quickly as the meager gravity could carry him, the actinic lanterns casting intermittent patches of illumination along the walls. The combination of low gravity and low lighting reminded him of the shuttle rides he'd had over New Eden. His father used to switch off the gravitics in the empty cargo hold, teaching him to do flips in zero-gee. Such were his thoughts when he heard the click and slide of a door to his back.

Mike grabbed the rail, halting his descent and pushed himself into the shadowy wall. He crouched down as small and tight as he could manage on a moment's notice. Drawing his gun, he counted only three, probably from the team he'd sent to the deck six goose chase. They filed into the stairwell and headed upward with not so much as a glance to

either side, all except for the last one, who turning his head to sneeze, suddenly opened his eyes, all wild and berserk, like he thought he was some sort of Gorgon. Mike nailed him in the hip, shooting the closest light source with his next round. The others must have went hysterical with fear, because in the ensuing moment of darkness, he counted at least eight shots hammering down the stairwell, one of them whizzing by his ear before he'd found the next portal and barreled headlong into the adjoining deck.

An alarm sounded by his ear. For a second, at least, it was all his scattered senses could consolidate. Everything else was dark. Then, for the barest fraction of a heartbeat, Mike thought he'd stumbled into an airlock, as all he could see was a horizontal slice of billowing, violet star-scape, the inner shell of the normal-space bubble undulating like a belly dancer in heat. Large tables began to take form, a roulette wheel here, long squat rows of wagering machines there. It was a casino, stretching clear from one end of the deck to the other, and running its entire length was a huge window via which penetrated the great chamber's only illumination.

Mike turned from the glimmering, violet tapestry as the gun-spray in their stairwell grounded to sudden halt. For the next few moments of indecision, he imagined footsteps approaching and the noise of panicked breath in his ears. He tugged the canister off his belt, twisting its top until he could feel the vibration of chemicals meeting one another in jubilant release. It dropped to the floor, smacking his foot as it fell, and then he found himself scurrying along the wall as fast as his legs could pump.

The lift shaft would be up ahead and to the left, or so he guessed, but the darkness was so thick that he could barely make out what was in front of his nose, much less the features of the corridor. He finally smashed face-first into a something solid, bouncing to the floor more as a terror-stricken mass of jelly than an armed and dangerous criminal. As he fumbled back to his feet, the throbbing noise of the alarm was suddenly replaced by silence. Mike waited motionless as his ears adjusted to the quiet. In the distance, he could distinctly make out a choking noise followed by the sound of more footsteps and numerous voices.

Mike crept beside the wall, gliding his hand along its surface until he found the double doors of the lift. He tried prying them apart by what little brute strength he still possessed. It was no use. Except for a bare centimeter in which to stick his fingers, the doors held fast, some sort of bolting mechanism holding them from the inside. Mike ran a finger along the narrow crack until he found the offending piece of metal. One bullet later, it was gone.

"Hey, that was a gunshot! Bring that light over here!"

Blindly slinking into the shaft, searching by touch for some ladder or hand hold, Mike suddenly found himself unmistakably weightless. The sensation grabbed him as terrifying and unique, but the bullet ricocheting over his head convinced him to duck inside. Then, with legs tightly coiled, he propelled himself into the black pit with as much force as he could summon, flipping himself back over as his legs brushed against the walls. The guard was above him a moment later, brandishing her gun in one hand and a bright light in the other. She fired blindly, bouncing her shells off the shaft's interior as Mike pushed himself into a exit groove two levels directly below. Then he blew away a similar metal bolt, exiting the shaft and entering a new gravity field.

The sudden shift in weight sent him stumbling, but the new deck he'd invaded was lighted enough that he could catch the carpet instead of slamming into it with his face. The passenger staterooms lining the narrow corridor seemed to streak past at lightning speed as he bolted back toward the stairwell. Inside, he could hear numerous voices above, some shouting orders while others yelled about poison gas. Mike continued downward, hopping the steps three by three, until the frantic voices faded gently into the distance, transforming over time into nothing more than venomous whispers, each interlaced with the vulgar rumblings of billowing vapors on a rainy seventhday.

* * *

She laid on her back, facing the endless sky, as the dark, warm grass stretched below, soft, green tendrils of life holding her in a gentle embrace. Overhead, the wispy clouds were mixing again, shifting their contour as though contorted by the sweet melody of leaves in the wind. Then, with laughing pride they crowding together, until with dark and menacing contempt, they loomed heavily like giants in the sky. She waited, open-eyed and innocent, blinking only when the brilliant spears of icy radiance screamed down. Rain soon followed, pouring over her, until she felt herself dissolving among the fine, velvety threads, sleep slowly receding into the hazy distance.

Ding* *Ding* *Ding* *Ding

Hunter opened her eyes. Brooks was still on the floor, slowly turning over, unable to shake it off.

Ding* *Ding* *Ding

With considerable effort, she rose from the cushi-bag and stumbled to the door. Feso was on the other side, still wearing his striped pajamas. Anders and another officer stood to either side, and from the looks on their faces she could vaguely surmise what they must have been thinking. She glanced over her shoulder as Brooks tried, again unsuccessfully, to regain his coordination. Feso finally voiced the question.

"What's going on?"

"Harrison was here. He brought more senthinol."

"He was here!? In your cabin?"

"It's a long story."

Feso tried to help her back to the cushi-bag, but she shoed him away, slowly finding her way to the kitchen. Her chief nurse was duly impressed.

"You must be developing a tolerance."

"If he tries to shoot me again with that stuff... I swear... I'll just belt him. What time is it?"

Anders stepped forward, "This isn't a social call, Doctor. We need you at sickbay. Another person's been wounded."

"Serious?"

"Just a bullet to the hip. He'll live. Two others are suffering from poison gas inhalation. They seem to be recovering on their own, but..."

"More hydrogen-cyanide?"

Anders nodded.

"Okay, give me a minute. I just have to wash off my face."

Her reflection surprised her even more than the second dose of the drug. Instead of a blood-smearred face, she was perfectly clean, a new bandage placed under her nose with just the right amount of pinch.

"Nice touch, Harrison, but I'm still gonna belt you."

By the time she reached sickbay, her mind had cleared, and the operation went smoothly. The regen specialist reported one more fatality, however. Hunter cursed herself for not being there, and then sucked down a highbowl of her favorite late night drink, particularly for those occasions when she knew that sleep was not a viable option. No more would die. Specialist or no specialist, they were ultimately her patients and her responsibility.

The next several hours passed slowly, Brooks trying in vain to pull up the internal comm-net as he sent runners from one team to another, continuing his search on the most manual basis possible. He used the front chamber of sickbay as his headquarters since it was more central than the bridge, slurping down so much zardocha that she began to wonder if another shot of senthinol would have any effect whatsoever.

The remaining patients finally began stabilizing, moving from the most critical stages one by one. When it finally looked like they'd all pull through without a catch, she decided to grab a nap in the cyberoptics lab. Feso woke her two hours later as he mulled about, whistling his face off, while he tried to hook together the remaining grav stretchers.

"Huh... oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know you were in here."

"What did you think I was? A corpse?"

"Well, no... I uh..."

"I'll take that as an affirmative. Where you taking these guys, anyway?"

"Uh... shuttle seven."

She yawned, "I thought we had more fatalities than just these."

"Oh... we have a lot. Real bad time to be a crewmember on this damn boat."

Then he smiled, shy and afraid, realizing he'd sworn in front of her for the first time in his life. She didn't bother to say anything. For all she was concerned, he had the right to swear at the top of his lungs for the next several weeks straight. That's how much she agreed with him. He continued about his business, however, keeping whatever thoughts he had to himself. Then, just as she was about to leave, he looked up, a knot forming at the base of his throat.

"Doctor... you think they'll find him?"

"Harrison?"

"I mean... Brooks said he's as good as dead anyway... something about mismedication, but something happened while you were at that meeting."

"The anamesa?"

He looked startled, "How..."

"Harrison told me... more or less. And you were acting so funny... what happened, exactly?"

"Ah... I don't know where to begin."

"Try the beginning."

He sucked in a long breath of air as though trying to remember that far back.

"Remember Mr. Smyth?"

"The druggie? How could I forget?"

"He... well, he came in... you know... was real nice..."

She smiled, for the first time in what seemed like a long while.

"He bribed you?"

"No!"

"He gave you five hundred credits, and you gave him some anamesa."

She checked her pocket. Sure enough, the money was still there. Feso just stood, mouth gaping, while he tried to stammer a response.

"Yes... but..."

"But what, Feso? He told you it was an aphrodisiac, so you figured it was harmless and let him have it? You broke the regs."

"But the computer agreed with everything he said. It was only after I heard that somebody had broken into the system... I tried finding Smyth's room, but all the passenger records had been erased."

She shook her head, "Don't sweat it, okay? In a way, what you did may have been a good thing. Talking with Harrison... before he let me have it... he just didn't seem like the killing type. I don't know what that's supposed to mean, but all he wanted was that holocrystal. I think I'm beginning to understand why."

Feso regarded her with an incredulous stare, confusion webbed over his features like a rubbery mask. Hunter guessed that he didn't understand half of what she was talking about. It was probably better that way.

"I know. I sound crazy. Guess I'd better get back to work."

"No. Sit down. You can come with me to the shuttle."

"And do what? Look at a bunch of corpses?"

"Keep me company."

She thought about it for half a second. It was a hell of a job, she had to admit, pulling around dead bodies. If she were doing it, she'd want the company. Anybody would.

"Ugh... what the heck."

Shuttle seven was always locked up tight. It served as the Commodore's private transport on the rare occasions that she would visit a planet's surface. Anyone approaching from the outside would either have to be recognized and allowed entrance from someone inside, or they'd have to key open the lock. Feso had the combination on a flimsi he'd neatly folded and stuffed into his pajama shirt pocket.

"You ever gonna change out of those?"

"Ah... they're very comfortable. You should try it sometime."

Inside, the grav-stretchers sat arranged in orderly rows, as though Feso had been trying to impress the former command staff with his space efficiency. The air was fairly cool, and when she reached to turn on the lights, something darted from one of the expiring shadows.

"Hey... what are you doing here?"

"Meow."

Bending her knees, she hunched to the deck as Feso brought in the first of the stretchers. He stopped short when he saw its yellow eyes.

"What's this?"

"Meow."

"Looks like a cat. I didn't know Reece was into pets."

"Sheesh... I can't believe I didn't notice it before."

"You know cats," Hunter offered, approaching it slowly. It let her get to arm's reach before bolting into the shadows underneath a row of grav-stretchers. She crouched to her hands and knees, spotting it against a corner. Meanwhile, Feso came in with the rest of the stretchers.

"C'mon, doctor. Why bother?"

"He's hungry."

"Well, as long as he stays in here, he'll have plenty to chew on."

"C'mon. I'm not going to hurt you. You want food? Food? Gotcha!"

"Meyowrrr!"

He had sharp claws, the sort that could shred skin like finely ground needles. Hunter switched her hold to the scruff of his neck as soon as he'd drawn blood, erecting herself amidst the virtual sea of stretchers. They jiggled furiously as she stumbled about, their covers ruffling, exposing parts of bodies with every new collision. Meanwhile, her captive flayed his claws in every direction possible, finally seizing hold of the first fleshy object he could reach, a corpse's forearm, and ripping three, parallel stripes.

"Ow!"

Hunter froze, dropping the cat more out of impulse than any cognitive decision. She'd been a doctor for a good many years, and she'd never heard a dead person say ouch before. Then the sudden realization dawned on her like a

smack across the face, and a combination of training and reflexes took over.

The pistol jostled from Mike's grasp even before it was fully free of the holster, skidding along the metal floor as he tried to throw his plastic cover in her face. Catching his bleeding forearm, she twisted it backward, until he fell off-balance from the stretcher, pushing his body into her legs and waist. A moment later, he felt her elbow smashing into the side of his skull, jarring his neck so far to the left that he swore he heard something crack.

The crack was actually a click, the click of a gun hammer to be more precise. Johanes was on the floor, shifting his aim from Hunter to Feso about every other second, his eyes dark and wild, sweat spilling into them as his eyelids went up and down with spasmodic velocity. Hunter let go of Mike's arms, her hands falling to either side as she backed slowly into the stretchers.

"Feso... run!"

"Try it and I'll blow your head off. Now get away from the airlock."

Feso froze, unable to budge his legs. He'd never had a gun aimed at his face before. He'd never had a gun aimed anywhere in his general vicinity before. The feeling it gave him was strange, as though every moment were crystal clear.

"Get away from it, now."

"Run!"

Feso edged along the inner wall, lowering himself to the floor as Johanes motioned him down with the gun.

"Mike, you'd better close the airlock."

"What are you gonna do, Jo?"

"Just close it. This'll make considerable noise, and we can't afford to be heard."

"Help!!!"

Mike punched her in the stomach and then slammed her to the floor. It cut her scream if accomplishing nothing else. He finally had to place a foot on her back to keep her from getting back up.

"Jo, I'd be happier if there was no more killing."

"Just close the damned airlock!"

The exertion from the yell seemed to wear him out, and Mike realized the Draconian was still in no condition to move around. That he'd made it to the pistol was a testament to the strength of sheer willpower. Mike pulled his foot off Hunter's back, and walked to the airlock, closing both doors with the flick of a switch and then evacuating the lock of all air. Now nobody would hear them. Even noises as loud as gunfire would sound only like muffled chokes to anyone directly outside. Johanes seemed to sigh inwardly as he aimed at the Doctor's chest, grateful that his command had been obeyed. A moment later he was unconscious, a red facsimile of Mike's heel on the side of his face. Mike collected and aimed the weapon before Hunter could close the distance. She skidded to a halt, not five meters from him, a wearied look on her face, as though she figured her end was at hand. Mike motioned her toward the nurse.

"You might as well lie down, Doctor."

"I'd rather stand, thanks."

"You make me nervous. Lie down."

She complied, slowly, settling herself face down on the deck next to Feso. It was cold, but she figured it warmer than the obvious alternative.

"What are you going to do with us, Harrison?"

Mike thought about it for all of two seconds.

"Cecil, do we have anymore hypo-darts?"

"Nope."

"You have any bright ideas, Doctors?"

"You could let us go."

Mike smiled, "I'd sooner space you. No offense, but that'd be my fate were our positions reversed."

"I doubt it," not that he'd be spaced, but that he'd live long enough to make it to the airlock. Of course, she wasn't about to say so.

"You're full of it, Doc; you know that?"

"You're going to get caught anyway, Harrison. Both you and your friends. Once we arrive in-system, what are you going to do? Spacejack the Commodore's shuttle and hope that nobody notices? Can't you see? There's no way out of this. You're trapped."

"Shut-up."

"If you let us go, you'll have a better chance. I promise you, I'll try to make it easier for you."

"I'd sooner take my chances with the great outdoors."

"Harrison, if what you told me before is true, that you've had nothing to do with the killing, then your chances are

good. Think about it. Use your brain."

Mike stepped forward, loading a shell from clip to firing chamber more out of anger and frustration than any desire to shoot.

"Doctor, maybe you haven't figured it out yet, but ISIS is after me. They're after this holocrystal. One way or another, they're gonna find me... and you. And if you think what Jo did was in bad taste, you're in for one hell of a surprise!"

"Then just give it to them."

"Don't you have any idea what's on this? We're talking about the weapon to end all weapons, Doctor. Armageddon. Doomsday. For any planet the empire wants to make an example of. Think about that."

She kept silent for a while, self-confidence falling into tattered ruins as the fervency of his words congealed around her mind like a hostile, alien landscape. Mike paced back and forth, between his two captives and the forward cabin, looking out the windows for some sign or a normal star-scape. She considered making a run for it on several occasions, but each time she'd gathered the courage, he'd look back over his shoulder, and she'd think a little bit longer about what he'd said.

"Harrison."

"The name's Mike."

"If the crystal's so bad, why don't you just destroy it?"

"I intend to. After I've had a chance to see what's on it."

"Personal curiosity?"

"Call it whatever you like. A lot of people died for this thing. I'm not just going to chuck it without taking a look. You've seen it, right?"

"Most of it," She hunched up on her elbows. "Tell me something."

"What?"

"How did you get mixed up in all this?"

Mike shrugged, "Same way you did... accidentally on purpose."

Feso looked up, a shy brand of anxiety controlling the sum of his facial muscles.

"Ah, I hate to call in a favor... but..."

"What?"

"Might there be a fresher? I've really got to... you know."

Mike shook his head, "Hold it in."

They continued to wait, each with his or her own personal degree of impatience, until the subtle disorientation washed over their senses with the "popping" of the normal space bubble. Now every moment was essential. Mike raced to the forward cabin, switching on the helm interface and hitting the disengage. He then brought the inertial compensators online, checking over his shoulder to see how the two guests were doing. Hunter was already at the airlock, trying rather ineffectually to override the safety lock. Mike hit the aft thruster and slowly brought it up to full. By the time he turned back around, Hunter was staring out the portal as the *Crimson Queen* slowly receded into the distance. She looking rather annoyed with her situation. It made Mike smile, at least a little.

"Doctor, I may need your help. Why don't you come over here and sit down."

With the gun aimed steadily, she had little choice but to comply.

"What do you want?"

"The *Crimson's* primary broadcast frequency."

"Why?"

"I'll explain later."

"Explain now."

Mike sighed, "If my guess is correct, they're currently rebooting their main computer, which means they'll have their communications back very soon. If we overlay the signal, we may be able to garble it enough so they can't sic their escorts on us."

"You can't match the power of their transmitter, Harrison."

"Even with the shouter?"

"I seriously doubt it. Not at this range, anyway."

"Maybe you got a better idea."

"Even if I did, I certainly wouldn't tell it to you."

"Doctor, you may not have noticed, but I saved your life back there."

"I guess that makes us even."

Mike blinked, not sure what to say. Then she dropped her snarl, as if no response was the right response.

"It doesn't matter anyway. If you'd bothered to consult the EMS, you'd see that the escorts aren't in yet."

"Where are they?"

"Tyber is the recognized capitol of this district, Harrison."

"So?"

"The escorts come in a hour behind us... diplomatic courtesy. Until then, we're at the mercy of the locals... sort of a showing of the belly... a gesture of trust."

"That's foolish."

"That's diplomacy. However, if you still want to know the frequency, the *Crimson's* primary is reserved Imperial standard."

"Huh?"

"Fourteen hundred kilohertz. What's the matter? Never been in space before?"

Mike opened his mouth to respond, then closed it again as he watched her fingers dance over the keys. She seemed to know what she was doing.

"Where'd you learn to do that?"

"Naval academy. Hmm... there's some sort of problem."

"Cecil, did you turn off the shouter?!"

"One moment."

"...zzztztzt... seven... please respond... Shuttle seven, this is the *Crimson Queen*. You are not cleared for departure. Repeat, you are not cleared for departure. Please respond."

"Looks like you're right. They've got comm back online."

Her light brown eyes no longer seemed threatening, but Mike didn't find them particularly cooperative either. Cecil came up from behind, tapping her on the ear before he realized he had the wrong person.

"Where's Michael?"

"Over here, Cecil. What's up?"

"Johanes."

"He's up?"

"Beginning to stir."

"To stir."

"To awaken, to revive... to bitch about a certain someone beating him senseless."

Mike bit his lip. He didn't like the idea of going back there, no matter what the Draconian's condition.

"Doctor, I think it's your turn to do the honors."

"Is that an order?"

"Consider it a diplomatic courtesy."

* * *

"What do you mean you can't fire?!"

"Sir... the optical cores are warped."

"All of them?"

"Yessir. It looks like somebody spread a low power, wide-focus beam over the cores, switched off all the coolers, and just left it like this for the last couple hours. We have no lasers whatsoever."

"Tell me, Lieutenant. Could the hacker have done it remotely?"

"Yessir. It's a strong possibility that's what happened."

Brooks slammed his fist on the console keyboard, eliciting a strange mixture of beeps and buzzes.

"Tabor, get a hold of the missile bay. Tell 'em we want a hellraiser loaded up with all the features."

"Aye. Still no response to our hail, sir. Also, medical is reporting two personnel missing."

"Who?"

"Ensign Sosrodjojo and Lieutenant Commander Hunter. They were last seen headed toward shuttle seven."

Brooks felt his mouth drop open.

"Transfer the hail to my desk."

"Aye sir."

Brooks listened to the line pop open. There was a vague sea of static with followed it, various particles left over from the big bang.

"Shuttle seven, this is Brooks. I wish to speak with Doctor Hunter."

Mike blinked, turning up the volume as the voice repeated itself.

"Doctor, you got a call! Want me to tell him to leave a message!?"

Brooks tried again, ready to give up when there was no response. Finally, her voice crackled over the frequency.

"Hunter here."

"Doctor, what's going on?"

"Um... would you believe a joy ride?"

"Afraid not. Is Harrison there?"

She looked at Mike, not sure what to say.

"Yeah... I'm here. Wha'd'ya want?"

"Unless you turn around now, I'll be forced to incapacitate the shuttle."

"That may be difficult without any lasers."

"We have other weapon systems, Mr. Harrison."

"Commander, we are well aware of the arsenal at your disposal, but if you're thinking of firing a missile, this shuttle will be more than incapacitated. It'll be blown right out of space. You really want to do that?"

"If that's my only option."

Mike turned toward Hunter. For a moment, he found himself genuinely sorry she'd gotten herself mixed up in his mess.

"Here, you talk to him."

Feso, meanwhile, kept himself flat on the deck. Mike guessed that he could hear most of what was being said.

"If you want to take a whiz in the airlock..."

"I'll wait."

"Suit yourself."

Hunter looked back over her shoulder. Harrison was walking back toward his two friends, leaving her alone in the shuttle's bridge. His trust in her, as of recently, had been nothing short of amazing, a true feat of diplomacy, either that or insanity. Still, the way he carried the pistol suggested he'd use it with minimal provocation. It left a lump in her throat, knowing that all her training was essentially useless should he decide to get nasty.

"Doctor, you still there?"

"Huh? Oh... yeah, I'm here."

"What's your situation? Are you being held hostage?"

"Oh, c'mon Brooks. What do you think?"

"I don't know what to think."

"Well... yes, I'm being held hostage... sort of."

"Sort of? Doctor, did you let them into the shuttle?"

"Of course not."

"I have it on very good authority that the Commodore's shuttle was locked up tight. How did they get inside?"

"What, you think I let them in?"

"You tell me."

"They probably got in the same way I did."

"What's that?"

"Accidentally on purpose."

"What?"

During the accusations, Hunter kept her eyes fixed on Harrison. First he spoke with his blind friend, then shook the other one until he was awake. As a trio, they looked fairly distraught, a gloomy pallor of hopelessness on each of their faces. Embittered words were hissed, then a moment for excuses and explanations, and then someone said something, something that made Harrison blink a couple times with the sort of disbelief that for most people may come along once in a lifetime. Hunter frowned, their voices too low and too far away but to allow the faintest trace of comprehension.

"Doctor..."

"Brooks, I think something's up."

He opened his mouth to respond, but Tabor cut him off before he could so much as enunciate one syllable.

"Sir, gunnery reports that missile as launch ready."

"Hold fire."

"Also, sir... being hailed by the Tyberian starport authority. They must have overheard something, sir. They want to know if we request assistance."

"Ignore their hails. Doctor, are you there? Doctor..."

Mike switched the frequency, letting Cecil dictate his every key stroke.

"Sounds like we're making a scene."

Johanes grunted, "He knows what'll happen if he lets the locals get involved... big mess and front page news."

Mike nodded, "You sure this is gonna work, Cecil?"

"Heh heh... once in... always in."

It was the hackers' motto, sort of a take-off on somebody's rules for magic, or so the story went. Dira was well of aware of the saying, and being so informed, she was the first to notice.

"He's back, chief."

Tuto turned around, spilling zardocha all over his shirt in the process.

"Damn it..."

"He's moving slow. Must be a decoy. I'm scanning the other channels for simultaneous entrance."

Tuto hit the comm switch, "Tabor, get me Brooks."

* * *

"OTC to *Crimson*, tracking deviation from your cleared approach vector. Please correct. Over."

"No response?"

"None."

"Are they changing course?"

"No sir."

"Ask them if they need help again."

Commander Merces clasped his hands together, fully expecting at least a negative response. Instead, he was met only by static. Although a certain degree of aloofness was expected from Imperials, this sort of behavior was way out of protocol. He nervously chewed a lip, settling back down in the command chair as the communications officer tried another time.

"Should I inform Administrator Chorea, sir?"

"Negative. Lieutenant, go over again what you heard."

"*Crimson* told their shuttle they were not cleared for departure. Then somebody started asking for a Doctor Hunter."

"A doctor aboard the shuttle?"

"That's right."

"Anything else?"

"They coded the signal immediately upon connecting, sir. I can begin saving the transmission."

"No, it wouldn't help us. Scan Ops, run an identify on the shuttle. Is it a medical craft?"

"Negative, sir. It says here that shuttle seven is Commodore Reece's personal craft."

Merces nodded, "Lieutenant, try hailing the shuttle. Ask them if they are in need of assistance, medical or otherwise."

"Aye sir."

Merces rose back to his feet, pacing slowly in the dim, blue light of the orbital traffic control center.

"Sir, detecting a missile launch from the *Crimson*. It appears to be directed at their shuttle."

"Missile ID?"

"Hellraiser-199. Nuclear package."

"Estimated time to impact?"

"Thirty five seconds."

"Tell gunnery to enable laser cannon arrays delta, epsilon, and sigma. Target missile. Hold fire to my order. Any response from the shuttle?"

"No si... yes sir, they are requesting assistance."

"That figures. What about the *Crimson*?"

"Negative... wait... sir, their transponder signal just vanished mid-stream."

"Scan Ops?"

"Detecting interweave emanations. Now detecting explosions. Sir, they're breaking up."

Merces held his breath, unable to regain his voice for several seconds.

"Sir, the shuttle is still requesting assistance. Impact in five..."

"Fire lasers."

Mike felt the explosion. The turbulence alone knocked him out of his seat. At first he thought he was dead, when opening his eyes, he saw only darkness. Then somebody turned on a flashlight. It was Feso, floating in mid-air like he was doing some sort of flip for everyone's amusement. Mike realized he was weightless, that they were all weightless, and that both Feso and the doctor wore staid expressions, the sort generally reserved for funerals. Appropriate, Mike figured, considering how many people he'd just killed; not just people, but innocent people, and the strange accomplishment suddenly hit him like an electromagnetic overload.

"I think I'm gonna be sick."

Johanes took the statement as a license to go for the pistol, a legitimate assessment if not for Hunter's keen reflexes. He ended up floating in somersaults back toward the stretchers, a bloody lip for his trouble. Then she looked up, sort of apologetically.

"Sorry, he was..."

"I know. Here."

Mike withdrew the ammunition clip from the pistol, conscious at once of both the idiocy and the necessity of his action as he handed it over. She seemed as surprised as he. Then a doubtful glare crossed her eyes.

"You're forgetting something, Harrison."

"Like what?"

"There's still a bullet in the chamber."

Mike tried to smile, "You're very observant."

He extracted the final bullet, pushing it gently in the zero gravity. It floated between them for a second or two before she grabbed it. Then she looked up, soft brown eyes turning wicked as her boot collided with his stomach. Mike curled into a ball and just floated while the pain slowly subsided.

"Thanks for the trust, Harrison."

"Don't mention it."

Chapter Twenty-Six

Starlight cut quietly through the carbon lattice half-dome, each twinkling tentacle dancing a merry jaunt along her features as though delighted that its long and aimless voyage had ended with the touch of human skin. Huddling together under Tyber's young, blue sun, the escort squadron resembled nothing so much as a group of flies buzzing beneath an electric lantern. From the edge of the space balcony, they seemed very small. Everything did, the stars, the ships, people working behind sheets of polymer, talking, sighing, laughing, perhaps even crying, and all of them, perfectly extinguishable.

It would take but a pinprick, she thought to herself, imagining the ideal culprit as a mere speck of dust. In her mind's eye, it floundered along at a lazy megameter per second. Photons zoomed past like the hare passing the turtle, but it continued unperturbed and blissfully unaware. At one moment the half-dome stood intact, the space balcony protected from the ever-inhaling depths of space. Then it would burst, shattering into the thousand shards.

Such events were, of course, incomprehensibly rare, however, the possibility loomed during every moment of every day. That was the reality of space. She held the vision in her mind, letting the image lend anxiety to her voice and trepidation to her eyes, as though the fear of uncertainty might reinforce her shadowy tale.

"What happened then, Doctor?"

Captain Grant studied her distant expression, the way her light brown eyes shifted out of focus for only a instant. He'd seen the look before, mainly from veterans who'd been exposed to more than their fair share of carnage. Then her mouth opened, just a bit, the words forming as though she'd rehearsed them a dozen times. In fact, she had.

"It was like a replay of the *Taganaka Maru*. Everyone just went crazy. Sickbay was stormed. What they didn't steal, they managed to break."

"They killed the Commodore?"

"One of them gassed the entire bridge with hydrogen cyanide. They must have been looking for the shuttle codes."

Grant blinked, completely unable to believe his ears.

"Security precautions weren't taken to..."

"I have no idea, sir. It may have been a security person who did it. When people are facing almost certain death, sir..."

"I understand. Continue."

"I knew the bio-toxin would eventually kill everyone aboard. It was only a matter of time before it got all of us, however, I also knew I had a chance. A good chance. We'd locked ourselves in surgery. The entire place is sterile and airtight. I managed to access the ship's computer from the medical console, found out where they were taking the bodies of the bridge crew."

Grant nodded, "And you made a run for it. Breaking quarantine."

She gulped down, "Sir, we wore sterile masks the whole time we were out of surgery, right until we got spotted near the shuttles. We threw them into the crowd and made a run for safety."

"You broke quarantine."

"Sir, we were clean. Otherwise, we'd both be dead now."

"But you broke quarantine. A ship's doctor."

"Sir, Brooks was threatening to blow up the ship. I was scared, and obviously, for good reason. I didn't want to die."

"Me neither," Feso echoed.

Grant drew a deep breath, "Okay, Doctor. I have the gist of it. You understand that you may have to stand court-martial."

"Yes sir."

"Is there any chance that any of those corpses are carrying the toxin?"

"Sir, like I stated before, if they were, I wouldn't be talking to you."

He nodded, "Okay. Administrator, have your people been inside the shuttle?"

Chorea nodded, her chin bobbing slightly as she spoke, "Yes. We transported the bodies to a safe containment area and have begun a diagnostic of injured systems."

The Captain made a sour face as though he wasn't pleased about the unsolicited help.

"No offense, Administrator, but Royal Fleet would appreciate it if your people would get off its property until the Navy can conduct a thorough investigation."

"Of course."

"Doctor... Ensign. You're both dismissed for now, but don't leave this station. Understood?"

"Aye sir."

"Thank you, sir."

Mike was still waiting, silent and motionless beneath a plastic cover, when he felt the tap on his chest.

"How did it go?"

"Sshhh."

Feso acted as lookout while Hunter and Mike helped the blind and the injured negotiate their way unseen through the small antechamber and down a corridor. Half a minute later, they were in a lift. It was a tight fit with all five of them, but the source of Mike's discomfort had nothing to do with claustrophobia.

"Where are we going, Doc?"

"Away from armageddon," she looked up, eyes as icy as any he'd seen. "What are you worried about, Harrison? You still have a career."

"What did you tell them?"

"What does it matter? Here. You may need these."

Mike reached to accept the three tickets, but just as he was about to touch them, her fingers wrapped shut.

"There's just one thing. Give me the holocrystal."

"Doctor..."

"If you want these, hand it over."

Mike shook his head, "Forget it."

"I only want to destroy it, Harrison. You really think I'd trust you with it?"

"You're gonna have to."

The lift's doors opened into a wide atrium. Hundreds of people, most dressed in vacc cloth or mendwear business slickers, wandered about, waiting impatiently for the next pod to arrive. Mike remembered the place fairly well. Aside from some more planters and a new coat of paint, hardly a thing had changed.

Stepping off the lift, Mike kept a hand engaged to both Cecil and Johanes. For a moment he felt like he was leading around two small children. Then, as people noticed them and began to stare, he realized how strange they looked together, Mike in a white, loose-fitting robe, Cecil, stumbling about blindly, with rows of jacks covering his skull, and Johanes, with a blood-soaked shoulder, barely able to keep to his feet. Hunter and her nurse followed them out, letting the lift slip away into the seamless gravitic traffic flowing continuously overhead.

"Harrison..."

"Sshhh," Mike felt the stares grow in intensity. All he needed now was an impromptu autograph session. She seemed vaguely aware but not the least bit perturbed by his discomfort.

"Look, I'm not joking. You want to cooperate, or should we just duke it out?"

"Go pick on somebody your own size."

Mike felt himself getting yanked backward by the collar of his robe. She almost had it clear of his body before the security people arrived.

"What's going on here?!"

They just looked at each other, each waiting for the other to come up with a plausible explanation. Meanwhile the

pod pulled into port. Mike watched the spherical structure coast silently up its tube, passing the air locks, and lining up with the entry corridors. People funneled out while others pushed their way inside, very little organization about the whole thing. From a distance, they looked like hamsters scuffling over the right to occupy a moment's space, a thing Mike had never gotten entirely used to, but then, it least it gave the security people something to do.

"I'm gonna ask you just one more time... what is going on here?!"

"This guy is attempting to abscond with my property."

"What, you steal something from her?"

Mike pulled one of the spare holocrystals from Jo's pocket, presenting it with as much of a frown as he could muster.

"You win, Doc."

"You trusted it with him?"

"He's not going anywhere, is he? You still got those tickets?"

The ride down the beanstalk took some two hours. Considering that the total distance covered was some thirty-six thousand kilometers, Mike had no complaints. He remembered his first time, how he got bored sick just looking at the stars. It was always like that right up until the last few minutes. Then the pod, plunging through a shaft of the purest vacuum, would cut straight through Tyber's thick atmosphere. The layers of sickly brown and orange clouds would pass by so quickly, you'd have to set up a holo-recorder and then play your crystal back in slow motion just to catch the speed rush.

An hour after landfall they'd made an interim crash site at the Senex, sort of a local guild hall for the cyber-cranially inclined. Cecil had been awarded life-time membership some years back after repeatedly breaking into their archives. The story went that the only way to attain such an honor was to award it to oneself, which in turn meant that every hacker on the planet had the right to feel properly challenged. If they ever beat the security, they'd join the inner circle of wizards who maintained that security. The Senex, over time, had become a think-tank of the brightest and more talented hackers in the entire region, a virtual playground for those who never passed the test, and a fertile recruiting pit for those who had.

Mike remembered the old days when Cecil would gingerly seat himself on the polished white marble underneath one of the various gravitic aqua-sculptures. His favorite had always been the dragon, wings outstretched, breathing orange colored vapor at all who would dare approach. It was the pinnacle, a place for the wizards alone. He'd assume a meditative posture as he shut himself into the electronic void, often staying like that for several hours at a stretch. Mike, meanwhile, would lay down on one of the numerous couches beside the fire hearths and study or read or just sleep. Then they'd grab a bite at the Morrowtyme Cafe, which not only served some of the best zardocho this side of Ares, but which also stocked enough old midterms and finals to make most any student wet his pants in effigy.

Mike soon found himself sipping a highbowl of clover-mocha, wondering how soon his shoulder would stop hurting. Checking his pocket for about the twentieth time since Cecil had handed back the holo-player, he discovered it once more to his surprise, crystal and all, and not a thing he could say about it. He sighed, rubbing his shoulder and thinking that compared to the mental state of most of the students, Johanes didn't look too bad. Cecil, meanwhile, had picked up a cyclops lens that he'd managed to glue to his forehead. It stuck out like a squat gray knob, wires licking their way to his jacks.

"Good to see you, Michael."

"Good to be seen... oh god."

"Eh?"

"Niki's dead, Cecil. Bill too."

"Been quite a trip."

"I have to find someplace to look at this crystal."

"All has been arranged. Just... hang tight... and keep Jo from drooling over the table."

Johanes just grunted, as though waking up from a bad dream.

"Where am I?"

"On Tyber. You want some zardocho?"

"Maybe."

The jolt of caffeine seemed to do the Draconian some good, and Mike found himself wondering how much Jo would remember.

"How d'ya feel?"

"Um... tired."

"You need to shave."

"Look who's talking."

Mike ordered up another round with some onion-crackles, and they proceeded to make a mess, dropping little

flakes of dried, caramelized onion all over the table. One nice thing about the place was that you never had to clean up. Nobody did. You could just press a button on the side of the table and watch the surface descend a few centimeters while all the crumbs would get vaporized and sucked down little vacc-tubes along the sides. Then the surface would rise again, brand spanking clean from its brush with maser technology.

Cecil finally spotted the person he was looking for. Mike vaguely remembered her face but couldn't put a name to it until Cecil spoke up.

"Ami, over here."

She glided over on a pair of grav-skates, halting her momentum with the edge of the table. A tangle of curly hair fell across her face with the impact, its color sandy-something, traces of brown, blonde, and red all woven together like it couldn't decide what color to be, so it just compromised. The thing that struck Mike most was her youth. She looked almost like a girl he once knew when he was studying journalism. Then it hit him. He had known her some years past, when they were both students at Tyber. He'd aged during the interim. She, however, had not. Except for the skates and the curl job on her hair, she hadn't changed at all.

"Hi Mike, 'member me?"

"Ami?"

"Long time, no see, eh? Hey, love those threads. Cecil!"

"Greetings. How have you been, child?"

"Could be worse. What about you?"

They seemed to exchange pleasantries well into the next decade. Mike just sat there, recalling memories from what seemed increasingly like a past life. She was the one who'd dragged him into those undergraduate science classes which he'd squeaked through only by the mercy of several major deities. The one good thing that came of it was meeting Cecil, who TA'ed the one in artificial sentience and seemed to know his stuff far better than the doddering professor. He had a cocky edge about him back then. In some ways, he still did.

"We are all pretty clueless right now. You know how traveling can be."

"Not really. Hey... are you guys okay?"

"Oh, fine. Very lucky, actually."

Mike nodded, "Very."

"Cecil, you look really... did you get fried crispy again?"

"Ah... not precisely."

"You got soaped."

"Dregged, actually. Soaping is for wimps."

During Mike's sophomore year, Cecil got fried within an inch of his life, something to do with an irate super-computer and too many long hours on a dysfunctional deck. The local regen facilities literally saved his mind, but there were some glaring gaps in his memory which couldn't be restored. He had to spend a year in rehab, another relearning the material for some of those courses he'd been teaching. It mellowed him out, to put things mildly.

"Would you like some crackles?"

"I hate those things. Oh well... sure, why not? So what happened to you?"

"Ah... it's a long story."

"Format brief?"

"Have a seat, child."

"I'm not a child, Cecil, and I'm definitely not having a seat."

She spun herself on a collision course with his lap. Mike had to give her some room for the maneuver. He wasn't expecting it, but he wasn't surprised either. Ami had gotten to know Cecil during the rotten years of his life, hanging out with him more than was natural. She used to tease him by saying things like "lose a brain, gain a buddy." Somewhere along the line, he picked up on her deranged sense of humor, and Mike began to figure they were either closet lovers or just two very good friends who liked to mentally torture each other in their spare time.

"Cecil, you stink."

"Ah... that would be Mike's fault."

"What have you two perverts been up to?"

Mike shrugged, trying to look innocent, "Can I help it if Cecil sweats when he's horny?"

"You sick little boy. You haven't changed at all, have you?"

Mike shook his head, "If you mean matured, then no. I noticed that you haven't changed much either."

She laughed, "You're so observant, Mike."

"Well, I try."

"Didn't Cecil warn you? I'm immortal."

"Really?"

"I'm an angel disguised as a devil. Or perhaps vice-versa. I haven't decided yet."

Cecil smiled, "She hasn't changed a bit. Eh?"

"Yes I have. I've gotten fabulously wealthy."

"Oh, do tell."

"Never. It's mine. All mine."

Eventually, the three of them had gone their separate ways: Mike to Tizar, Cecil to Calanna in hopes of finding employment with the post-war reconstruction effort, and Ami stayed on Tyber, working toward a doctorate in something or other. Mike never found out whether or not she'd finished it. He'd never really cared, but seeing her after all these years, still in pristine condition, made him begin to wonder. Sensing his distraction, her chestnut eyes seemed to laugh when they caught his stare, and smirking as though with some hidden knowledge, she popped another onion-crackle in her mouth. For somebody who hated them, she sure was eating quite a few. Mike finally blinked, shaking off the spell.

"So what is it? Plastic surgery?"

"Really, Michael."

"I'm just curious."

"Too bad. It's a state secret. I'd tell you, but they'd erase your brain."

Mike practically choked. His automatic response gave her the sort of bewildered look that she so rarely showed the world, at least not willingly. Her natural state, Mike figured.

"What? Something I said?"

Cecil interceded, "Gatherer's got a headache. OD'ed on RL, poor boy. Goes ditto for long-face in the corner."

"He looks pretty gross."

Johanes smiled, winking at her in between the shivers. Cecil swiveled her into her own seat, perhaps to get his mind back on the so-called conversation.

"So, Amicia, what stink-hole art thou infesting nowadays? Still at the Iron Works?"

"Hah! I bailed on that dump years ago."

"So you're at another dump."

"I'm at the Myriad Spires."

"Really?"

She shook her head, "No, I'm just joking." She paused for the drumbeat. "Actually, I'm glad you approve, Cecil. It reinforces my ego. It's just so... you know... wonderful. That's the word."

"A studio?"

"Ixnay. Big-time ixnay."

"A flat."

"Keep goin'."

"A condo."

"You are one insulting son of a canker sore! He is, isn't he?!"

Mike nodded, figuring that she must have gotten that doctorate. Either that or she mated rich, an unlikely proposition considering her general attitude toward the male of the species, or as Ami once liked to call them, "the weaker sex". They took a lift up to the surface, catching a grav cart along the Cylindrical Expressway. Mike leaned back as orange and black clouds of toxic vapor pressed against the transparent, tubular avenues, squinting his eyes with each brief flash of lightning as they zipped along. The hose-like boulevards meshed along the surface like a spider's web of spindly strands, some major thoroughfares, others more like back roads, turning and twisting at various eccentric angles.

Her place turned out to be even more "wonderful" than she had let on, a slim, four story abode with translucent walls tinted in intermittent swirls of blue, green, and purple. The lightning storms raging outside cut glimmering streaks of tranquil, soft-hued light on the white tile floors while two open shafts dominated the tower's interior. Each contained a field of low gravity, one reversed against the other, so that a person could simply fall like a feather from one floor to the next, going in either direction. With the rooms themselves mostly deserted and empty except for the occasional maintenance robot, the place was a virtual mansion, lonely, depressing, and terribly quiet. A prototypical hacker house, Mike figured, save for the lack of technical hardware.

"You live here, Ami?"

"Sometimes. Can I get you guys something to drink? Some Hydrogen monoxide, perhaps?"

"Sure."

She brought up a blue-tinted pitcher of ice-water a few minutes later, while the three of them were still staking out their favorite null-tubes. Mike helped Johanes stumble into the closest, watching him drift into unconsciousness as it filled with warm, scented air.

"Sweet dreams, Draconian."

Johanes mumbled something in response, but the air jets stole the edges of his words, converting them into nothing so much as rounded, incomprehensible noises. Mike turned around to accept a highbowl, sipping down a gulp.

"Thanks."

"Doesn't your friend want some?"

"He said no thanks."

She nodded, filling Cecil a bowl.

"So... why are you guys here? I tried contacting you a few months ago Cecil. You never got my mail?"

"Was temporarily indisposed."

"Oh yes... got dregged in the cellars. How typical of you. Was it much pain?"

"It's a long story. If not for Michael here..."

"I see."

Mike imagined that she actually did. Like him, she occasionally showed the strange ability to draw forth all sorts of pertinent details from just a few obscure clues. But then she knew Cecil well enough to understand what kind of trouble he could get himself into. It didn't take a genius to guess what a "long story" inevitably entailed.

"So that's why you're here."

Cecil smiled, "No... that's an even longer story."

"We've got a long time."

Mike winced, certain that he would have some choice words with Cecil at the first opportunity. She turned, noticing the expression before he could wipe it from his face.

"Look, if you two are in some sorta trouble, I wanna know about it. I mean, you guys show up with Mr. X here, obviously not in the best of shape. Mike's wearing a robe. That's cool. I mean, my ears are perking up, okay? I'm getting some vibes. Something not quite kosher is definitely goin' down. Next thing, I'm providing shelter for two guys who wouldn't go to a money-changer to save their mothers' souls, and you won't even tell me what the problem is. How's that for trust?"

Mike kept wincing, thinking "same ol' Ami" during the tirade.

"Ami, it's not like we don't trust you. We just... don't trust you."

Her jaw dropped at least two inches.

"How rude."

"But honest. You can always toss us out, y'know."

She never did take him up on the offer, instead retiring to the uppermost chamber to brood. Mike soon realized he was too wired on zardocho to fall asleep. Cecil seemed to be suffering from the same predicament, flipping over in his null-tube several times before crawling out and laying himself on the tile floor. It seemed to be his preference ever since the cellars.

"It was good zardocho," Mike offered.

"A bit mistimed."

"Cecil, why didn't you warn me?"

"About Ami? Figured you could use the surprise."

"I had no idea you two kept in contact."

He shrugged a bit, "On and off."

"How's she afford the anagathics?"

"Apparently has a friend in Bio-Dep. Synthesizes it right on campus. Quite a perk, eh?"

Mike smirked, "Yeah... well, she's gonna get a bad batch someday, and whamo."

"They're careful, Michael."

"So did she get the doc, or is she just selling that stuff for a living?"

"Both, only I had no idea she was doing so well. She must have been squirreling away some profits."

Mike nodded. It explained the nice place, surface-side and all. It even explained the lack of furnishings. She probably moved around a bit, staying ahead of the competition, not to mention the police.

"She better be real careful, stealing business from Tyber, Inc."

"It's hardly stealing."

"Oh, I know; it's free enterprise, right?"

"Precisely."

"It's outlawed, Cecil. It's stealing."

"And what you do isn't?"

"Look, I'm not saying it's wrong. I agree, the law is protectionist slogshit, but that doesn't change the facts."

"Everyone's doing it, Michael."

"Everyone?"

"Lots of people. There's too much money at stake not to."

Mike watched Cecil rip the lens from his forehead, disconnecting its wires and laying it carefully to his side. He was right of course, at least insofar as his comprehension of the underlying problem. The whole issue was just a vicious cycle created by the corporation. They'd hiked the prices on their anagathics right into the stratosphere. Heralded as a population control measure, Mike guessed that profit maximization might also have had something to do with it.

As with any industry, however, monopoly was only sustainable insofar as its ability to thwart the competition. When the technology finally disseminated, competitors began to swarm the market in droves. The Tyberian monopoly was broken, prices fell, the consumer was happy, and for about a year, it began to look just like any other industry.

That's when the big-boys got scared. Nasty things started to happen: lab bombings, assassinations, coerced mergers, all the standard rituals of a corporate war. Prices flew back into the stratosphere. Everything was hunky-dory again, but not for long.

The disbanded casualties of war began to reform, this time operating under a new strategy. Instead of forming with the intention of remaining on-going concerns, they opted for the in- and-out approach to profiteering. Get in, make your money, and run like hell before you get squashed, or by another more widely known definition, screw the customer as hard and fast as you can.

Quality control went from being the rule to being the exception almost overnight, and the change caught quite a few customers unaware. For nearly a year, the fast-movers were pushing nothing so remarkable as piss-water to a horde of geraphobic yuppies, and those were lucky ones. The unlucky, millions of them, found their way into body bags.

The backlash in public opinion was appropriately severe if entirely misdirected. Roxy, in a rare though popular edict, banned unlicensed competition in the name of public safety. Prices stayed high, underground competition actually increased, there was ever more piss-water, more money went into law enforcement, etcetera, etcetera, ad infinitum. It didn't take a Ph.D. in macro-econ to figure out the consequences. The funny thing was that very few bothered to admit it, or perhaps those that did were censured.

Mike didn't know. He didn't care. It wasn't his problem. He just wanted to go to sleep. Closing his eyes, he tried to slip unnoticed through the sandman's gate, but somehow, tired though he was, sleep refused his summons. He finally crawled from the tube, stepping softly to the cold, tile floor and over Cecil's prone form. His old friend didn't seem to notice, baiting his own sleepies ever closer with immaculate stillness and infinite patience.

Floating upward, Mike found Ami at the tower's apex. She sat in a grav-recliner, gazing at her three-vee while sipping something purple and bubbly from a straw-ball. The depth-box was switched to one of the news-comedy channels, the sort where all the gatherers had to double a professional humorists and vice-versa. Mike remembered interviewing with one of them. Instead of looking at his portfolio, the personnel director just asked him to tell some jokes. It turned out to be a very short interview.

"...and just in case you're still holding tickets for the *Crimson Queen*, might as well cash those puppies in for a full refund. Orbital Traffic Control reports that the *Queen* will not be making it to space dock any time soon. Our own Rowe Dorran with the details."

"Thank you Murray. These images were captured at OTC just a few centims ago. Here you can see the *Crimson Queen*, and here we see it... gee, what's it doing? Looks like it's self-destructing. Itchy owwy, that must have smarted! To all of you who had friends or relatives aboard the *Queen*, our station's staff and management would like to express our most sincere sympathies... not! Heck, they knew space travel was dangerous when they bought their tickets. And shame on them for flying Imperial. Hopefully, they've learned a valuable lesson. We're still not too clear on the details surrounding the incident, but fear not, folks. We'll pass along any new information as soon as it becomes available... and perhaps even sooner. Back to you, Murray."

"Thanks Rowe."

"Oh, it was my pleasure."

"Really? Then go ahead and do it again."

Mike settled his bare feet to the soft micro-shag, letting the warm fibers curl between his toes as the two gatherers continued to chew the air-time. They'd probably over-budgeted the segment, their director waving the infamous "Improvise" sign back and forth.

"What's the matter, Mike? Couldn't sleep?"

She'd caught his reflection in the glassy walls. Mike approached around her left side, hunching down to his knees as she turned her head to look at him. The flashes of lightning outside painted a menagerie of flickering hues across

her forehead, cheeks, and chin.

"Ya know something, Mike?"

"What?"

"You stink. There's a bath in the basement."

If there was one thing he could say for Ami, it was that she was true to her word. A large, green-hued, diaphanous sphere with gravity inhibitors spaced evenly about, the bath reminded Mike of a crystallization chamber he'd once seen at the Tizarian med-center. He crawled hesitantly inside its miniature airlock, closing the doors behind him. Water beads clouded the glass, carrying the fusty fragrance of the scented soaps. Instead of turning on the water, a fan, or even the gravity inhibitors, Mike slowly withdrew the holo-player from his robe pocket, settling himself into the shallow puddle which had collected along the chamber's concave floor.

It took less than a minute to test the device with one of Jo's blank crystals. The player's scraped and dented exterior echoed a very weary stare, however, despite its external appearance, it didn't seem to have any technical troubles. Mike slapped "the crystal" inside, pausing his finger over the play button for several heartbeats while that little voice in the back of his head told him to just chuck it out an airlock and let it rot in Tyber's corrosive atmosphere. "So much for little voices," Mike contemplated, pressing the button and sliding backward into as comfortable a position as he could manage.

* * *

If there was one thing she hated, even more than being beaten, it was being ignored. Nobody had ever gotten away with that, nobody until Erestyl. So far he'd proved himself a tougher nut than anyone could have guessed. Drugs, torture, even the mind scanner had only reached so far. At first she thought he merely possessed a tremendous will, the ability to fight unrelentingly. It was a rare trait in humans, but one which could be defeated with the proper application of psychic trickery.

This new ability, however, that of the subconscious mind to wiggle free of a psychic suggestion, was far more confusing than elucidating. Now, without any trouble whatsoever, he simply disregarded her very presence. Against such an opponent, sheer force would fall as short as an ice-clown chasing its mistral wind.

The predicament reminded her of the bull-fights on Ares, and how with a furl of his cape, the matador would step to either side. The bull, perplexed and enraged, would try again and again. Each time it would fail, until rolling in the sweet dirt, a sword wedged in its heart, it would hear the crowd's withering cheers blowing through its severed ear. Such was the battle between force and finesse. Lamentable for Sule that delicacy was rarely a bio-synthe's attribute. More often, the clone banks designed for the opposite. She was no ordinary skin-job, however, and Erestyl no ordinary hard-shell.

She'd pegged him from the moment she'd first laid eyes on him. Supposed destroyer of insurgent civilizations, to her, he was nothing more than a pawn, a toy, a crazy dreamer, so far beyond mere insignificance that his death would not even contribute to a statistic in the galactic almanac. He would be uncounted, unremembered, and therefore unforgiven, this pacifist's only lasting gift to the universe, a device for killing *en masse*. All that was still true, except for just a few minor details. He was beating her. He was ignoring her. He was winning.

The situation was nothing short of infuriating. All that remained was this interrogation, a fiasco of such embarrassing proportions that it had served thus far to expose nothing more than her wretched incompetence. Erestyl was a very tough nut, indeed. He'd forced himself to assume the worst about Clio, and in so doing, he'd severed his only weakness. He was right, of course, more so than even he knew. The director had been very hard on her, keeping her torture slow and satisfying. Erestyl, with all his sub-quantum theories and the endless encyclopedias of knowledge crammed into his skull, even he could scarcely imagine how his colleague had suffered. Yet he knew enough about ISIS to write her off. A wise move on his part. It dissolved a weakness, though Sule promised herself she'd find another.

A person without weaknesses was too beautiful to be, an impossibility, pure and simple. Everyone needed at least one blood-curdling defect to hold themselves together, everyone non-synthetic, Sule clarified. Flaws seemed to be essential roots of the human ego, the deepest mountains of the mind, perhaps even more basic than the will to live, a will that in Erestyl had long since dissipated.

That would be his only consolation, that before the sun would rise, his burnt remains would settle to the bottom of Arien's moat, this festering ball of filth his eternal grave. Sule knew that much, and if she guessed correctly, then somewhere in that drugged, wounded, psi-touched mind, so did he.

"Erestyl."

He just sat there, the corner of the room his pedestal. Several recently-inflicted welts accented his sallow complexion while his watery eyes, devoid of emotion, stared through the window and into the glimmering emptiness

beyond.

"Erestyl. Can you hear me?"

His indifference to his own name seemed to her nothing short of astounding. It was the basis of Arien's suggestion, and yet here was her subject, rendering it conspicuously meaningless against the dim, milky shades settling along his pasty features.

"Erestyl?"

She slapped him lightly on the cheek, causing his eyelids to flutter up and down.

"Don't ignore me."

He looked at her momentarily, turning his eyes back toward the window, toward the Siri cluster and the red giant, Oremar, twinkling at its center. Why the star should strike him as worthy of particular notice, she couldn't fathom. Then, somewhere in that magic space of the intellect, a realization slowly dawned.

"You've got more of Harrison's psychic in your head than I thought. What was her name? Nikita? Is your name Nikita?"

The word seemed to startle him, as though the sound of it fell like the crack of a whip. Suddenly, his apparent ability to wiggle free of Alister's suggestion made sense. Sule cursed herself for not discovering it sooner.

"Very interesting... and very stupid."

She stepped to the wall, opening a channel over the mansion's internal comm-net.

"Get me the old man."

Alister appeared at the door not a minute later, Sule opening it and motioning him inside.

"It appears that we have a slight problem."

"We?"

"Your suggestion on Erestyl is useless."

"Useless?"

From the corners of his mouth, Sule could sniff the ingredients of a smirk. For all his years, he was a lousy liar.

"Yes, Alister. Useless. Maybe you can explain it."

He shrugged, "I performed just as we agreed. No more and no less."

"And you forgot to mention our visitor?"

"Visitor?"

"What sort of fool do you take me for, Alister?"

"Well... the sort hardly matters," his smirk gave way to a wide, cheshire grin. She considered physically slapping it from his face.

"There's no point in lying. I know about Nikita."

"Ah," he dropped the grin. Words were so much more exquisite.

"It comes as a great surprise, Alister? Perhaps you thought I wouldn't figure it out?"

"One can always hope."

"Hope is dead. Now get her out of his mind, and then we'll talk business."

"I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

Alister paced to the corner, running his fingers along Erestyl's forehead.

"Ms. Sen was a healer more so than anything. She had a great deal of time with Erestyl."

"So?"

"So she had enough time to do her job, to heal his frayed mind which had been so soundly thrashed by your scanners. In so doing, she left behind fragments of herself, entire sections of her own identity to fill the holes which you people tore. To even attempt a removal would probably kill him."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't ask."

"Alister, we had an agreement. If you'd seen this potential bridge in identities, then you should have told me outright. Instead, you tied your suggestion to a name this subject could just squirm free of."

Arien shrugged, "It was worth a try, wasn't it?"

"It was stupid. You only succeeded in wasting my time, nothing more. Now if you can't get Nikita out of his head, I at least want another suggestion put on him, one that he can't break free of."

"Sule, it is not easily done. He is between identities now. You must wait for him to settle upon one or the other."

"How long will that take?"

"Days... perhaps weeks."

"I don't have that kind of time."

"Then I am sorry. There is nothing more I can do."

She nodded, "And I suppose you're not going to let me out of here."

"When my mate is returned, safely, then you may leave... as we agreed."

"You broke our agreement."

"I fulfilled all that was explicitly required. If you want to live to see the sun rise, Sule, I would suggest that you do likewise."

With that he left, not the most dramatic exit she'd ever witnessed, but for the likes of Alister Arien, it was as good as they got. Erestyl, meanwhile, stared obliviously out the window, scarcely conscious of a single word they spoke. Oremar seemed to hold all his attention, absorbing him into its faint, distant light.

"You want to go there, Nikita. Don't you?"

The name startled him again, and he nodded slightly.

"Tell me what Erestyl did with those records. The designs. Of the Prometheus device. Remember?"

A confused look crossed his face. She could see him fighting it.

"Nikita... cooperate with me, and I promise that you'll return from whence you came."

"Ashes to ashes... dust to dust," the first words he'd spoken in at least an hour. Sule crumpled her fingers into a tight fist, then let the tension dissipate into thin air. Striking him would solve nothing. She had to find the weakness.

"I can always interrogate Harrison, if you prefer."

"Michael..."

"That's right. He's close by. Close enough to bite."

Sule watched as the sudden jolt in Erestyl's eyes melted slowly into the glimmering starlight.

"You won't catch him, Sule."

"You little fool, I'm quite certain that I won't have to."

She returned to the wall, opening the same channel.

"Get me Alister."

"Not again, lady."

"Yes, again."

But the knock never came. Instead, Korina's voice broke over the wall's speaker box.

"Yes Sule, you are finished?"

"Almost. I understand that you have another guest aside from myself... a certain Tizarian gatherer."

"He's hardly a guest."

"Regardless, I'd like to see him... in the flesh, if you don't mind."

"For what purpose?"

"To expedite my business."

"To kill him?"

"That all depends. You say he isn't a guest?"

"He's a prisoner."

"I see. I assume you have a camera monitoring the cells?"

"Of course."

"Pipe his image through to this channel. I wish to verify his status."

Harrison's image materialized on the wall communicator's visual display. They'd focused in for a close-up, the camera apparently hidden into a light fixture judging from the angle. Erestyl's eyes grew wide, darting back and forth from the monitor to Sule. She could only guess at what bizarre cacophony of thoughts raced behind them, but a guess was all she needed.

"There you go, Nikita. Just as I promised."

"Alister won't hand him over."

"Oh, I think we can do a trade."

"Trade? You're bluffing."

"Am I? Think of it, Nikita... or Erestyl or whatever name you're going by. You'll be free for as long as you can hide from ISIS, which won't be very long. During the interim, I'll be erasing Harrison's brain bit by bit. Works for me."

"He knows nothing."

"I'll see to that personally unless you start cooperating."

Erestyl or Niki or whoever was inside that mangled mind looked back toward Oremar, as though the Siri star could provide some measure of moral guidance.

"He tight-beamed them into space."

"What?"

"Laser-comm, maximum focus. That's where Erestyl hid the records, Sule. They're out there, between the stars."

"What frequency?"

Details began pouring from Erestyl's mouth: frequency and direction of beam, decompression protocols, decryption instructions. In less than a minute, Sule had everything she'd come for. It was that simple.

"Just promise me one thing, Sule."

"I'm listening."

"Don't hurt him."

"Harrison?"

"He knows nothing of this."

"I don't care what he knows. He tried to nuke me. Us. He almost succeeded. I don't have to put up with that. It's not in my job description. Now if you don't mind... it's time for you to die."

Mike watched, through the injection, as Erestyl/Niki curled up on the floor and died. Then Sule switched off the player, and the hologram deteriorated into the cold, moist air of the bath-sphere. He wasn't sure how long he stayed like that, sitting in a puddle, unblinking. He didn't care. All things considered, it was as good a place as any.

The caffeine had loosened its grip by the time he crawled back out. Ami was still at the tower's apex, sleeping peacefully in front of a blaring three-vee. Mike lowered the volume little by little, finally switching the box off with a flick of his thumb. Two floors down, Cecil was asleep as well, really asleep, not like his usual haphazard slumber, intermixing dreams and databank excursions. "The subliminal mind is the most pristine, the least prone to err," he'd once explained. That was before the cellars. Mike vaguely wondered if he would care to reiterate the statement.

Johanes, meanwhile, slept like the dead, or at least like the very sleepy. With a bullet still lodged in his shoulder, he had a right to. Mike opened the tube, reaching to the Draconian's jacket pocket. He still had a few hundred credits on him, the anonymous kind, worth less on Tyber than most other systems due to the stingy exchange rates. Mike borrowed a fistful for the Beanstalk and Cylindrical Expressway.

The ride into orbit took an hour longer than the ride going down. Mike continued past the OTC terminal and exited only when his pod had reached Far-Point Harbor. A small, hollowed-out asteroid was tethered there to the tail end of the stalk, making a place where dozens of free merchants could anchor. Several adjacent hulls, long since decommissioned, had been transformed into a conglomeration of taverns, inns, window shops, and warehouses. Mike found the first Tizar-bound ship, and sacrificing his pilfered currency with the promise of more to come, he was soon back in hyperspace, going home.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The sky was murky, the crimson red sunset almost totally eclipsed by long, grim sheets of billowing, charcoal-colored vapor. Mike exited the starport, a tan conveyor belt carrying him beyond the perimeter gates until he was protected from the pouring rain only by a thin row of blue and white striped banisters. Linden was there, ducking his head as the rumbling of thunder rose over the incessant buzz of air-traffic. He wore his welcome-face, a big smile painted bright and rosy. It slowly bled away into the tide of droplets.

"Mike... where's Bill and Niki?"

Mike didn't need to say anything. It was understood.

They drove around for awhile, coasting along the outskirts of the starport district, over the parked taxi-cabs and the hordes of pedestrians rushing to and from the subway. Linden finally turned south, toward the beach.

"Your place is getting checked for bugs, like you requested. They should be done in a couple cents."

Mike nodded. Chuck usually liked to do most of the talking, but as the sun slowly sank beyond the horizon and the cloak of evening descended along the coast, he seemed to have less and less to talk about.

"You don't have to worry about the security people. We just finished their review. Got rid of quite a few of the less than sparkling employees. I think the rest are pretty shook up. They're gonna be on their toes for quite a while."

"No doubt."

"Well, why take chances, y'know? And... uh... with the strike threats pretty much scuttled, things are starting to get back to normal. Not that I was ever worried, of course."

"Of course."

"They just like to make waves. That's all. Mike... umm... I'm sorry about..."

"I know."

"What happened?"

Linden stopped the car, letting it hover over the shoreline as a torrent of raindrops smacked into the front window. Mike didn't know how to respond. He didn't even know where to begin.

"It's a long story, Chuck."

"But it is a story."

"I don't know."

"What do you mean you don't know?"

Mike shrugged, more exasperated than weary. Linden didn't seem to take it as an adequate response.

"C'mon Mike, don't give me this."

"It's a big story, Chuck. It's the biggest thing I've ever latched onto."

"Great."

"No... it's not great."

Chuck blinked, then slowly nodded, "It's not great. Okay... fine... I can accept that. Not. Look kid, you've got too much sand in your head. A big story is what we want. Bigger the better. That's a rule."

"So I've heard."

"Mike... I know you're upset about Bill and Niki, but they went along because they wanted to. You didn't twist anybody's arm."

"It's not that..."

"You know better than most people in this business... things happen. That's part of the job. They knew it also. It goes with the territory. Okay? Whatever happened out there..."

"I know."

"I know you know. What, you've heard this speech three times now?"

Mike nodded, "It's a good speech, Chuck."

"It's the truth."

"Yeah... well, whatever. That's not the problem."

"Then what is?"

Mike took a deep breath, "I assume you've been following the story on Ambassador Kato's kidnapping."

"Yeah. They say it was an inside job."

"Strikes you a little strange, doesn't it? Draconians kidnapping their own Ambassador."

"What's your point?"

"Clay was working for ISIS. He did an about-face on the DSS."

"What about Robin?"

"She was programmed to kill me the moment we touched terra-firma."

Mike could see the editor's adam's apple go up and down. It meant he'd digested the tid-bit and was ready for more. Mike kept talking, words spilling out of his mouth without any more hesitation. He told Chuck about Ambrose, about Cole, about the axe and the flight to Xin and how he'd followed Bill. He wasn't sure how much of the tale the editor was catching. He didn't really care. All that was important was that he understand one thing.

"Prometheus device?"

"Yeah. It... it destroys worlds. Pretty simple concept once you get past all the scientific stuff. Fork... Erestyl was the key. He'd destroyed the prototype. Erased the records, the logs, everything. Tight beamed them into space, actually. Guess he figured he could pick them up later."

"He wasn't interrogated?"

"Of course he was, but somehow the DSS got ahold of him. The agent who was organizing Erestyl's transport got himself captured. Like I said, it's a long story."

"So where is this Erestyl now?"

"He's dead. He left his final memoirs on this." Mike pulled out the holocrystal. "It's the key, Chuck. If ISIS finds out we have it... no more *Galactican*, probably no more Tizar."

Linden's mouth dropped open. Mike figured he was starting to get the picture.

"By the way, Chuck. You had this grav-car checked for bugs, right?"

"You're getting paranoid, you know that?"

"Yeah, well... just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't really out to get you."

When they arrived at his house, Mike had the security people check the car. It was clean, both the house and the car, or so they said. Linden stuck around, assigning a guard to the front door as he fetched himself a beer. The precaution was unorthodox, but none of them questioned it.

"So ISIS doesn't even know you're back."

Mike shook his head, pouring himself a glass of milk. "Nobody does. Not yet, anyway."

"We can post guards on you."

"No."

"So what would you suggest?"

Mike shrugged, "I dunno."

"You know, ISIS might not suspect a thing. Considering how much of their operation got taken out, they may not even know you were involved."

"That's a nice thought, Chuck, but you know I can't take that chance."

"So write the story. Tell all. Retire. We'll change your identity and send you the proceeds in company stock."

"You think I give a damn about the money?"

"What do you give a damn about?"

Mike sipped down half the glass, hoping the guard was out of earshot.

"This whole thing... it's not over."

"Mike, you've done enough."

"Somebody has to stop that laser-comm transmission. We could sandcaster it or something. Disperse the pattern. Make it unreadable."

"Mike, nobody's going to find it. You don't stumble across stuff like that. Not in space."

Mike smiled for the first time in what felt like a couple years.

"Space is big. Space is dark. You'll always find a place to park."

"What's that from?"

"Navy chant," Mike put his glass on the counter. "My dad taught it to me... a long time ago."

"That's nice, Mike. Look... this isn't your problem anymore. Let the company handle it from here."

"Is that an order?"

Chuck put down his beer, shaking his head slowly as the rain continued to pound against the roof.

"What would be the point? You wouldn't obey it unless you wanted to. Unless you needed to just let this go, and I think you do. Otherwise you wouldn't be here talking to me. You'd be out there, getting more involved than a gatherer probably should."

"I'm already involved."

"But you don't have to stay that way. It's okay to back out... let somebody else handle it. What makes you think it all has to be on your shoulders?"

Mike thought about that as the rain continued to dance off the rooftop and make millions of little ripples in the sea. From the window, he could see a lump of dirt on the beach surrounded by a small furrow. He imagined that it used to be a sand castle. Some tourist hadn't read the weather forecast, or perhaps they just didn't care. It reminded him of that house for the small, white kitten crabs.

"You're saying I should just run out on this? The moment I figure out what's going on, I should just bail?" Mike shook his head, "I bailed on somebody a long time ago. I was scared. I didn't know what to do. But I'm not making the same mistake all over again."

Chuck nodded slowly, and Mike wondered if he understood. Even though they were both good friends, there were still things unspoken, things Mike had never explained but only hinted at tangentially, like some puzzle-master, waiting for someone to come along, fit the pieces together, and make sense of it all. Maybe Chuck was that someone.

"Just tell me what you need, Mike."

* * *

"Meow."

Hunter knelt down, letting the feral beast twist another piece of cheese-sausage from her grasp. She never caught the creature's name and was absently wondering what to call him.

"How does Felix sound?"

"Meow?" it grappled for another, racing to the corner of the room to enjoy its spoils.

"No? Okay, how 'bout... Freeloader?"

It continued chewing, stopping to look only as the door slid open. Hunter turned around, dropping the rest of the sausage to the floor when she noticed a pair of automatic pistols trained on her.

"What do you want?"

"Military Police. Against the wall."

She let herself be frisked and cuffed, the metal biting painfully into her wrists.

"Excuse me, but what am I being arrested for?"

They never did answer. They didn't even read her any rights, and as she was being dragged down the hall, getting strange looks from everyone in sight, she felt her innards turn to jelly.

"Wait, stop... help!"

Nobody did, of course. This was Tyber. They passed through an airlock to one of the Imperial ships. A dozen or so MP's stood around the entrance. They finally entered a lift which took them down to a brightly lit room. Her nurse

was there, hair shaven and a faint smile on his lips.

"Feso... what's going on?"

He didn't even seem to notice. He just kept staring out at nothing, his smile growing increasingly serene.

"Secure her. Then take this one to Disposal."

The voice came from somebody in a lab coat, sparse, jet black hair slicked to his skull. Running a shaver over her scalp, he didn't seem to regard her as anything so sentient as an animal fit to be slaughtered. It was that nonchalant attitude that freaked her more than anything else.

"What's going on?! Who are you?!"

He smeared her bald head with anti-static jelly, finally taping a row of scanning nodes clear from her temples to her ear lobes. She blinked, the moment crystallizing in painful clarity as he toyed with the dials.

"Wait! I'll tell you anything! Please..."

"I know you will, Doctor. Now just relax. This won't hurt a bit."

* * *

"Ow!"

"What? That didn't hurt, did it?"

Johanes frowned and shook his head, "Uh... no."

"Why'd you yell, then?"

"It looked like it was going to."

"Oh," Baxter laughed, "Don't scare me like that, okay? For a minute there I thought I was doing something wrong. I mean... it's been awhile since I've... you know..."

Johanes turned his head around so he wouldn't have to see the blood. "Does he always inspire this much confidence?"

Baxter just kept working, until the bullet clinked against the magnetic needle.

"Contact. Okay, don't move a notch. This is the tricky part."

He tugged it out slowly, ripping through the flesh that had already healed. He had to use a clamp just to keep the blood from pouring out.

"There it is. Want to keep it as a souvenir?"

"No thanks."

Baxter shrugged, pumping in a couple more cubic centimeters before he sealed the wound with a regen patch and cleaned off his patient's shoulder.

"Okay, I'm gonna immobilize it in some castfoam. You should be getting some feeling back in a few hours. I'll warn you know, it'll probably itch. No matter how bad it is, don't wash off the foam for at least another three days. We have to keep this critter all by its lonesome."

"Fine, I'll be able to use it in three days?"

"It'll probably be sore for awhile, but yeah, it'll be perfectly usable. Just don't strain it too much, and if you have any problems, go to a real hospital. Okay?"

Johanes nodded, getting up to leave. No matter how quick and painless the impromptu operation, he was glad it was over and wanted nothing more than to leave the area as expeditiously as possible. Cecil seemed to concur, however, Ami wasn't so quick to ditch her friend.

"Thanks Bax. I'm really sorry... I..."

"Don't mention it. I mean, really, don't mention it. If this gets out, you know... me without a license and all... we're talking five to ten, easy."

"Not a peep."

He laughed, "I know that's nothing compared to..." his voice trailed off as he glanced over toward Johanes and Cecil. Ami just kept shaking her head.

"I know. Can I help you clean up?"

"No... I've got it. Um... Ami, we're gonna have another batch cooking up next week. You gonna be at the harvest-fest?"

"My schedule's really strange right now."

"Guests, eh?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, just let me know."

"Will do."

Cecil was mildly intrigued as they headed out the door.

"Harvest-fest?"

"You know."

She went for groceries as Cecil headed back to the flat with Johanes. The Draconian didn't seem the least bit interested in their exchange. It was as though he had other more important things on his mind.

"What is it, Jo?"

"We've got to find Michael."

"He'll be back in due time."

But Johanes didn't seem terribly convinced. Cecil wasn't sure either. He didn't care. Mike had gone of his own free will. He wasn't chased out or even gently nudged into a corner. He left because he chose to, and if it was what he wanted, then it was probably for the best.

Cecil found Ami's deck on the tower's top-most floor, pretzel crumbs dusting its surface. He plugged himself in, tumbling into the net as just another anonymous floater. There were always thousands of them, scuttling about, most searching for new ways to destroy their already limited supply of brain cells. He loaned himself some CPU credit from the Senex and began fine-tuning her configuration.

"Can you search for him?"

The voice was Jo's, almost lost somewhere in the hazy, background of his senses.

"It would not be a good idea."

"Why not?"

"Taboo topic."

"Taboo?"

"Global searches are easily spotted, and unpleasant people may be watching."

"I thought you were good."

"Absolute skill is nothing. Relative is everything. And this is Tyber. There are wizards out there."

"How about something relatively innocuous?"

"Name your poison."

Johanes cocked his head sideways, "Try the *Crimson Queen*."

"There are reams."

"Anything directly linked to the Empire?"

Cecil wasn't sure what he meant, but it sounded like it might be worth a try. There were numerous data logs on the actual event as well as statements issued by the Imperial embassy. Then something awful crossed his awareness.

"Uh-oh."

"What's uh-oh mean?"

"Somebody in the Decryption Society must have captured and posted the damn thing."

"What?"

"The transmission."

"What transmission?"

"Ours. Between our shuttle and the *Crimson*, just before you-know-what happened. When the Imps see this, they're going to know the Doctor was lying."

"Can you send her a warning?"

"Uh... personnel files say she's been relocated."

"Where?"

"Classified. It's all classified. One can try breaking in, however."

Johanes shook his head, "No. It's too late."

The data flow came to a sudden halt as reality suddenly careened in from all sides. Cecil just about ducked from the shock. When he finally got his bearings, he saw Johanes sitting with Ami's deck in hand, the thin strand of optifiber unplugged and dangling to the tile floor.

"Now do you understand? We've got to find him before they find him."

"Mike isn't a total fool. Wherever he went, he's taking precautions. You can be sure of it."

"Cecil... we're talking about ISIS here. They're going to find him eventually. And they'll find us too, if we stay around here for very long."

Cecil opened his mouth to respond, closing it when he saw Ami floating over the null pit.

"Finished shopping already?"

"I never went," she had an angry smirk on her face, partially hidden by concern over what she had overheard.

"Look, I want you guys out."

"Ami..."

"Cecil, I have enough problems already. I don't need to add large interstellar organizations to my list of enemies."

"What about Tyber, Inc?"

"Look, I choose my own risks. Not you. Not Mike. Now please, just leave."

"If Mike comes back..."

"If Mike comes back, I'll tell him you went to Tizar. That's where you're going, right?"

* * *

"Right... we're working on it, Marcie.... No.... Well, how am I supposed to know? ...Of course, I'm on top of it, but you never know how these things are gonna work out.... Okay, well, I'll get back to you as soon as I have a solid estimate. Alright? Okay. Bye."

Linden closed the line with a gentle nudge to the receiver rest. It was old, like the phone itself and most every other piece of equipment in his office.

"What's next Jo?"

"Got a call on two. A Mr. Zared. He won't say what it's about."

"Put him through."

Linden sighed, looking out his office window. It looked like the storm was clearing as he could actually see the ground again.

"Hello?"

"Hello, ah... Mister Linden?"

"That's right."

"I am calling with regards to Mr. Harrison. I am a personal friend of his."

"Mike Harrison?"

"That is correct. I was hoping if you could tell me how I could get into contact with him."

"I haven't seen Mike in a good while. He's working off-planet. You can leave him voice-mail, but he won't receive it until he gets back in-system."

"That, unfortunately, will not do. I myself am on-planet for only a short time, and is it very urgent that I see him as soon as possible."

"Well, I'm sorry I can't help you, Mr. Zared."

"Perhaps you can tell me when he might be back."

"I have no idea. There's no set schedule."

"Has he sent you mail?"

"I can't discuss any particulars over an unsecured line. If you give me your number, I'll call you back."

"Ah... I think it is okay, you can just tell me."

"Mr. Zared, all I can tell you over this line is that he's not in-system. If you'd like me to call you back on a secured channel..."

It went dead.

"Joseph, did we get that traced?"

"Just barely."

"Where is he?"

"Oops. It looks like he wrapped the call through a dialing service. Sorry Mr. Linden."

* * *

"Let me get this straight. He wants me to apologize?"

Clarence smiled, hoping he looked appropriately servile as Ms. Tyber eyed him menacingly. He didn't relish telling her the news, but then nobody else had the guts.

"Roxy, it's not the end of the world."

"That over-stuffed bureaucrat wants... me... to grovel??"

"Grovel? Did I say grovel?" He tried to laugh but coughed instead, velvety blue eyes jostling in their sockets. "He wants an apology. Whole universe of difference. We did blow up their missile, after all."

"To hell with their missile. Don't you take his side. Where is he, by the way?"

"Outside."

"Right outside?"

Clarence nodded, holding his breath as though anticipating an explosion. Roxanne didn't seem to notice, but just stood there, letting him turn purple.

"Okay. Send him in."

She didn't like the ambassador. It wasn't that he was a bad person. On the contrary, she found him to be one of the more congenial people in Imperial government. The problem, she occasionally told herself, had more with her than with him. It was that she simply didn't like fat people. That was to say, she didn't like obese, bloated, greasy fat people.

Ambassador Lambe fit nicely into that category. In fact, it was one of the few things that he fit into nicely. To say that he was fat was like saying that Tyber's atmosphere was unhealthy. He was plump to the point of not being able to squeeze through small doors. He couldn't walk, instead traversing from one point to another via a floating grav-chair. There were even rumors that without a personal gravity reducing device, his bones would snap and lungs collapse under the strain of his own weight. Roxanne wasn't sure she whether or not she believed the hearsay, but it was the sort of crazy story that wouldn't surprise her too much if it actually turned out to be true.

Of course, it wasn't that he was a glutton. Fat folks rarely were. In fact, she'd hardly ever seen him eat a bite at formal gatherings, perhaps, she mused, because his tongue was too swollen to allow its use in an ingestive capacity. It was a mean thought, she conceded. His only affliction, if one could call it that, was that he was a wealthy Coronian. His people considered corpulence to be a sign of prestige, many of them resorting to lipo-infusion just to put on the kilograms. Roxanne had always counted herself as open-minded, but there were still certain things she detested, and surgically induced grotesquery was one of them.

"Ah... Ms. Tyber, so pleasing to see you again."

"Please have a seat, Ambassador. Oh, sorry. You already have one."

He smiled, several chins jiggling as he spoke in a deep, throaty voice, "Your incredible sense of courtesy overwhelms even your remarkable powers of perception. I am most humbled."

"Good comeback. Can I offer you something to drink? A diet shake perhaps?"

"Such enviable wit... I would laugh, but as you know, my heart is weak." He paused for only a moment, running fleshy fingers through his gray hair, curled and braided with iridium. "Now that our traditional verbal parley is concluded, I assume you understand the reason for my visit."

"The Emperor seeks subservience from his subjects?"

"Not precisely."

"Well, then enlighten me."

He raised a thick eyebrow, circling her slowly in a counter-clockwise fashion, toward the billowing orange haze which pressed against the observation window.

"My superiors are not so much concerned about the missile as they are about Tyberian intervention into non-Tyberian affairs."

"Ambassador, the people in OTC are trained to preserve life. I am not going to apologize for their actions no matter whose feathers were ruffled, and that's the end of it."

He nodded, almost approvingly.

"Since you are so adamant in your loyalty, perhaps you will allow the Emperor one act of fealty."

"Such as?"

"We require access to certain local records."

"What records?"

"University of Tyber, student and housing files. It is a small request, no?"

Roxanne smiled, wondering if his brain was bloating.

"What's this all about?"

"We are conducting an investigation."

"What sort of investigation?"

"To be perfectly honest, I have no idea." He tacked on a slight chuckle, as though it would increase his trustworthiness.

"Request denied."

"Ms. Tyber... think first. My superiors will be very angry, otherwise."

"That's your problem. I will admit one thing, Ambassador. You've piqued my curiosity."

He made a face, as though that was not his intention, but swiftly recovered, making his fleshy cheeks perform as wide a smile as humanly possible.

"I am pleased that my visit has had some positive effect. Goodbye, Ms. Tyber, and have a nice day."

"Yeah, same to you."

* * *

"No, Mike's not even in-system. He's working on an assignment... no, I don't have any idea when he'll be back."

You might try leaving him mail."

The voice on the other end didn't sound too thrilled with his response. Linden didn't care. He had better things to do than act as Mike's call-screening service.

"All I can tell you is that he's on an assignment."

"You mean his little escapade on Calanna?"

"I can't discuss rumors, Mr. Adyms."

"It's not a rumor."

"I can't discuss this over an unsecured line. If you give me your number, I'll call you back."

Johanes looked over his shoulder. Giving somebody your number was the first no-no they'd taught him in basic training. You give somebody your number, and the weirdos with the big guns zoom in like wildfire. But there were literally hundreds of call-booths, enough so that spotting one only by its number would be improbable at best. He relinquished the information and hung-up, the pain in his shoulder sparking with the sudden decision. A moment later, the call box was beeping.

"Hello?"

"Now, before I can go any further, I'm going to need your name."

"I've already told you, it's Adyms."

"Your first name. Be honest."

Johanes bit his lip in frustration. Giving somebody your name was the second no-no.

"It's Johanes."

"Is anyone with you?"

"Cecil Dulin. Would you like me to spell that?"

"No, but I do need the name of Cecil's cat."

Johanes moaned. This was getting ridiculous.

"It's Pooper-Dumper. Don't ask why."

"Good. Now all I can tell you is that Mike mailed me. He said he was going to visit somebody named Little Nicholas to take a test. Do you know who that is?"

"To take a test. That's cute. He's a kid who got killed on Calanna. What are we playing here? Twenty questions?"

"Who killed him?"

Johanes made a face as if to squirm out of the question, "I did, indirectly."

"Okay Johanes. If you want to find Mike, you'll have to go to the breakfast hang-out that he and Cecil used to frequent. Be there at the standard time."

"Hold on. Cecil, a breakfast hang-out?"

"Seafood or zardocho?"

"Mr. Linden, fish or zardocho?"

Chuck shrugged, "Your guess is probably better than mine. I'm closing this line now. Watch your tail."

Johanes listened to the line click and fuzz-out. On a certain level, he found the cloak and dagger stuff somewhat amusing. Amateurs always outdid themselves. Not that he minded. It was generally better to take too many precautions than not enough, so long as the basic information got from Point A to Point B. But in this case it hadn't. Cecil tilted his head sideways.

"Well, what'd he say? Fishies or caffeine?"

"You tell me."

Cecil frowned, "Any hints?"

"He said to be there at the standard time, whatever that means."

Johanes watched as the frown fluctuated briefly into a smile. Cecil knew.

"Let's blow this sluice-stand."

They split-up and left the starport aboard conveyor belts, moving along with just about every other in-bounder on the continent. Going separately was just another precautionary measure, or so Johanes hoped. He wore a loose-fitting poncho to conceal his foam-cast, never before realizing how difficult it was, trying to act inconspicuous with an obvious bulge around one's shoulder.

Being on Tizar would make things easier, however. More so than any world in the region, it was held to be the undisputed home of interstellar tourism, at least for those who could afford it. Thus, not surprisingly, the society accommodated almost every type of dress-code imaginable and usually without a second glance. On Tizar, the unusual was blase, a hard place for a gatherer to get recognized, but the perfect place for a spy.

Amidst the cheerful throng, Cecil's camera fit right in, the jacks on his head hidden beneath a wide, colorful beach-hat. Of course, the customs people wouldn't be fooled. There were laws against that sort of thing on Tizar, and their metal detectors would pick him up with ease. Apparently Linden had called ahead and pulled some strings, as

Cecil was ushered straight through without significant incident.

The Tizarian night was windy, cold and beautiful, the bright walkway lamps doing nothing to shatter the brilliance of the black, star-studded sky. They re-grouped aboard the subway, Cecil looking a little sheepish though a tad warmer.

"That was too easy."

"They just don't want us getting spotted." Johanes looked around, organizing a mental inventory of the faces.

"And since they're being so careful, perhaps we should reciprocate the favor. Ever play ditch the nothing?"

"Only in cyberspace."

"Then you've got the rudiments down. Follow me."

They proceeded to hop from one subway train to another, getting so confused after awhile that neither was sure where they were headed. It was all an elaborate precaution, Johanes assured himself, accomplishing absolutely nothing other than giving them something to do.

When they finally re-surfaced near the beach, a purple glimmer had already emerged over the eastern horizon, thin strands of violet painting shadows along the choppy waves. They found the long, stone jetty cutting into the shallows and walked together along its paved surface. It terminated in a series of barbecue grills, but a row of floating planks led about a hundred meters further. They swayed with the waves like a drunken snake while a flock of gulls settled along the narrow boards. Aside from the birds and the long imaginary snake, they remained alone, the cold wind almost numbing in its intensity. Johanes wrapped his one good arm over his chest, trying to conserve what little warmth his body still generated.

"You sure we're in the right place?"

"Don't worry. This place will fill up by daybreak."

And it did, more or less, scores of fisher-folk with their techno-gadgets competing beneath a brilliant, scarlet sunrise. They used little sonar monitors to track their targets moving beneath the planks. Then, with miraculous efficiency, they'd point their rods and press their buttons, several dozen sea-critters snared in simultaneous union and not so much as a single torn fin in the entire lot. Johanes was genuinely intrigued.

"Sort of takes the sport out, doesn't it?"

"That's what Mike always said. He liked it more for the scenery than the food."

"I can see why. Do they stock these waters?"

Cecil nodded, "Obviously."

They continued to watch as the gulls started having a field day, swooping down to shanghai seafood right from the grills. A few people raised their fists and shouted at the birds, but most of them accepted it as part of the process, laughing about "the fish that got away" and occasionally feeding the birds fish-heads, nutri-chips, and even one antacid pill.

"Now that's illegal."

Johanes turned, "What?"

"Look."

One gull flew up, thrashing its wings violently, until a streak of red coated its breast and it fell back into the waves.

"What happened?"

"That guy snuck a tum-tum inside a piece of bread and fed it to the bird. You can figure out the rest."

"Huh??"

"Birds can't expel gas as easily as people. Their stomachs explode if they get too much at once."

Johanes felt mildly nauseous. He'd killed more than his fair share of innocents, but it never got his rocks off. The guy responsible for this little stunt was in a different category all together. He just stood there laughing, as though the spectacle had already made his whole day.

"This is a sick planet."

"Aren't they all?"

Only those with people, Johanes thought. They didn't have much longer to wait. A young red-haired woman in a white sweater showed up, walking directly toward the two as though she had a purpose in mind.

"Cecil and Johan?"

"Johanes."

"Close enough. Come with me."

She led them back to the shoreline and along its edge about fifty meters until they came upon a small motorboat resting just beyond the lapping waters. It wasn't a motorboat in the conventional sense, but more of a rowing gig with a small, motor-driven propeller attached to the stern. She waded it out, holding it steady as they plopped themselves

carefully inside while she gave them instructions on how not to capsize.

"Just hold your oar out... no... flat against the water like he's doing."

Then she ambled inside, making not the least disturbance in the vessel's balance. In a matter of minutes, she had them rowing their hearts out, until they were driving right into the choppy crests of the waves and the shoreline seemed like a distant luxury.

"Just say when you've had enough."

"Enough."

The motor gurgled to life a moment later, pushing them along at a steady clip. Johanes pulled both oars inside as Cecil wiped his camera lens with the sleeve of his shirt. Meanwhile, the anonymous red-head was working the rudder.

"Where are we going?"

"You'll know when you get there."

The place, as they were to later learn, was named Reefland, and as if that weren't enough, there really were reefs there. They laid interspersed between small cylindrical cottages, wide terraces and sunroofs being all that showed above the surface aside from a network of transparent access-tubes, some half-submerged. The reefs were ever-present, however, so many and of such a variety that even though their boat skimmed along close to the water line and with a very shallow keel, Johanes was glad they had someone capable doing the navigation. The woman seemed to have no trouble at all, swishing between the jutting expanses of rock and coral, as though the place was no more treacherous than the typical playground. Cecil, meanwhile, thought he could see the pillars of Aquapolis protruding just over the horizon.

She switched off the motor, and they rowed into a small marina. Various craft nestled there: kayaks, submersibles, aquafoils. They climbed onto the deck, waiting for her to secure the boat with a spongy cord. She then led them into one of the submerged tunnels. The lighting was gloomy, and for several minutes, they just walked, the narrow corridor jiggling back and forth with the presence of the waves outside. She finally stopped in front of a door, punching a combination into its access computer. It opened, and Johanes could see Mike inside, dictating to a microphone, his words being spelled in context and punctuated where appropriate on the wall monitor. He paced back and forth as he talked, moving from one corner of the chamber slowly to the other. It was the story. He was actually writing it.

"Computer command pause."

"Mike, what do you think you're doing?"

"Hi Jo. Cecil. It's okay," he motioned for the woman to leave. "So, umm... how's it going?"

Cecil smiled, "You wouldn't believe what one goes through just to say hi."

"Yeah, I'm sorry about all the precautions. And about leaving in such a rush. I just needed to get out. It didn't feel right."

"You could have woke me up."

Mike shrugged, "I know. Do you guys want something to drink?"

"How about something to eat?" Johanes was surprised that the question came from his mouth. Here he was, virtually at the end of his most important mission ever, and he was thinking about food.

"Sure, there's some stuff in the cooler. I'm not real sure how edible it is. I wasn't the person who stocked it, okay?"

They proceeded to put together some breakfast, microwaving a sack of frozen clams and a large, half-eaten flatbread pie. The pie was coated with cheese and sausage, and Mike admitted to being its instigator. Even so, Johanes and Cecil had no negative comments, both considering how much better leftovers compared to the starship food they'd recently been subjected to.

"You guys must of been hungry."

Johanes smiled, wiping his chin with a paper napkin, "Espionage does that. Speaking of which, we did some snooping back on Tyber. It seems as though our Doctor acquaintance is in hot water."

"I know."

"You do?"

"Chuck has a few, well-trusted people looking into it. They keep sending me updates. I guess he wants an up-to-the-centim story."

"Do you?"

Mike shrugged, "You think I shouldn't?"

"Well, I have to admit, I'm a little surprised that you're actually writing it. It'll spoil the mystery, after all, and what fun is undercover work if there are no secrets?"

"What's the fun or what's the point?"

"Both."

Mike smiled, a grim smile at best.

"When I came back here, I wasn't sure what I was going to do. I talked things over with Chuck. It helped."

"And what did you decide, o' wise master?"

"Jo, you don't have to be sarcastic."

"You're toying with the fate of all known civilization, and you're calling me sarcastic?"

"Okay. Just hear me out. If you don't like what I have to say, then we'll argue about it, but just listen for now, alright?"

Johanes nodded, "Go ahead."

Mike gulped down, trying to find a place to begin. He decided to just get to the point. The details could wait.

"I figured you'd be coming here, with or without Cecil, and I knew this wouldn't be a social call. You'd want something. You'd want this."

Mike pulled the holocrystal out of a pocket, "Go ahead, it's yours."

Johanes accepted it, not sure what to say, so he didn't say anything. Mike smiled. It was the response he expected.

"Chuck has talked to the board of the company. They don't know that the crystal is on-planet, but they do know it exists. We have some experts working with us, and they figure that even though the Empire lost the prototype and the mission records, there's no way that this is going to set them back very far."

"How do you figure?"

"A scientific breakthrough has been accomplished. They know that. Most likely, they'll be able to re-construct what happened from some articles currently in publication. It turns out that one of Erestyl's associates was rather prolific in terms of theory, and she didn't mind sharing her ideas. Assuming that the Empire pours some resources into creating another prototype, and they will, then we've got maybe ten years at best before we all have a very big problem."

"The Empire will go power-mad," Johanes intoned.

"Or there might even be a civil war. With such a weapon, the Archduke could conceivably make a run for the throne. No matter how it works out, there's gonna be new deal for every system that doesn't get along with the powers that be. The deal will be cooperate or die. They probably won't make an example out of Tizar. We pay our dues, so we're a source of income, but there are worlds out there that they will snuff without giving it a second thought. New Eden was one of them. The only thing that'll stop them is fear, and the only way they're going to be afraid is if somebody else has the weapon."

"Mutual assured destruction?"

Mike nodded, "Something like that. The Draconian government is the binding glue of the Outworld Coalition. And since we happen to have contact with one of their representatives..."

Johanes smiled, "That still doesn't explain why you're doing this story."

"ISIS has already caught up on the salient facts. We're hiding next to nothing by not running the story. By doing it, we can create some political will against the Empire, maybe enough to solidify the coalition's resolve and create some sort of political balance so that this weapon never gets used."

"You believe that's possible?"

Mike shrugged, "All I know is that we're far from the end of this. Very far."

Appendix

Traveller Tales Being an Encapsulated History of Future Time

A.D. 2004-2568 — The Infancy

2004-2007 The Glowing War
2011-2034 Germ Wars
2047-2080 The E-Grid
2068-2088 Only One Earth
2084-2102 The Farmers' Rebellions
2107-2181 Corporate Science
2162-2212 High Road to Peace
2197-2243 A Human Question
2212-2262 Conquest of the Solar System
2251-2292 Children of the Apes
2247-2299 Quest for the Stars
2273-2334 Problems in Space
2295-2367 Problems on Earth
2336-2419 Medical Renaissance
2374-2470 Resurgence of Religion
2470-2471 Harbinger from Nessus
2443-2568 Genetic Evolutions

2004-2007 The Glowing War

The 3rd Millennium kicked off with a bang, when in its first decade both Paris and New York fell victim to nuclear terrorism. The blow to the western psyche was heartfelt, yet the fear the terrorists hoped to illicit was replaced only by anger in the wake of the destruction. A handful of nations were held responsible for backing the terrorists, and repercussions were both swift and certain. Through a combination of neutron and bacteriological strikes, the alleged offending nations were decimated and a virtual moratorium on nuclear weapons was called for by the seven superpowers. A policy of Cooperative Guardianship was ruthlessly enforced by the superpowers in order to maintain the nuclear free world.

2011-2034 Germ Wars

The so-called peace following the Glowing War was short-lived. For another two decades, as the ability to produce bacteriological weapons became available to the developing nations through numerous advances in medical science, a series of germ wars plagued the earth. By the middle 30's, the death toll was at three billion people. The wars resulted in tremendous biomedical advances in the more advanced nations, however the third world nations rarely benefited from new discoveries and were the hardest hit. Although relatively minor outbreaks occurred later in the century resulting in half a billion more fatalities, the wars were said to officially end with the Treaty of New Delhi in 2034, when India unveiled the Yama Bug, a class of germs with theoretically no possible immunization or antidote. Such a germ had already existed in the more developed nations for several decades, but never before had its release been threatened. The Prime Minister's statement, "If India dies, the whole world dies," brought an abrupt halt to the self-inflicted genocide.

2047-2080 The E-Grid

By 2047, the world's first fusion reactor with a positive net power output was successfully tested in Tokyo. Although the news came as an astonishment to the energy community, the media and public reaction was one of

disinterest. Several times before, nuclear fusion had been announced only later to be disproven. Further, the advent of fusion had been anticipated for next to a century, so that when it finally came about, people wondered only that it had taken so long for science to accomplish. Without going into the technical reasons for the delays, it can be stated with some accuracy that it was only until the middle 40's that the technological components for the nuclear fuser were available.

Several nations began extending their national energy grids, exporting inexpensive electricity to the third world by way of power lines or energy capacitors. The boost in world productivity was astounding, and with the energy crisis finally licked, the major stresses inciting conflict between nations were for a time relieved. In 2080, the national energy grids of the nine super powers and twenty-seven other states joined together in an energy confederation under the auspices of the United Nations. The World E-Grid was born.

2068-2088 Only One Earth

In 2068, the nine superpowers joined in a treaty known as the Green Pact which was to later evolve into the Only One Earth restoration campaign. As the global-warming crisis continued unabated, the world community cooperated in the implementation of long-term solutions to the greenhousing of the earth's atmosphere and the environmentally sound disintegration or holding of toxic substances. Although initially greeted with mixed support, the efforts of this campaign were finally joined by the remaining nations in 2088, instituting policies of renewal over the entire planet.

2084-2102 The Farmers' Rebellions

In the years before the establishment of the world e-grid, particularly during the middle stages of the Only One Earth Campaign, the emerging energy-confederation began reclaiming large areas of infertile land traditionally used for small-scale subsistence farming. In so doing, the land was once again made fertile for collective farming, however, hundreds of millions of small-time farmers were displaced. This sudden shift in the social order created a people entirely dispossessed, and in the resulting chaos, a number of rebellions broke out beginning in 2084 and continued sporadically for eighteen years until the Noland's rebellion was ruthlessly crushed in 2102.

2107-2181 Corporate Science

Throughout the 21st century, the vast majority of critical research in the sciences was conducted with government funds, yet beginning in 2107, corporations took the lead role in developing emerging technologies. In 2107, Femm Bi-labs in the United Kingdom engineered a new species of algae which not only helped reverse global warming during the 22nd century's period of increased thermal-energy pollution, but also technologically paved the way for sea farming. In 2122, cryogenic suspension was refined to the point where long-term freezing became both feasible and relatively safe. In the early 40's, several breakthroughs in synaptic-electric links made artificial prosthesis of both limbs and major organs more feasible, and by the middle 50's, the human mind could be connected directly to computers for the transmission or retrieval of data. The 60's saw the advent of limb and organ regeneration, and by the 70's startling progress had been made on total body rejuvenation, enabling individuals to live up to 200 years. Yet it was in 2181 that the corporate science achieved its crowning glory: the development of gravitic technology. Though it wasn't for another three centuries that the science behind the phenomenon was understood, this step opened an entirely new field of technology, revolutionizing the global transportation industry almost overnight.

2162-2212 High Road to Peace

Despite all the progress made toward a unified social structure, renewed tensions began once again to sweep the seeds of discord. Disputes over territorial rights, population control, reparation for past injustices, patent infringements, and a whole host of other issues divided the varying and often fluid factions as though by an iron wedge. It is thus significant that the United Nations took the lead in renewing cooperative ties between the world's many states, inciting perhaps the most unifying gesture of the first quarter of the millennium. In 2162, the U.N. approved its first fifty-year plan for space exploration and colonization. Though this action may seem today more an attempt to divert the world's attention from the real issues, the joint venture did a great deal to quell nationalistic

aggression and instill a feeling of world community among divergent peoples. By 2178, both Martian and Lunar colonies had been established, and by 2210, numerous colonies existed in the Jovian and Saturn systems and in the asteroid belt.

2197-2243 A Human Question

By the late 22nd century, the cyborgization of the human species was well underway. Since the 50's, numerous machines had been designed to do nothing other than link with the human nervous system and provide artificial sensations. These psychedelic sensitizers or sex machines, as they were sometimes called, were by the close of the century responsible for as many as a million fatalities worldwide. To compound the problem, the public seemed oblivious to the mounting death toll. This crisis prompted the United Nations to create a Council on Human Affairs, and for the first time in its existence, the U.N. began dictating a universal morality from its high pulpit.

For the most part, this infringement on private enterprise came as a shock to the business sector which began moving its more questionable operations off-planet where the Council would not have legislative jurisdiction. However, as the 23rd century dawned, it became apparent the U.N. would have more on its hands than mere sensitizers.

In 2231, unprecedented breakthroughs in biogenetics allowed the precise description of an unborn child's future traits, and by the end of the decade, the IHM Corporation began marketing its First Step program to prospective parents. First Step was basically a euphemism for the alteration of the genetic material of an unborn fetus in an attempt to create perfect human beings. As the U.N. began wrestling with the ethics thereby involved, geneticists began work on altering the human DNA to even greater extremes. In the majority of cases, the geneticists delivered on their promises, producing evermore intelligent, physically powerful, and dexterous humans. However, in a certain number of cases mistakes were made, and artificial mutants were born. Although many of these accidents were promptly disposed of, not all could be hidden so easily. Finally, in 2243, the U.N. passed a comprehensive ban of genetic engineering on human DNA. By this time, however, several million super-children had already been born, and although this figure represented only a small fraction of earth's thirty billion inhabitants, the threat of super beings pounded a serious impact on the social psyche.

2212-2262 Conquest of the Solar System

With the successful completion of the 1st fifty year plan, industry began to get heavily involved in space interests, particularly in asteroid mining and shuttle services. Thus, when it came time to draw the second fifty-year plan in 2212, the U.N. conferred heavily with business leaders to form an opinion on what was possible and what was financially feasible. At the 2212 conference, the Aster Corporation unveiled its prospects for the construction the Von Neumann Robotic Miner. Once complete, the spacecraft would be capable of self-replication, it's sole purpose to find mineral deposits among the asteroids, mine them, and reproduce itself. By 2220, the first VNRM set sail for the belt, and within four decades, hundreds of the miners existed, plying the asteroids for minerals which manned vessels could later find neatly deposited with a homing beacon and refine in the deep of space.

Planetary population stress, however, proved to become an even more serious issue than the plundering of the belt. Despite the numerous microworlds and planetary settlements created during the first fifty-year plan, the Terran population pressures were more evident than ever, and by 2212 every nation on the globe practiced some variety of population control. It was, therefore, critical that some form of large-scale terraforming be undertaken by the world community. Again, the corporations came to the rescue with a number of exotic ideas involving the biological terraformation of Mars, Venus, and Titan. Forming into a cooperative combine latter to be known as the Solar Planetary Trust Corporation, these companies demanded exorbitant property rights on the planets to be terraformed, rights which bordered on the creation of sovereign states beyond the United Nations' traditional jurisdiction. With the world community's grudging acquiescence in 2217, the long process toward terraformation was begun.

2251-2292 Children of the Apes

With the road to human genetic development legally cut short in 2243, many human engineers found themselves squeezed out of the private sector. One such scientist, Dr. Ukliv Eski, returned to the academia where he founded the Department of Hominid Studies at the University of Kampala. There, his research team raised several generations of

chimpanzees, the genetic structure of which he successively modified toward humanity's own. By 2289, his chimps gained international notoriety on a holovideo talk show where, on several occasions, they argued the world issues with political leaders, the implicit parody of the situation flustering their opponents and creating a media circus. Although never progressing beyond a grade school intelligence, the chimps ingratiated themselves into their hearts of the common people. However, in a biological mishap at the University in 2292, the chimps and their trainers, including Dr. Eski, were killed. Later that year, the U.N. extended its 2243 prohibition on the genetic manipulation of human DNA to cover the DNA of all hominid species.

2247-2299 Quest for the Stars

As the United Nations' second fifty year plan for space exploration and colonization came to its completion, science teams around the solar system raced to find some answer to the mass-deficiency syndrome which held back interstellar travel. Finally, in 2247, the Bourns Corporation announced its successful development of the hydrofunnel, a device by which hydrogen could be captured in the deep of space. Several companies, including Aster and MDC, began licensing production rights in lieu of the 2262 summit. There, a whole host of interstellar vessels were commissioned for service. The quest for the stars had begun.

To cap off the century in 2299, radio transmissions were received from researchers on Alpha Centauri. A primitive ecosystem had been discovered on the small world orbiting within the primary's habitable zone, reinvigorating ancient hopes and fears that human beings might find intelligent life in space, or vice-versa.

2273-2334 Problems in Space

To the exasperation of scientists, not all of humankind's efforts in space were fruitful. A combination of inexplicable failures and oversights gave pause to the U.N. space program while corporations continued to rush ahead. The first sign that Man had reached his limit came in 2273, when Femm Biolabs announced its latest breakthrough in the engineering of artificial organisms by unveiling a whole host of Martian settlers. Although the line proved extremely beneficial in the early terraformation efforts, the organisms proved unreasonably hardy and became a bane to the settlers during the late 23rd century when predatory organisms were called in to check the population of the pests. The situation fell entirely out of hand during the early 24th century as predatory Martian beetles would burrow through the foundation of domed settlements, exposing the colonists to the hazards of vacuum.

In 2306, reports from Alpha Centauri confirmed that Man had overstepped his bounds when Terran bacteria began running amok in the fragile, alien ecosystem. By the late 20's, the Terran bacteria had completely usurped their indigenous rivals.

The final boot fell in 2334, when the UNS *Halifax* suffered a catastrophic failure of its hydro-funnel during a routine survey mission of the interstellar hydrogen clouds around the solar system. The crew decided by lots who would undergo cryogenic freezing, hopefully to be later rescued, while the losers sustained themselves for several years, finally resorting to cannibalism as their nutrition supplies became exhausted.

2295-2367 Problems on Earth

Despite the colonization and population control efforts of the 23rd century, the population stress on planet was insidious with a purported demographic summary of sixty billion people by the turn of the century. In order to combat this problem, the U.N. began a large scale sterilization movement in 2295 combined with the marketing of propagation rights three years later. Any children who were found to have been born without proper processing after the turn of the century were confiscated by the newly created World Peace Agency. Isolated rebellions against the policy were quickly put down, and political leaders, many of them in their second rejuvenation with families of eight or twelve children, argued that enforcement of these extreme measures were the only way to quell population growth from bursting the seams of the world order.

To compound the crisis already forming, the U.N. initiated a policy in 2318 of forced deportation and/or cryogenic sleep for repeated law offenders as a means of humanly screening the undesirables from society's ranks. In 2329, a group of protesters broke into a cold berth confinement area in order to try and free the captives. The government responded by shutting down power to the sector, thereby killing the occupants in the low berths before they could be freed. This incident led to the London uprising of the following year in which an additional 1.3 million

people were arrested and cryogenically frozen.

In 2315, corporations began responding to the crisis by building colossal Arks in which humans could travel cryogenically frozen for hundreds of years before reaching any of the various settlements promised to be robotically constructed before their arrival. Over the next five decades, some four hundred and eighty million people signed on for interstellar colonization. However, when compared to the size of the overall problem, the colonization effort seemed more like the proverbial drop in the bucket. The vast majority of population relief came due to the U.N. propagation restrictions, unpopular though they were, and by 2367 the legislation achieved its benchmark goal of a fifty billion population level with sustained negative growth.

2336-2419 Medical Renaissance

Part of the reason behind earth's population pressures was the increasing pace of advance in the medical sciences. In the middle of the 23rd century, geneticists already knew how to modify a species' DNA over successive generations to create, in effect, a new species. The more simple the organism, more available the model, and shorter the lifespan of the organism, the quicker the pace this engineered evolution could be carried out. By monkeying around with hominid DNA in the late 2200's, scientists at the University of Kampala were, in fact, learning a great deal about human genetics. The subsequent accident in 2292 was said to have set back the field of research perhaps as much as thirty years, and the extension of the 2243 ban significantly slowed down the rate at which science could catch up. Despite these hindrances, however, corporations carried out secret research off-planet, finally culminating in the early 2330's with the development of broad-spectrum antiviral vaccinations. With the Terran inoculation of 2336, humankind had virtually licked the common cold, something that medical experts had only dreamed about for hundreds of years.

This event revitalized the medical research profession, lending new impetus to the fight against human suffering which had been for so long cheapened and abused by the morally questionable and occasionally dangerous products of medical science. Nerve refusion techniques were developed through the 2370's and 80's, and the first broad-spectrum antitoxin was introduced in 2419, a virtual cure-all against entire classes of disease. By this time, however, corporations campaigned openly for the right to re-initiate genetic research on human DNA without having to conduct their operations in secrecy. However, fears over the creation of superhumans still lingered in the public subconscious, and corporate sentiments failed to turn over this legislation.

2374-2470 Resurgence of Religion

With the interstellar exploration and colonization well underway, the popular media began anticipating the contact of intelligent alien life forms while prominent scientists began staking their reputations on the prospect of first contact being just around the corner. However, "just around the corner" never came, and as radio transmitted reports of lifeless planets and primitive bacterial ecosystems came back to earth, the scientific opinion began to waver. It seemed as though humankind was very much alone in the universe. The initial evolutionary steps were simply too difficult and improbable to support a teeming universe hypothesis.

The outlook seemed so bleak that scientists reversed their stands, now questioning whether there was any intelligent life other than humankind, and if not, then what fortune led to the rise of sentience on Earth? This philosophical climate led to a resurgence of religion, Pope Joseph IX declaring from his lofty pulpit in 2374 that after hundreds of years of struggling, men of science had finally arrived to the true knowledge which was always offered to them by God. Each new negative discovery seemed to confirm this statement, and Catholicism found billions of new converts who hoped to cash in on the gift of immortality just as the human race had cashed in on its gift of the Universe.

However, with the resurgence of religion, so came a new division among people. While the majority of the world's people moved toward monotheism, and Catholicism in particular, several of the eastern nations diverged, holding true to the more ancient, eastern faiths. These deep rooted differences, combined with a yearning for independence from U.N. dictates, led to open animosities between the eastern and western nations during the early 25th century. Unrest continued to ferment until 2443, when Xao Ti Xang defied United Nation's authority by funding human geneticists from the Humanix Corporation and allowing the development of super-intelligent humans in China.

During the following two decades, this open schism over the nature and course of human development generated terrorist actions in China, which were countered by bacteriological offensives against supporting nations. An

estimated twenty million people died in these reprisals, leading to further escalation of the crisis when the Catholic Pope declared a holy war against those who would play God. This militant Catholicism led to the outbreak of the Yama bug in China in 2467, however, advances in medical science managed to exterminate the dreaded virus, through only after a death toll of 570 million. Rather than respond in kind, the Chinese government unveiled the Lu Yueh virus in 2470, an engineered sub organism capable of mutating itself beyond even the reach of the broadest antitoxins. The Pope called for courage, continuing to demand that the heathens leave the devices of life and death to God alone as the United Nations Secretary General demanded a reunion of the global alliance at any and all costs.

2470-2471 Harbinger from Nessus

So engaging was the new world-conflict, that when news of the UNS *Erik's* discovery of a somewhat more advanced ecosystem on New Amsterdam reached Earth in 2447, the Terran media scarcely took notice. It thus came as a fortuitous coincidence that in 2470, just as world war seemed imminent, radio transmissions reporting startling discoveries on Nessus reached Earth. Nessus, a world immersed in what appeared to be an artificially produced greenhouse atmosphere was literally strewn with ancient ruins. It appeared, for the first time in human history, that humankind might not be alone in the universe after all.

As the United Nations sat poised on the brink of invasion, reports from explorers on the distant planet's surface were received by their perplexed earthbound counterparts. From initial data, it appeared that the Nessusan civilization had simply faded away as if each and every individual had suddenly died without cause. Some alien specimens were found in cryogenic suspension but died during the thawing process. By a careful analysis of the raw data, it was finally determined by Terran geneticists a year later that the society had fallen victim to some form of biological germ, something too advanced for the explorers on Nessus to detect since they were still using outdated technology. Ironically, where the explorers lacked knowledge, they seemed to lend wisdom, the immortal words of the alien archaeologist, Dvitro Xerxes, streaming as particles of radio light through the vastness of space, piecing together the final whispers of an alien people who died some forty million years before humans learned to build fires. This harbinger to Earth's own imminent destiny proved so powerful that support for the U.N. invasion of China immediately collapsed.

2443-2568 Genetic Evolutions

When corporations were finally given free reign to develop a super-intelligent human with the full backing of the Chinese government, genetic engineers flocked to Beijing from all over the solar system. The resources put into the project were enormous from the very beginning, however, unlike Dr. Eski, these researchers had no naturally evolved genetic model upon which to base their work. Therefore, the quest was likened to a grope in the darkness, when after numerous attempts, science had as its best example of experimental success produced only a colony of sterile, psychotic deviants.

Humanix was finally bought out by Femm Biolabs in 2470, during the uncertainty of the mounting U.N. invasion. Femm immediately diverted corporate resources toward the physical manipulation of the human species, something which was considered far more attainable by science, and the decision proved successful in 2502 with the unveiling of water-breathing sapiens who, though genetically fragile, were nonetheless capable of reproduction.

Japanese and Australian opposition to the creationists finally caved-in to business pressures as new corporations raced to catch-up in what soon became known as the Race of Evolutions. However, just as anxiety had grown three centuries earlier when the prospect of a race of super people loomed in the mind of ordinary man, so was there a resurgence of activity from various fronts attempting to regulate the flow of government sponsored research dollars as U.N. Articles were instated, effectively enslaving the newborn species even as they arrived.

Between 2510 and 2568, a plethora of human variants reached the market, one adapted for cold weather, another for extremes of heat, another with the ability to soar by the use of wings, and still others, often created as midgets, with little more than a dog's mentality and often purchased as household pets. Progress on the intellectual side of the genetic coin was finally achieved in the 50's and 60's with the development of super-intelligent children whose increased learning ability and pre-implanted knowledge threatened standard humans on a more psychological level. However, the majority of these creations were non-viable, unable to reproduce as does a true species, though, with time geneticists promised that they would learn the secrets of life itself, not merely of its modification.

However, whether unfortunate or inevitable, the proverbial excrement finally hit the spinning rot or-blade in 2565, when a scientist defecting from the More Perfect Human Corporation stated to the media that a psionic child had

been born. Suddenly faced with the prospect of mind-invasion and a whole host of alien mental powers, anti-creationist groups gained increased political power, finally forcing the passage of a U.N. Resolution in 2568 declaring Earth a standard-human zone. Individuals could either apply for special waivers to harbor non-standards or move off-planet. This resolution put a virtual stop to the creationists who relied on government sponsorship for a majority of their research and development and on the Terran consumer for a substantial market. In an attempt to continue the rally, the Chinese agreed to sponsor psionic research off-planet, however, in 2576 the U.N. extended its '68 resolution to the entire solar system.

A.D. 2568-3516 — The Corporate Era

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2597-2663 Unearthly Plunder
2663-2710 Foundations of Anarchy
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2568-2597 The Beanstalk

With the 2568 U.N. creation of a standard-human zone around Earth, advancing biogenetics was effectively forced off-planet, causing the displacement of tens of millions of highly educated corporate personnel. The sudden influx of out-world traffic, combined with the industrial, service, and clerical personnel who were sure to follow, motivated the U.N. to step up plans for the renovation of the world spaceport, culminating in the construction of what was to become popularly known as the Beanstalk, a ground to space station over seventy thousand kilometers in overall length.

2597-2663 Unearthly Plunder

The beanstalk's finalization in '97 gave substantial impetus to a period of alarming growth in space imports. Entire earth-bound industries were flushed out as the use of mutant labor gave off-world firms a strong competitive advantage. Mitsubishi invested heavily in off-world trade and transport, sinking considerable assets into a major corporate gamble. During this period, samples of alien bacteria and primitive lifeforms began appearing on earth. Some were sold for research, but others were distributed through the black market to wealthy collectors for exorbitant prices.

Although most of these organisms proved less hardy than their Terran equivalents, wide-spread outcry resulted concerning the public's protection. Following the discovery of an advanced ecosystem on Darwin IV, the U.N. instated the Orbital Quarantine Command as a protective measure against the infestation of alien organisms. However, the passage of the Nakamura Resolution in '63 caused the OQC to evolve into a protectionist trade barrier, crippling off-world industry from doing business in the Terran market.

2663-2710 Foundations of Anarchy

After the close of the Terran market in '63, competition between off-world corporations intensified, eventually forcing the interstellar conglomeration of what was to be known as the big three: Mitsubishi, Aster, and Femm. By the turn of the century, the tensions of trade competition threatened to spill over into open conflict. Fleets of war vessels were built, and each conglomerate controlled its off-world business as though it were a separate nation-state, creating

it's own laws and effectively ignoring the edicts of colonial governments. The ice finally broke with the Martian ultimatum of 2710, when the Aster Corporation charged Femm with contract violations in the joint terraformation project. Due to political interests, both parties refused U.N. arbitration, but instead set-up a private arbitration council consisting only of non-Terran interests.

2710-2741 Open Defiance

With the success of the Martian accords, the terraformation of Mars, Venus, and Titan, which all began in the early 23rd century, neared the completion stages. However, the inner-system importation of mutants in the early part of the 28th century led the U.N. to threaten police action for the violation of the standard-human zone. Aster and Femm agreed to submit the issue for arbitration, but only to a non-Terran arbitration council. The U.N. refused to agree to this condition and sent warships to enforce its will. Before they arrived, however, Femm's public affairs office, on Earth, threatened the release of undisclosed biological contaminants if the Terran warships reached their destination. The threat was later proven a bluff, but it gave the big three time to organize fleets within the solar system, resulting in the Second Martian accords of 2741.

2741-2872 The Corporate War

The Second Martian accords saw a cessation of U.N. domination of the solar system and a loosening of quarantine restrictions with a corresponding collapse of Terran trade barriers. However, the accords also brought Mitsubishi to its knees with the domestication of its Earth-bound facilities which came under the control of the newly formed Terran conglomerate. Despite this, however, Aster and Femm continued to grow in power, waging a trade war against the untested Terran Corporation until Mitsubishi managed to claim reparations for its domesticated facilities. It was, thus, clear that the megacorporations were acting as a single economic entity.

The quasi-peace was short-lived, however, as within a decade, news arrived from Durhael, one of Earth's most distant colonies, that the shattered core of a nova had been discovered. This news, though unheralded by the mass-media, carried extreme weight with the scientific community, as it was hypothesized for several centuries that the eka-metals (heavy elements) to be found within such an astronomical find could be used to tear the fabric of multi-dimensional space at the subatomic level, in effect, opening the possibility for faster-than-light travel.

Although technically owned by the Terran Corporation under the 2741 accords, the Aster corporation was in a far better position to claim the find as its own, and this is exactly what it did. In order to protect its position, however, Aster began a conquest of the entire arm leading to Durhael. Noting the opportunity to rid Terra's influence in corporate space, the Mitsubishi and Femm conglomerates jumped to Aster's side, their offensive sweeping the entirety of Terra's immediate colonies, culminating in the decisive corporate victory in the battle of Osgiliath in 2872.

2794-2911 War Technologies

The Corporate War led to the hastened development of mutant technologies, when in 2794, Femm geneticists located the psi-gene and later incorporated psionic attributes and bio cybernetics in its infamous line of mass-cloned Okuma war-mutants of the early 29th century. The 2830's saw major breakthroughs in artificial sentience, and various degrees of self-aware computers were deployed in Aster's Shambler series of self-rep Heating predator vessels akin to the Von Neumann robotic miners of the 23rd century. The discovery which ended the war, however, came in 2852, with the Mitsubishi-AI's derivation of the famed Deagol equation which, utilizing Eka-metals, actualized hyper space travel as a technical hypothesis. In a joint venture with Aster, Mitsubishi developed the technology during the late 50's, and actual star ships were in deployment by the middle 60's.

Several spin-off sciences were either invented or serendipitously arrived at during the following decades, including the rudiments of matter transportation during the late 80's, genetic reconstruction of the 30th century's first decade, and the anagathics discovery of 2911.

2887-2969 Post-War Exodus

After the conclusion of the Corporate War, the big three began consolidating the conquered territories, driving

out the smaller independents and monopolizing huge chunks of the colonial economy. Psychohistorians predicted a future war far bloodier than the Corporate War, this to be fought between the big three with a sharp trend toward political-economic centralization during the interim. A symposium of wealthy industrialists met on Terra in 2887 to discuss these economic developments and psychohistorical prognostications, and a coalition of independents was formed the following year, the focus of the pact turning toward a mass-exodus of the colonized regions.

Plans were made, and the exodus began with the departure of the *Ash* in 2909, which carried over a million cryogenically suspended colonists. Other vessels departed over the following six decades for various systems in the Persei and Cassiopeias clusters. The project finally failed in '69 due to the bankruptcy of its sponsorship.

2969-3130 Total Producer Monopolization

With the failure of the Exodus Fund in '69, it became apparent that the ultimate goal of the big three was total market monopolization. By the 80's, even Earth was not exempt from the trends, the Terran corporation finding itself slowly crushed and later purchased at bargain rates by Mitsubishi in 3010. Standard human labor was largely replaced with mutant slaves from the frontier, and by the turn of the millennium, billions of Terrans were effectively selling themselves and their families into the same corporate institution which had deprived them of their livelihoods.

During the next hundred and twenty years, the Aster-Femm-Mitsubishi conglomerate carried out a meticulous campaign of isolating and destroying the millions of smaller independent firms which still remained, finally officially merging into the AFM Corporation in 3130. The three controlling families became intertwined by a series of arranged marriages, and the ancient institution of nepotism became a model for ensuring the future peace.

2981-3210 Age of Wonder

The era of peace gave rise to many new sciences as AFM's separate components competed against each other without traditional government restraints. Thus, although there were tremendous technological advances, the median standard of living actually declined during the period, leading to urban unrest which was largely contained via brute force techniques employed by the corporate authorities.

During this period, deportation and hyper space projection technologies became widely utilized as forms of transportation. Communication technologies evolved to encompass a wide host of FTL-particles, making interstellar communication next to instantaneous. Finally, the first Tau-fields and pocket universes became realities.

However, with the rapid pace of technology, a great deal of power fell into the hands of those with the most direct control over scientists and knowledge-based resources. Thus, corporate power became more and more decentralized as individual upper managers and groups of middle managers combined resources in several ill-fated attempts to overthrow the ownership and seize control of AFM or to create breakaway divisions under independent ownership. As always, the corporate response was as ruthless as it was decisive.

3210-3223 The Tomorrow War

What followed the Age of Wonder is perhaps the least understood period of history. Apparently, an era of terrible warfare between the corporate divisions erupted sometime in the 35th century, but spread backwards in time, to the year 3210. This was the year to which the Mitsubishi Division, in its dying gasp, sent a prototype star-ship capable of traveling through both space and time. The star ship, named the *Mitsubishi Maru*, was expected to arrive before the discovery of alternate temporal realities and to destroy Asterian and Femm research centers, thereby creating a timeline in which Mitsubishi might rule all of humanity.

However, another vessel followed the *Maru* backwards through the temporal continuum, this one named the *Asterian War Dragon*. The two vessels met several times in battle until 3216 when they destroyed each other in a fiery climax. The captain of the *War Dragon*, nicknamed "Draconius" by the war's spectators, survived the final battle and was appointed admiral of the Asterian fleets a year later. With the war now ignited, the corporations continued to fight until 3223 when Mitsubishi was finally forced to submit unconditionally.

Returning to Terra, Draconius turned against corporate ownership in a surprise bombardment of his own victory parade, assassinating each member of the ruling family in a single stroke. The attack left a vacuum of power, to which Femm's management could only have a single response.

3223-3309 Mutant Rebellions

The Femm Corporation had never had large war fleets. Instead of technical hardware, it concentrated on the manufacture of biological organisms. However, within each organism it produced, it created a sort of emergency-lever which could be pulled via the application of trace amounts of a specific chemical. Once pulled, the organism would be psychologically transformed from an obedient slave into an insane killing machine.

Thus, the 3223 assassination of Femm's ownership saw the beginning of the Mutant Rebellions and the corresponding breakdown of corporate government into total anarchy. Over half of the human population perished during the first ten years of the rebellion as Draconius used his fleets to crush one outbreak of violence after another.

It wasn't until the middle of the century that the cause of the rebellions was even understood, and not until the 80's that antidotes were synthesized. The fighting finally ended in 3309, with over nine-tenths of the human population slaughtered during the interim.

3309-3516 Period of Recovery

The next two centuries saw a slow period of recovery as Draconius entitled old AFM executives and their families with large provinces while charging them with various duties including social welfare, economic recovery, maintenance of the peace, and the administration of justice. This policy saw the foundations of Imperial bureaucracy and the caste system within which it became rooted, resulting, ultimately, in the coronation of Draconius as Emperor in 3516.

F.I. 0-1481 — The First Imperium

0-129 Age of Reckoning

129-137 The Reign of Blood

137-461 Athena's Imperium

462-467 The Little Empress

467-483 Emperors of Doomsday

483-1120 The Dim Time

1120-1484 Quest for Solidarity

0-129 Age of Reckoning

The mutant rebellions of the 33rd century combining with the contempt of an educated population for the corporate state set the stage for the formation of the First Imperium under Admiral Draconius. However, as the great stellar estates returned to their corporate masters during the economic recovery, tensions resurfaced, forcing the inevitable settlement of accounts between a once enslaved population, corporate management, and the futurian who would be emperor.

Draconius was crowned in A.D. 3516, also the year zero of the new calendar, during a symbolic ceremony in which his young empress-to-be, then a palace slave, was accorded the right of kingmaker as a gesture of defiance against the lesser nobility. The gesture was not taken lightly, as during the Emperor's marriage four years later, an attempt was made on his life, killing instead his bride-to-be. Not knowing upon whom to retaliate, Draconius seized the opportunity to execute each and every member of the noble families while all were present and had nowhere to flee. The exercise in Draconian justice made the archaic roots of his name all the more meaningful as he personally disposed of the last of his corporate rivals.

Claiming the wealth and power of his victims via the Imperial fleets, Draconius mercilessly slaughtered all opposition to his absolute rule. He indiscriminately butchered entire planetary populations in the name of his beloved empress, and by the middle teens, the pervasive anarchy which threatened to consume the Empire had been successfully quashed. The process of decentralization began anew, as Draconius called to the upper echelons of his fleets for his most loyal and capable officers. To these individuals, he invested the titles of nobility. Large fiefs and governorships were distributed arbitrarily, in a fashion which best suited the Emperor alone without consideration for the regions or peoples to be held subject.

By the early 30's (F.I.), the new order was intact and functioning. Perhaps to test the bureaucratic machinery, Draconius began the issuance of royal edicts, the first calling for an accelerated program of expansion. Production levels were driven upward to meet the increasing demand, and the median standard of living rose to all-time highs since the turn of the Terran millennium making Draconius the most popular and effective leader in historical memory. No one would foresee that within a century, his face would become virtually unknown.

129-137 The Reign of Blood

Before the murder of his empress-to-be, Draconius fathered a pair of paternal twins, Paulo and Athena. The brother and sister were considered as the two separate halves of their father's double personality, the former: sinister, evil, rash, and prone to tantrums, the latter: quiet, reserved, careful, and thoughtful.

Over the years, Paulo grew impatient with his father's rule. He desired mastery of the galaxy for himself, and in 129, he murdered his father, seizing the crown and marrying his sister, Athena. Rebellion broke out almost instantly as Paulo had carried out his plan without a strong network of conspirators, yet the ruthlessness with which he crushed the revolt dwarfed Draconius' cruelty. This policy of terror and intimidation would characterize the short remainder of his rule as Paulo lapsed into a guilt-ridden paranoia which drove him finally into an obsession to eradicate the memory of his father.

Paulo ordered that all the images of his father be destroyed; anywhere the name Draconius was written, it was erased. Anywhere his father's memory lay, he would put its keepers to death. Soon, even if he heard that the name Draconius was so much as whispered on such a planet, all its inhabitants would be killed. Paulo used all the powers he could bring to bear to seek out and destroy all who would oppose him in his quest.

In a short time, Paulo had canceled every edict his father had ever decreed, erased every statement, undone every deed, destroyed every concrete memory he could find of his father. Soon, he believed, even he would forget Draconius.

Paulo's reveled in courtly games of pain and death to relieve a moment's pressure from the enormous task he had undertaken. He spent long hours developing new tortures of the mind which he tested on his chosen mate, Athena, and administrated the Office of Emperor only where it would accomplish his ultimate goal of erasing the name of his father.

Despite his repeated attempts to impregnate his sister in the earlier part of his reign, Athena never bore him any children, nor allowed any of her ova for use in an artificial womb. This, a testament to her own psionic prowess, confounded Paulo with the greatest anger, and in a fit of rage he abused her to such extremes that she fell into a sleep of eight years from which even Paulo and all the Empire's sciences could not resurrect her. He ordered her ova surgically removed, but during the operation her life signs ceased until Paulo and his doctor's retreated.

This apparent threat of suicide kept Paulo at bay until the final year of his reign, when losing patience with her game he fell upon her, pushing her to decide between birth and death, nevermore allowing her to linger in that nether state she had created through her Psi talents. For those eight years, Paulo butchered nearly half of the Empire's population, and yet rebellion seemed a distant hope at best. Paulo grew madder by the day, until the hour of Athena's awakening when she bore him a baby boy.

Seized with joy, he resolved to allow her the tradition of naming the newborn child. She uttered but one word, "Draconius," which caused him to plunge into uncontrollable spasms of anger and fear. Observing her opportunity, she ordered him restrained and sedated and put him on Psi inhibitors to control his mental powers. That day, the people rejoiced as Athena became Empress.

137-461 Athena's Imperium

Athena's first act of office was to order Paulo exiled to the most remote planet in the Empire where she built a prison especially for her brother. Continually drugged, Paulo now seemed as helpless as the infant Athena had borne him. Due to the strange circumstances of its birth, however, the baby Draconius was greatly feared by the remaining population, and in a gesture of sacrifice, Athena had her only son exiled to a distant corner of the Empire and placed on agathic inhibitors to forestall his development into maturity. The population was placated for the time being, and Athena began her rule, instituting several edicts toward the amendment of the Imperial political framework.

The first of these edicts involved the creation of a Senate of Nobles who would enact laws with the consent of the Empress. This proved of tremendous importance, as it ended a long era of arbitrary legislation and provided the foundation for a firm legal code. The second of these edicts involved the creation of the Imperial High Court to

interpret law in cases of magnitude for the better consistency of justice. This proved extremely valuable in centralizing legal authority.

Over the three centuries of her rule, Athena continued her father's program of expansion, though not nearly at the rate her father had forecast. She viewed Terra's ties to the outer worlds as already over-extended. Strangely enough, however, she continued to enforce Paulo's will that her father not be remembered. Over the period of a century, the effort proved effective with respect to the common citizen, however, an underground historical society eventually formed which preserved the memory of Draconius.

Athena finally consented to marriage in 449, bearing two issue to the Archduke of Deneb during the following year. Both children died shortly after birth, and rumors of an assassin within the Imperial palace circulated among the populace. Athena ordered the palace psi-shielded and sent a secret communique to Paulo's prison ordering that her brother be executed. By means unknown, Paulo escaped only hours before the receipt of the message, and Draconius mysteriously disappeared a short time thereafter.

Fear of Paulo swept through the masses, and Athena ordered the suppression of psionics to counter the panic; however, her actions were too slow in coming, and rebellion ensued from the Siri (psionic class). For a short period, a movement known as the Draconian Front challenged the Imperial Right of Suppression, borrowing its name from the centuries old censure as a show of defiance against the Empire.

Lacking the ability to survive direct battles, the front relied on piracy and sabotage as its primary arguments, harassing Imperial shipping and communication routes during the early 50's. However, it lacked the momentum of a full-scale rebellion, and was soundly defeated at the battle of Aranruth in 456. The Empress rejoined her husband later that year and bore a daughter in 457 on the world of her victory. She stayed until 461, refusing to venture into the spacelanes until she was finally persuaded by her longing for Terra. There, the Empress and the Archduke both perished in a surprise attack by pirates.

462-467 The Little Empress

Christine of Aranruth assumed the crown of Empress at five years of age, almost a full year after the death of her mother and father in an act of spacelanes piracy. Prior to her ascension, various dukes of the Deneb clusters, all nephews and cousins of the late husband to Athena, formed a grand alliance and waged a siege on Terra in anticipation of the power vacuum soon to result.

The ransom of Christine in 462 provided the Terrans with a golden opportunity for home rule. Thus, crowning the young Christine as Empress gave the Terrans the legal authority to summon their defense. Once reinforced, the Royal Navy drove back the rebels in a gallant victory, but the winds of anarchy were not so easily quieted. As various dukes attempted to win favor and influence over the young empress, competition to control the Empire through Christine serving as its puppet figurehead led to open hostilities among the nobility. This, in turn, resulted in Christine's assassination in 467. She was ten years old.

467-483 Emperors of Doomsday

Before the young empress could even be accorded a proper funeral, the vacuum of authority left in her wake swept in all the worms of the muck. Over the following sixteen years, no less than forty-seven individuals proclaimed themselves autocrat of the Empire. Each new wave of invaders brought forth a new noble, admiral, or crackpot opportunist to power. To capture Terra was to rule the Empire, yet as the entirety of the 1st Imperium swiftly collapsed into desperate anarchy, numerous duchies announced their separate independence. Finally, during the Battle of Doomsday, F.I. 483, 3999 by the old calendar, Terra was destroyed.

483-1120 The Dim Time

As humaniti entered the fifth millennium, the psychic blow of Earth's destruction carried with its passing an air of misanthropy. Although without focus, the war continued in sporadic outbursts for well over century.

Finally, the economy of the Empire became so depleted and ravaged by internal war and the political system so fragmented and disarranged that no true Empire could be said to exist. Within the core worlds, a long depression ensued, in which key industries fell apart, the caste system was destroyed, and communication and transport between the stars came to a near standstill. However, colonization still continued near the rim, and new states were built from

the various duchies, kingdoms, domains, and governorships which remained.

Humanity slowly re-established itself during the final centuries of the Dim Time, however, it was so politically fragmented that the more powerful states squabbled amongst one another for greater power and prestige, leading once more to outbreaks of armed conflict. An interworld trade language soon arose among the merchant class, facilitating exchange and communication, and many national leaders found their authority waning as merchants flocked to the least aggressive and least trade-restrictive of their counterparts abroad. Since trade wealth and privateering were still considered paramount to a state's prestige and defense, there was a concerted movement on the part of all nations to cease their hostilities and to renew their ancient bonds.

1120-1484 Quest for Solidarity

As nation states became tempered by the economic realities of the age, the ceaseless forces of political centralization countered the peace ethic inherent to a re-developing interstellar community. Ultimately, neither force could defeat the other, and in 1120, a solution was discovered with the first of several arranged marriages which would eventually rebind the Empire and make it whole once again.

Over the next three and a half centuries, the route to power was clear. As the fragments of the first Imperium steadily coalesced into ever more powerful states, political leaders became increasingly concerned that their progeny should one day rule all of human space.

The merger was completed with the marriage of Prince Frederick of Omicron and Princess Anastasia of Sol in 1484, coinciding with the sixth millennium celebrations scheduled over the entire year. The young couple was paraded before the media, announcing a new era of peace and prosperity as their families continued to hold the real power behind the scenes.

S.I. 0-656 — The Second Imperium

0-359 Challenges to the Young

359-491 Good King Richard

492-499 The Civil War

500-656 The Modern Era

0-359 Challenges to the Young

Although the marriage of the Solian and Omicronian heirs brought about the existence of the Second Imperium, the splendid coronation of year zero lacked one vital ingredient of Empireship, that being a central ruler. The prenuptial agreement between Anastasia and Frederick, which served effectively as articles of interim confederation, left the actual reins of authority to their grandparents until a child should be born, later centralizing authority and stabilizing the Empire. This, however, was unlikely, for although the young couple met under fair circumstances, family differences quickly tore them apart.

Remaining married for political purposes, Frederick returned to Omicron shortly after the ordeal in order to oversee industrial growth and reaffirm his family's power in the region. Mangled during the Dim Time, Omicron's primary agenda focused on centrality of control with limited growth. Sol, on the other hand, pursued a policy of exploration and conquest, spreading its dominion across the stars and claiming more territory than it could effectively administrate. Therefore, Omicron maximized a policy of focused industrialization, while Sol spent its resources on traditional priorities such as colonization and expansion; and while a compact Omicron was easily controllable, Sol's colonies, primarily in the Perseus Arm, became increasingly rebellious.

Anastasia set up two strong rival governorships in order to handle the situation locally in the interests of Capitol. Her idea was that neither would rebel because of the other's existence, yet both would be very capable of quenching internal revolts because they would both be close to their problems. The outcome proved disastrous for the untested Empire. Neither of the two governorships recognized any rivalry. They held the mutual interest of independence against a common enemy, and through intensive cooperation they realized their interests with the 341 Declaration of Independence of Persei and Cassiopeiae beginning fleet maneuvers to prove the sincerity of their intentions.

Angered that her hand-picked governors had turned traitorous, Anastasia began recalling naval forces from the far reaches of the Empire back to Sol to be overhauled, refitted for battle, and sent off to punish the traitors and

reincorporate the governorships. However, the entire process of preparing for a major war took far too long to implement, and as soon as the local guard was pulled off other worlds, they too began to talk of independence. A new Draconian Front slowly emerged, calling for the cessation of Imperial domination of outworld states. Although the name was no longer suppressed, it did serve as a reminder of the Reign of Blood, eliciting support from otherwise neutral parties.

Anastasia was forced to withdraw her plans of attack and shift the focus of the war campaign toward the solidification of her rule. The Draconian Front was eventually stamped out, but only with the realization that the Solian half of the Empire had drastically over-extended itself. The Omicron half of the Empire, on the other hand, was compact and stable, and in the interest of preserving failing relations, Frederick ventured to Sol to make a rare visit with his wife in 354. The visit, scheduled to last one quarter of a standard year, ended up lasting three, and a prince was born by the name of Richard. Frederick left to settle affairs back at Omicron, but two years later he returned to stay. With this decision, the seat of Omicron's government had been moved to Sol, and with this act the two kingdoms became fused into one Empire more-so than ever before.

359-491 Good King Richard

Throughout the remaining years of their reign, the happy couple did very little in the area of their administrative responsibilities. Leaving the reins of government to Richard, their son, they spent the following years taking adventurous incursions into the outer sectors. In 383, their convoy was raided by pirates, and both were killed in the resulting battle.

Richard assumed the throne as soon as word reached Capitol and continued the work he had already made himself accustomed to. His reign can be characterized by the overall leniency with which he ruled and by his great charisma which won victories in a more peaceful fashion than those of his predecessors. He was probably the most well-loved Emperor ever; certainly, he has been the most missed.

Richard turned over even greater Imperial power to the Archdukes, further decentralizing the Empire and making its administration more practical and convenient. He formed a Senate of advisors which took actual power in the detailed planning of central goals, and he refocused the energies of government to rebuild the agricultural worlds' production capacities especially along the Betelgeuse and Spica fringe which had still not completely recovered since the Dim Time. He reformed the relationship between big business and the state, allowing greater corporate independence from Imperial strictures on noble ownership and anti-monopolization, but less freedom on stakeholder repatriation issues and matters concerning technological development.

Richard conducted the first complete census of the Second Imperium and published the data in the Encyclopedia Galactica which he founded as a permanent storehouse for all knowledge. He opened diplomatic relations with Persei and Cassiopeias which flourished into a trade partnership and later a cooperative alliance. Perhaps most importantly, he allowed more states on the Imperial periphery to attain practical independence, and he granted independence to the Archduchies of Caprissa, Tigris, and Epsilon Aurigae, emphasizing the need for peaceful cooperation between states, rather than warlike competition.

Richard was also somewhat of a scholar and philosopher of the other social and political systems which had suffered to exist along the Imperial periphery during his reign, and in 490, he became so enthralled with democracy that he outlined a plan which would have over the course of the next two-dozen standard years gradually formed the Empire into a democratic republic while simultaneously granting independence to the Archduchies of Scorpio, Herculese, Athens, and Nu Cephei. His Grand Plan outlined seven free Duchies and seven Democracies of the new Imperial Republic (Sol, Omicron, Betelgeuse, Spica, Rigel, Deneb, and York). In effect, he was offering to permanently reduce the power of the throne for what he believed could be a stable and long-term peace for all humanity. His plan was never put into effect, however, as he died the following year in a star lanes accident, the Empire's management finally falling to his oldest son, Stephan.

492-499 The Civil War

Stephan saw things very differently from his father and often argued openly with Richard on matters of state and the suppression of inevitable rebellions. He vowed that when he should come to power, he would militarily strengthen the Empire rather than weakly submitting to colonial demands. When he finally became Emperor, he attempted to do just that; however, the moment was already lost and the power of his office, greatly diminished during Richard's reign, proved too weak to take control of big industry and wrestle back the periphery for direct Imperial rule.

During his first year, Stephan was always at odds with the now powerful Senate. He dared not dissolve the body, or he would risk rebellion from every front, but he did take the privilege of retiring senators and replacing them with his own friends, a practice very much set against the tradition instated by Richard.

By the middle of 492, the seven Free Duchies sent identical statements to Stephan, demanding a continuation of Richard's Grand Plan. Stephan flatly denounced the plan as an old man's folly and began preparing his military to reincorporate the lost territories including Cassiopeias and Persei. The Civil War began later that year with Nu Cephei's and Epsilon Aurigae's simultaneous invasions of Deneb and Spica.

Caprissa, Tigris, and Scorpio quickly organized their defenses as Athens invaded York with all her forces during the early quarter of 493. Sol organized a defensive front along the Scorpio border where her forces stood for the remainder of the war facing the enemy but not attacking while Stephan called for Omicron to send reinforcements to help defeat the rebels. While not participating herself, Omicron allowed Betelgeuse to send minor reinforcements to aid the effort in Spica; but the assistance was far too little to be of substantial benefit to the Imperial cause, and Spica eventually fell into rebel hands.

Rigel invaded rebel Caprissa in late 493 as Deneb halted the Nu Cephei invasion, and by the end of 494, Deneb was chasing the remaining Nu Cepheian rebel forces all the way back to Tigris. In 495, Herculese having just finished quenching internal uprisings, entered the war on the side of the Empire and invaded Athens from her back door. The Athenian forces were immediately recalled to a defensive front as York and Herculese pounded them from both sides.

In 496, reinforcements from York relieved the Deneb forces and carried on the war in Nu Cephei and Tigris. Deneb moved its attention to the defeated Archduchy of Spica, still in rebel hands. Another year of fighting only produced a stalemate, but in 497, Deneb's remaining border forces attacked Epsilon Aurigae directly. The shock produced a rebel withdrawal from three-quarters of Spica.

By the middle of 498, Athens had fallen, but Persei, Cassiopeias and the Outworld Coalition (at Herculese) were preparing to enter on the side of the rebels. Both sides were weary of war, and Omicron still hung on the sidelines like a vulture waiting for the best moment to enter and snatch its prey. Afraid of losing the upper hand, Stephan called for a peace conference to get out while he was ahead.

In 499 the conference met and signed a peace resolution. Scorpio, Epsilon Aurigae, Caprissa, Tigris, and Nu Cephei suffered a rearrangement in their borders which was to an Imperial advantage in return for Stephan's recognition. The empire suffered the severance of large regions of space from the Archduchies of Spica, Rigel, and Athens for the purpose of creating independent states and buffer zones in return for the rebel states' denunciation of Richard's plan toward democratization. Despite the fact that war could have been waged by both sides for several more years, the conference settled on this compromise, as victory for either side seemed too uncertain.

500-656 The Modern Era

Stephan began a program of intensive industrial reconstruction after the war, particularly in Rigel, Deneb, and York which were all hard-hit by rebel offensives. Appointing his son-in-law as the new Archduke of Athens, he executed the old family in 504 and paid a special visit to Archduke Constantine of Herculese a year later, personally thanking him for not turning traitor as did the other six of the seven free Archdukes and for playing so critical a role in the defeat of Athens. He then visited Omicron in 509, supposedly to admonish the Archduke there for restraining the requested aid. To the surprise of the citizenry, he had the Archduke executed but allowed the family to live with its eldest son instated as the new ruler.

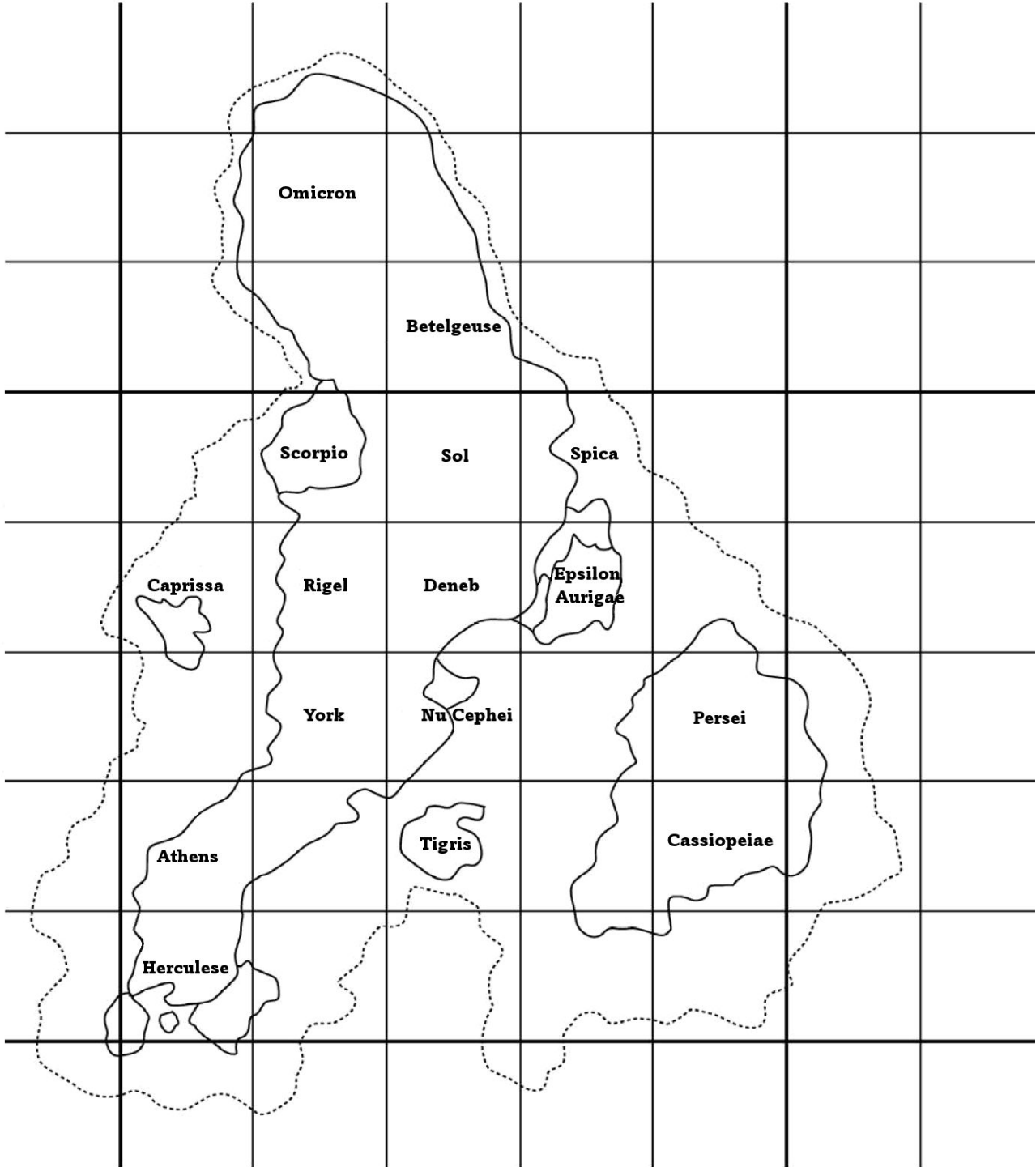
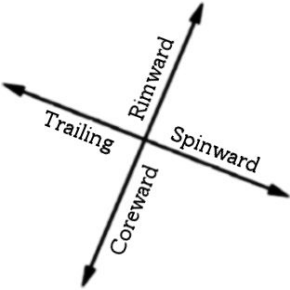
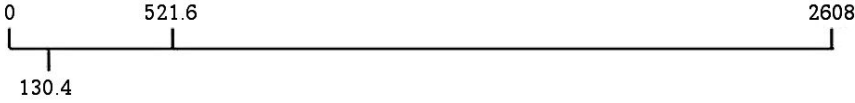
The trade agreement with Cassiopeias and Persei, which was discontinued at the start of the war, was reordered and extended to the border states. In 510 he had Omicron funnel aid to help in military reconstruction as he began reinforcing the borders along Sol, Deneb, Rigel, and York to protect the coreworlds from rebel invasion.

In recent years Stephan has gained a strong hold over the Imperial Senate's sub-bodies and has moved toward a large military build-up in the Imperial Core primarily around Sol, Rigel, Deneb and York, heavily taxing or seizing control of the megacorporations in order to finance his projects. Anti-Imperial sentiments have risen especially high along the Imperial periphery as both sides prepare for resumed armed conflict.

The Second Imperium

circa 656

Scale of Light Years



Herculese Centrant

Kronos	Zeus	Atlas	Plato	Sparta
Helena	Apollo	Herculese	Hermes	Tyche
Katina	Ares	Hapaestus	Pan	Rabanitas
Azazi	Draconia	Siri	Astela	Delta Cephei

Ares Sector

Arcadia	Tyber	Ares	Stanton
Mao	Poseidon	Oceanus	Pelston
Crystalight	Natal	Siri	Lurak
Bermuda	Dimstar	Sebastian	Ventura

Sector: Ares / Subsector: Tyber

