

THE VANG

THE MILITARY FORM

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BOOK ONE

THE SEED

CHAPTER ONE

THE DESOLATION WAS AS ENDLESS AS THE UNIVERSE itself. The tiny rescue pod, little more than a protective skin and respiration module, wallowed helplessly in the distant fringes of the asteroid belt of an insignificant orange sun.

As far as the Military Form could predict, the pod would continue to orbit there for as long as the solar system might last, which would be a long time, no matter which school of belief one might belong to concerning the structure and long-term future of the universe.

Unfortunately, the Military Form was built to survive. It could not contemplate suicide and it could live, if floating in the tiny pod could be called living, for just as long as the universe existed.

This brought on feelings close to despair when the Military Form contemplated certain cosmological possibilities. If the universe consisted solely of "remnant mass," left over from all-consuming gravitational contractions shortly after the big bang, then it was an "open" universe, and thus endless. The stars would eventually go out, the galaxies darken, and in the barren void it would float on, too far from anything else to effect a micron's worth of difference to the flow.

Twice, during the half-billion years that the pod had orbited there, it had passed within five million kilometers of another small body. With no motive power except muscles, and no spacesuit, the Military Form had not dared to strike out for either. It could survive in vacuum for a considerable time, but not if it had to adopt a form capable of work.

What made the situation irretrievably bitter was that the system boasted a life world, a bright fat disk that showed blue oceans in the telescope. A world that undoubtedly had host!

Host! it was enough to make even the Military Form quake with the wanting. But the water world was safe, and the Military Form could do no more than watch its bright disk and hunger for it.

Naturally, the Higher Form that the Military Form guarded within the pod, had gone into life suspension a long, long time ago, even before the pod had fallen into this solar system.

For this the Military Form was extremely thankful. Having the Higher Form awake with it, cooped up in the tiny pod, would have been miserable. Through many campaigns and innumerable victories, the Military Form had developed a powerful aversion to the complaining of higher forms.

In solitude therefore, the Military Form continued to obey its genetic compulsions, searching the surrounding space for close passing asteroids. Every so often it regenerated the optical surfaces of its telescopic limb to refresh the input. Other than that, it did little but breathe once a minute or so.

Its duty was to cling to life, no matter how bitter that might be. For all it knew, it was the very last of its race, the only survivor of the Gods of Axone-Neurone.

In the Saskatch colony district, located in the temperate sector of the northern hemisphere, it was late spring. Fine weather had brought a break in the clouds; the sun shone over the Elizabeth River Valley.

Way out in the backwoods of the Black Ruk Planetary Park the sound of a heavy motor cut the cool, humid air. In a ravine a little south of Mount Servus, a walker was groaning and shaking atop its long legs, stuck halfway up a sixty-degree slope.

In the cab, a forty-year-old drug smuggler named Carney Waxx cursed and screamed, banged his palms on the driving wheel and begged the walker to climb, at least to the safety of the thick stands of kinkpine that cloaked the ridge top.

On the computer's main screen the "predicted" radar trace continued to grow.

"C'mon baby, do it for Carney now. C'mon baby, do it or the law is gonna be on top of us and we are gonna be bare-ass naked and it's all over."

The machine growled. Pad-treads dug, dirt splattered.

"Come on!" howled Carney. "That damned chopper's almost on the horizon! If it spots us they'll impound you, baby! They'll strip your files and stick you in the mines."

The walker responded as if lashed. The 12-cylinder, 800-horsepower hydroburner coughed warm steam. The treads gripped, and the walker lurched upward, breaking down a pair of saplings to slide beneath the bigger trees.

Carney let out a little whoop of relief. He retracted the legs and sat tight with the engine off.

The distant Drug Enforcement Police chopper slid up the sky from the east. Slowly it drifted across the mountain's flank.

It passed across his route to the next fuel cache. He thought he saw it hesitate, slow down. He scarcely dared to breathe.

Slowly, ever so slowly, it moved away into the uplands of the plateau.

Carney cursed it all the way, but softly because you just never knew these days. The damn things carried such super-sensitive microphones they could pick up a fart at a thousand meters.

When it was finally beyond the mountain he let out a subdued cry of victory and rubbed his eyes.

This trip had been a nightmare! But the forty universal ounces of Tropic Acid 45 he had hidden aboard the walker would make up for all his trouble, if he could just make it the rest of the way.

Trouble was, even after three thousand five hundred kilometers of jungle, he had the worst three hundred and fifty clicks to go. The fringes around the colony were real dangerous these days.

First he had to get to the next fuel cache, a couple of kilometers away, hidden in a ravine on the flank of Mount Servus. The walker was running on empty; there was no telling if he could get there before it jammed to a halt. It was partly driven by software, and running out of gas while powered up screwed the motion interface something terrible. The fuel, stabilized hydrogen in a powdery conglomerate with a catalyte, burned clean of course, leaving no trace pollution for the DEP.

Carney ran a shaking hand through his hair, silver-blond stuff that got thinner all the time. He tried not to look at it in the mirror, tried not to think too much about the effect his life-style was having on his Extended Life Medical in general. He looked old for someone his age. His nerves were shot, it was plain. It was time he found another line of work.

But how the hell else was he going to make enough to get through the whole winter on TA45. That was the most important thing of all. "To sit in the House of Gold, in the blue radiance, to hear the sweet voice of the magical lands.."

That was why he'd quit his promising career down at the timber inspectorate. He didn't intend to spend his life sitting in a house of glass in downtown Beliveau City.

And since the DEP had completely shut down the aerial traffic, the walker jocks were the sole source of supply. And the whole human hegemony was howling for more TA45. What fool in his right mind wouldn't want "the heavens," all the time.

So prices had gone through any imaginable roof. One ounce of TA45 was worth seven figures of credit. The smuggling at the colony's spaceport had ballooned mightily.

If you wanted to ride the heavens on a more or less continuous basis, you needed a fortune. Or you could ride a walker across the continent and cut a deal with the dangerous people who lived wild in the tropical rain forest. Whole tribes of strange nomads roamed down there in the endless rain, tapping the megafungi trees. The tribes were always short of ammunition and medicine, and they gathered all the dankwood sap they could.

From the black sap of the dankwoods colossal puff-balls came Tropic Acid 45, the most pleasurable human hallucinogen ever discovered. In the universe of drugs that had been developed by humanity over the millennia, TA45 was a new supernova, attracting interest and money from all sides.

Organized human societies, however, could not tolerate TA45 abuse. The apathy, the insanity, eventually the crazed violence of the long-term abuser were political anathema. Police action against TA45 was mandated everywhere. Enforcement was the problem. Demand too great, the cash flow too enormous.

Still, the political pressure from offworld was so heavy that the Saskatchers simply had to keep a lid on things, thus the drive to get good video of walkers being run down and shot up by DEP helicopters.

What with the DEP, the unpredictable nomads that tapped the trees, and random menace from things like giant land crabs or bulmunk, it was getting downright nerve-racking walking TA45 back from the tropics.

Carney wondered how long he could keep doing it. It had been four years now, and seven successful trips.

While he wasn't in the big leagues with Cap'n Strider yet, he was well over the average mark. The odds were getting longer.

But if he made it all the way this time, he would deliver thirty-five universal ounces to the Fixer Brothers, who'd bankrolled the trip, and get to keep five ounces for himself. He could sell one and retire for three years of near-continuous bliss.

A couple of minutes after the chopper had gone, Carney extended the legs and lifted the cab up above the top of the dark little kinkpines.

The sky to the east was thickening. A cloud system was brewing up on the distant mountains. The promised storm from the Thompson glacier showing up at last? A storm would keep the choppers out of the air for a while.

He started the walker forward again, the computer guiding its steps through the forest, over boulders, down the steep slopes into the canyon below.

Not far from Carney, on the flank of Mount Servus, Rieben Arntage groaned softly when the faint sputter of the hydro burner shattered the peace of the long afternoon.

He swung around anxiously. Little Bruda Dara looked at him with horrified eyes. "A motor?" she whispered.

He nodded.

"Oh, damn them, what are they doing out here?"

"TA45, what else? It must be a smuggler, working his way through the Black Ruks after crossing the Thompson Plateau."

"By the sound of it he's coming right this way." Little Dara was on the verge of tears.

"And it took us so long to set up, everything's ready, they're going to breed, and now..."

The advancing hydrocarb burner revved and snorted, much louder now. It was climbing a defile somewhere.

With a loud bang and a curse in Wan Xo Chinese, two men jumped out of the photography hide.

"They're gone! They heard that engine, and the male dropped his crest. The female took fright, and they both flew away."

Sebastian Liesse, tall, pale, and lanky blonde, smote his fist into his palm. Yen Cho, stocky, Sino-Caucasian, simply shrugged expressively. Bruda burst into sobs.

"The best shots ever of the gray nightfeeder, and all ruined. We're a hundred kilometers from the nearest road. There's nothing up here, absolutely nothing, and we can't even get the quiet to take some bloody photos of the bloody gray nightfeeder."

The motor sound increased sharply. The damn thing was coming right their way, up onto the slope of Mount Servus.

Sebastian had gone to his pack and pulled out an automatic. "Just in case," he said, tucking it into the waistband of his camouflage pants.

CHAPTER TWO

THE SHIP WAS AN OLD K-CLASS CRUISER. LAID OUT ALONG a mile-long spine with the fusion drives at one end and the life-support torus at the other. In front of the rotating life-support zone an ablation shield of neutron-latticed rock capped the spine and protected the human cargo.

On the rotating torus were stenciled the ID numbers and the ship's name, Seed of Hope.

The ship had been smuggled into the Saskatch solar system aboard a Baada-drive interstellar jumper and assembled for an illegal prospecting mission. Three years had passed, three very profitable years for the heterogenous crewmembers of the Seed.

Now it cruised the outer margin of a moderately rich clump of asteroids. Beyond the last few rocks, the outer belt thinned to virtually nothing. The Seed was about finished on its quick, plundering mission for good-quality radioactives. The ship was due to return to the inner system for a pickup by another Baada-drive colossus. A moment that the crew was looking forward to after the confined tedium of three years.

They were somewhat incompatible people, the buccaneering, space trash Xermins, and the pompous, wealthy Beshwans, but their mutual lust for money had kept them from murdering one another. The Xermins handled matters spaceside, and the Beshwans handled the planetside and provided capital.

Still there were arguments, most frequently within the Beshwan family, which included not only Pramod and Ritilla but their only child, a daughter, Pandamon, aged nineteen. Daughters who were only children were very unusual among the members of Pramod and Tili's people, who followed the Refined Hindu Canon and exalted sons above daughters to a quite extraordinary degree. Pandi Beshwan was a problem in Pramod's eyes and was never shown much love or affection by her mother.

Somehow the indifference, even hostility from her parents had not warped her. For her age and situation she was a quiet, somewhat bored teenager, almost placid.

When her mother, Ritilla, got angry, she always started yelling. When she yelled Pandi grew sullen. Her defiance never failed to enrage Tili, who would say cruel things, disowning her child, damning her and all that she stood for.

Invariably the aftermath of such a scene required Pramod to have a long, soul searching talk with his daughter in his study. Pramod always had a study wherever he lived, a retreat from the gross world of materiality and women.

He would begin the talk seated behind his desk, and he would try and reason with his recalcitrant daughter.

Usually, a few minutes into the talk, Pramod would rise from his desk and begin shouting and waving his finger. Pandamon's refusal to take him seriously simply infuriated him.

The latest argument had been about pink socks, of all things, pink socks that Pandi had left in the "Hers" shower room. Tili was a fanatic for cleanliness, tidiness, and Hindu-ness. Pink socks violated her idea of normalcy on every count.

Now Pandi sat on the hand-carved Bombay chair while her father stood over her, his finger wagging in her face.

"You know that Mother did not mean to hurt you; she was upset. She hates those clothes you wear, you know perfectly well she does. Why you will not wear sari I do not understand. Your mother is unhappy enough, and you make her worse. We are struggling to recover our lost happiness, to get out of this useless system, and you are not helping."

"She hates me!" said Pandi Beshwan between gritted teeth. "It is quite difficult you know, when your own mother hates you. I don't think she should say those things to me."

Pramod stared at her with his usual mixture of perplexity and disgust. How he hated these emotional scenes, where women screamed and argued and then sulked and wept for hours. But he was trapped, locked up with them in extremely cramped quarters for three years now, hunting the wealth of the proscribed asteroid belt in the Barzap starsystem.

He struggled to bring his voice down and to control his hands, which had a tendency to flutter when he was angry.

"Look, my dear, you must realize that it is all because of the strain of this situation. We are not used to this sort of thing, your mother and I. She is an artist; it makes her very high-strung. You know how it is; we are desperately trying to recoup our fortune. We must go back, back to Nocanicus system where we belong, your mother and I."

"Saskatch is all right with me! Pandi smoothed her hands down the pant legs of her chebrans.

"Your mother can't stand to hear you talk like that, like a whiteskin buffoon. You are not like them! You are pure Hindi, you have caste! It is a sacred honor, a duty!" Pramod waxed like an angry brown moon, puffing himself up to his full six feet.

It never made sense, to her, of the millennia-old family traditions.

So Pramod was left on the verge of weeping with the sheer frustration of it all. All because of this damned, difficult child.

"It is heartbreaking to raise a child like you, Pandi."

She smiled and pressed her hands to her knees. "I am quite sure you never wanted me, Daddy."

"Don't say that!"

"Why not, when it's true. You never wanted a daughter. Mummy had me because she wanted to hurt you. She blamed you for losing all your money and having to come to Saskatch."

"Can I believe I am hearing this? How can you say these terrible things? How did I raise this daughter who so abuses me in this unnatural way?"

"It's the truth, don't bother to deny it. I will not be sad to say good-bye to you or Mummy. You weren't happy on Saskatch, but I was. You never had time for me, outside of your obsessions with the past. You want to go back to the world you left, but it's not a world that means anything to me. I like living on a planet, with real life all around me."

Pramod was nearly purple. "You are being ridiculous. There's only a few million people on Saskatch. How can you compare the life here with the life on one of the great habitats?"

Pandamon Beshwan tightened her full little lips and kept silent.

Pramod smote his forehead and strode gloomily around the narrow little storage room he called his study.

"For three whole years we are shut up in this tin can, wandering the void in a Proscribed Area, facing unimaginable dangers! And all so we can make enough so that we can get out of this hellhole system and go home to Nocanicus. And now our daughter tells us that she doesn't want to go back, that she's content living out a pauper's lifestyle here on this white-skinned frontier world."

Pandi shrugged.

CHAPTER THREE

DESPITE THEIR ISOLATION IN THE DEPTHS OF THE ASTEROID belt, Pramod Beshwan insisted on maintaining the rhythms of family life, as laid down in the Refined Hindu Canon.

One of the firm rules of the Beshwan household was the retention of family meals, especially "dinner," the last meal of the waking watch, which was often preceded by a little ceremony of sacrifice and purity in the tiny shrine to Shiva, established in one corner of the family living room.

On this particular occasion dinner was a curry of concentrate, served over hydroponic rice with chapatis and hot spiced pickles on the side.

Dinner was also highly spiced with angry emotion. Tili Beshwan could barely bring herself to sit at the same table with her daughter. But since it was Pramod's wish that she keep silent, she did. They must make the semblance of a family; that much was essential.

Pandi however was abrasively lighthearted about things, referring happily to her future life on Saskatch, alone. "I want to go to Saskatch U. Take a business course."

"Listen to that," said Tili, provoked at last, but speaking to Pramod as if Pandi were not really there. "She wants to go to the bush-planet university and learn the logging business. How wonderful, and she'll turn down the chance to go to Nocanicus University, to live on Hyperion Grandee itself."

Now she turned to face Pandi and drew a finger through the air for emphasis. "One of the great universities in the human sphere, a university to be mentioned in the same breath as those of Earth itself!" Tili folded a chapati around some hot pickle. "And equipped with one of the best psychoholo departments anywhere."

"Oh, Mother, I know how proud you are of your education, and I'm sure you had a great life at Nocanicus University, but you've got to understand that I'm not you. I want to go to Saskatch U. and then I want to live on Saskatch. I don't care about glamorous spacehabs like Hyperion Grandee. I don't care about the art world either."

Tili did not appear to recognize that her daughter was speaking to her.

Angered, Pandi selected the dagger she had never used, never dared even to show her mother, throughout the years they had warred. "And anyway, I think your kind of superholo image is overdone to the point of being silly and ugly. Who cares about the abstractions of Thinth Space corners? The emotional content of balloons? It's all shit, Mother, absolute stupid shit."

Tili froze, her eyes rigid like glass marbles, unseeing in this moment of exquisite horror. Then she picked up her plastic beaker of tea and threw it at Pandi. "You are a disgrace! Get out of my sight! Get out! Get out!"

Pandi ducked, then looked to her father, but Pramod merely stared back at her, struck silent by mortification.

Tili stood up and cuffed Pandi across the top of the head, the girl ducked away from further blows, dislodging a tray of condiments that fell, scattering, to the floor. Brilliant yellow pickled cauliflower dappled the blue perfection of Tili's favorite Nocanicus rug, a real silk Yang from Heaven abounds habitat.

Tili screamed horribly.

At which point the communications screen in the wall module activated and Roger Xermin's beefy, pink face suddenly filled the screen. Xermin was enormously excited. "Pramod!" He bellowed. "Prraaaamo-o-d, we're rich, we're richer than we ever dreeeaamedd."

Tili stuffed a napkin into her mouth to stifle her screams, which continued in a low undertone gurgle.

Beshwan struggled to find words.

Xermin's blue eyes danced madly. "Pramod! Come on down here, take a look at the scope findings! You won't believe your fucking eyes!"

Finally Pramod exploded. "Xermin, do not use that disgusting language in front of my wife and daughter!"

Xermin blinked at him, startled into a rare silence.

"It is most inappropriate for you to be calling at this time. You know how much importance I give to the stability of our family life."

Xermin swallowed, grinned broadly. He knew all about the quality of Beshwan family life. "Pramod, wait till you see what we've found. Look, I'll show you."

But Pramod was beyond listening. "Later, it will have to wait." Pramod turned off the communications station. The screen went dark.

Pandi jumped to her feet. "But, Daddy, what if it's important?"

Pramod turned back to his daughter. "It can hardly be that important, not when compared with your dreadful manners and infuriating rudeness."

"Oh, Daddy, you're impossible. Turn the screen back on. I want to see what it is that Xermin's found."

"Be silent. Can't you see your mother is weeping. Look what you have done."

The sight of the horrid yellow cauliflower pickles staining her beautiful rug had sent Tili to the couch, where she huddled, weeping loudly.

For a moment Pandi felt a certain sense of doubt and self-reproach, Was she being a monster? Really? She searched for the feelings of love she should have toward her mother, but nothing was there. Somebody was a monster in this situation, but who? Not being absolutely sure made her sad and furious with herself. She started to cry.

Then the scene was interrupted by a thunderous knocking on the outer door of the Beshwan family suite.

Dimly they could hear Xermin shouting to them.

Impulsively, barely able to see through the blurring tears, Pandi went to open the door. Pramod ordered her to stop, but she ignored him.

Xermin burst in, laughing and hooting in triumph, patting her on the head, helping himself to a glass of water.

Ignoring Pramod's protests he went over and switched on the main TV screen, then held up his glass and toasted it.

"Look what we dug up on the scope! About six days away as well, if we get ourselves up to two gee immediately, which I think we should."

On the screen floated something incredible, something beyond price.

The Beshwans stared.

This was no radioactives-rich asteroid rock. It was smooth, artificial, like a silvery pumpkin the height of a man, floating against the black velvet of deep space.

"What is it?" breathed Pramod.

"Alien manufacture of some sort. Computer gives that a very high probability. Isn't it beautiful? No

matter what it is, I guarantee you that it will fetch us more credit than everything we've found so far."

Pandi stared at the thing; it had an organic look that made it seem far more like a seed than the Seed of Hope. It would make them rich.

CHAPTER FOUR

IN PANDI BESHWAN'S OPINION, TALL, BLOND SALLY XERMIN was the only other bearable person aboard the Seed of Hope. So for the big boost, or "long drag" as spacers called it, Pandi rode with Sally in the Xermin's quarters.

"I simply couldn't bear to listen to any more of my mother's groaning and moaning. You know how bad she is during acceleration!"

Sally gave a little laugh. To go with her blue-eyed, button-nosed good looks, Sally had an eternally cheerful disposition, a necessity, as she called it, for being married to a "crazy, mad-bastard piece of space trash" like Roger Xermin, for fifteen years.

She cycled the entertainment screens to the new episode of "Antares Home." The credits rolled. She gave Pandi a smile. "I'll take a little acceleration if it gets me as rich as I think I deserve to be."

"You really think this thing will make us rich?"

"Well, dear, we're already loaded. Roger says we have enough radioactives packed away to pay for the trip ten times over. Enough for us all to go back to Nocanicus if we want. So if this pumpkin thing turns out to be something, we might all become quite wealthy."

"Uh, huh." Pandi stretched her leg muscles. It was really a drag feeling twice as heavy as normal.

"I don't know about you," said Sally, "but I'd very much like to be rich after all these years of bumming around the systems."

"When I get back to Saskatch I'm going to establish Adult Status and then I'm going to buy my own house, out in Boldover somewhere, and then I'm going to start my own business."

Sally laughed; the kid had big ideas. "And then you'll get the man of your dreams, right?"

"Well, that would be nice, but I'm not sure there's just one man for me. But I'll get somebody, a physical kind of man, someone like a logger or timber-walker." And Tili and Pramod would be out of her life at last—a wonderful thought.

"Antares Home" came up, the images enhanced by the computer after being picked up from the Saskatch Orbiter.

Today all the guys who counted—that was Rik, Givestro, and Lucio—were dressed as girls, so they could hide in the maternity ward where Sherli was expecting her baby. Meanwhile, Candi and Joarn were dressing as men, so they could enter the Big Truck contest out at the City Limit.

Pandi sank back, letting the cushioning prop her against the relentless two-gee drag. She felt warm, and expectant. She giggled; she was identifying with Sherli or something weird.

The Seed drove forward across the near emptiness of the outer belt.

The headquarters of the Saskatch Colony Police were in a pedestrian blue-glass box on Antoine's Boulevard in downtown Beliveau City, the largest urb on Planet Saskatch, with a met area population of four hundred thousand people, spread out over twenty thousand square miles of the Beliveau Valley.

Colonel Henri Tusseau, commanding officer of the Saskatch Drug Enforcement Police, and second in command of the Saskatch Police Force System, sat behind his black oak desk and let his visitor blow off

some of the steam so obviously built up between the big pink ears.

Lieutenant Johan Griks, a veteran of three years with the Military Arm, didn't hold much back either. "Two men dead, sir. Security breach, sir, for the goddamn tenth time this year. That's eight deaths now, sir, all in the same goddamn situation, sir. There's a spy inside the DEP, who has access to operations secrets and sells them to the smugglers. It's as clear as the fact that those men are dead! And I still don't hear a word out of you, sir, about doing something about this!"

Oh dear. Tusseau wrapped his long, pianist's fingers across his hefty tummy. He was glad he'd had lunch before this little engagement. It gave him a firm, warm feeling. The wine had been excellent, and the poached game crabs had been delicious.

How young Griks ranted and raved. How he went on. How embarrassing it all was. "Look, young man, this is a complex situation. You ought to know that by now. There are a lot of things going on that we can't do anything about."

Griks went purple. Stood up, spoke in a furious voice. "What is this? Am I crazy, sir, or am I talking to a wall?" Griks gesticulated furiously with his long, pale arms. "Ten times this year our operatives have found themselves under the gun when we went in for a big buy. Ten cases, all set up in Spacetown, all connected to the 'big boys' down there. Now is that a coincidence, sir, or is that murder, sir?"

Tusseau tried not to move; one must never give an inch, never show fear. You had to stare these wild ones down. "Now, Lieutenant, I understand the reasons for this outburst, and I agree that it appears that some unfortunate mistakes have been made. But this is a risky game we have to play. In Spacetown we don't have full authority. Spacetown police are totally corrupt; there's no way around that."

"That's crabshit, sir! At least five of those operations were deep secret, level three. Nobody in Spacetown police should have known about them. We're dealing with a leak from this building, sir, from our own goddamn side!"

"Sit down, Lieutenant Griks!" Tusseau moved to reassert authority. One had to play Griks carefully; he was a wild bull, with a bull's energies, and a bull's wit. Once deflected he could be sent hurtling down harmless paths until he exhausted himself and his rage. "You know as well as I do, Lieutenant, that what goes on in Spacetown is all part of bigger games off planet, games we don't know anything about—level seven secrets, Planetary Governors and Elected Presidents Only, that kind of stuff—and we don't have full authority in Spacetown because the offworlders won't give up their control there. So we can't stop the smuggling inside—it's impossible given the value of the merchandise."

"I know that, sir!"

"So we have to play it carefully when we have operatives working under cover inside Spacetown."

Tusseau had hardened his voice. Taken on an accusing tone.

"What does that mean, sir?"

"That sloppy planning is what's responsible, really. That and some dumb stunting pulled by operatives who refuse to obey the rules."

Griks's eyes popped. "Sir, that is a cruel joke; that is a travesty! Those missions were the result of a lot of hard police work. Our teams set them up immaculately. We had experienced, high-quality smugglers coming in to sell. We had video, audio, samples in personal possession, virtual confessions in some cases. All down the tubes, ten times."

Tusseau cast a weary eye to the ceiling. How boring this infantile youth was. But they needed him. He was so blatantly honest that he was invaluable to the shaky credibility of the entire DEP downtown section. And this kind of unshakable stupidity was essential when it came to sending someone to defuse the offworlders at police conferences.

In fact there was now about forty-five grand a week in Universal Credit Units, coming out of the current "contracts" with the gangs in Spacetown and BV City. The cut for the "Top Table" headed up by Police Chief Gaspard Beliveau had swollen to five thousand UCU apiece, or about half of their annual official salaries. And that was just UCU; he wasn't including the freelance, the deals in TA45 itself. Tusseau knew well that at least half of his downtown unit were regular users. If pressed they would even say that the drug made them better cops, that they thought more clearly under the influence.

Griks raved on. Tusseau tried not to show too much impatience. It was true that some operatives paid for it all with their lives. Necessary casualties in the war with the Offworld Drug Authorities who demanded more action in shutting down the flow of TA45 through the spaceport.

"Johan, Johan, look," he expostulated—it was time to deflect the bull, "if we wanted to try and shut things out we would shut down the spaceport completely. But every grain company demands a separate launch window, and they put in the ships to go with that window. What does that suggest to you, eh? We ship grain cargos by Baada drive to Nocanicus and some other nearby corporate systems. But that trade could really be handled pretty much the way it used to be, thirty years ago. Five ships a year, five crops a year. One big ship for each big crop. Now what do we have? We have three hundred ships a year, and dozens of small ships leaving for the space station every day. Thousands of opportunities to smuggle out."

He had Griks's attention. The head was lowered, the picks in place. "So what would happen if we shut down the spaceport trade entirely?"

Griks smouldered. Tusseau continued, calmly, as if lecturing a child. "We'd have a thousand illegal landing sites. The ITAA would lose control of near-orbital space altogether, and then we'd have no way to even regulate the trade. Eventually things would get so bad that the offworlders would interdict us, they'd shut us off, total quarantine. You know how it is, all or nothing with them; it's the only way they can ever reach agreements. Just think back to the ITAA itself."

Griks listened although he had the feeling that he was having warm goo poured over him from an endless vat.

Now he knew that Tusseau was in on it; the corruption was right there in the room. But the Tusseaus were a powerful family, one of the mightiest in the colony, so he hunched his shoulders and refrained from administering the punishment so richly deserved, because if he slugged him that would be it and Johan would be out of a job and he'd have to go back to the tundra farm. And that he'd sworn he'd never do.

His brother could handle the farm; Johan wanted more, and to start with he wanted this Tusseau, and as many of the others as he could get. But, you had to stalk such game very carefully, had to stay well upwind. So he continued to wear the mask of stupidity, continued to hunch his shoulders while the warm goo was poured.

Later—it seemed to take an eternity—he got out of Tusseau's office. It felt cleaner in the elevator, and a lot cleaner still, once he was back on his own floor.

The corruption was devouring the little frontier planet.

Millions of thrill seekers wanted TA45 and would spend anything to get it. The Saskatchers were all too happy to be bought.

There were two hundred thousand legal Saskatch residents with ITAA registration. And now there were three million illegals, each of whom had paid heavily for a faked residency permit. TA45 exports and illegal immigrant imports—together they had made the elite families incredibly rich and powerful.

In his office his assistants were waiting for him. Constables Young and Moulin, a pair of bright-eyed college kids from Blue Lake, rushed with him through the corridors to the garage car pool. A big, old-fashioned, blue groundcar was waiting for them.

Nicola Moulin had given him a gray folder to refresh his memory about the inspection procedures that

had to be followed at the spaceport that day. He flipped through the folder as the car headed north on the bridge road and crossed the Elizabeth River, wide and gray, into the old town with its blocky stone buildings, wooden porches, gray-slate roofs.

They passed within a block of the old police building, a four-floor stone block, with slit windows and metal grills that loomed over the old houses along this stretch of Cotes des Neiges Avenue. It had been designed as an urban fortress; the early colony had been an unruly place, and heavily armed gangs of bandits and woodsmen had sometimes gone there to forcibly eliminate their legal problems.

They passed some laborers filling potholes along Cotes des Neiges, and then climbed the ramp to the modern elevated highway that ran along the top of Beliveau Heights, with the towers and spires of the Chaebol city around the spaceport looming ahead.

The highway bore the grandiose title, "Trans Colony Highway," but it was a joke highway, existing inside the city limits. Even there the sections were unconnected, stopped dead by the environmentalists' lobby.

From the folder Griks noted that they were supposed to inspect all twenty-four blast-pan sites that day. In addition they were to check all the official interior structures. This was standard ITAA practice for a small installation, and it conveniently ignored the fact that Saskatch spaceport was large enough for a Class A rating.

"So is it 'go,' boss?" Constable Young asked when Griks finished with the folder.

"Yeah," he answered slowly, "it's on. It goes all the way up, who knows how far."

They slid beneath the spires of Spacetown, with its glittering hotels, flashing casino signs, all the trademarks of massive, unregulated colony development.

"We'll find out how far, I know we will," said Nicola Moulin. Her brother had died in a covert operation five years previously; Griks was sure he could trust Nicola with his life.

Then the car pulled up the ramp into the spaceport terminal, a U-shaped five-story structure in functional concrete and glass, that appeared to crouch in front of the four glass towers that had been built directly opposite it on the other side of the portal access road.

They climbed out into the hubbub of the terminal. There were three liftings in the next hour; hundreds of passengers and their bags were being moved through.

The well-greased official from the ITAA was waiting, a smiling plump fellow, with his green uniform pressed immaculately.

Griks gritted his teeth. More than even Colonel Tusseau, he hated this man, Captain Auguste Darnay, an ITAA Planet Rank, the officer in nominal control of the spaceport.

Darnay was the fourth of the Planet Ranks that Griks had known in his years on the force. They came, they got very rich, very fast, and they went away again, creatures of unknowable offworld manipulations.

Darnay was a man fond of good food; every time Griks saw him the captain tried to invite him out to lunch, or dinner, or both.

"Lieutenant Griks, welcome once again." Darnay knew better than to offer his hand; Griks always treated him with the same disdain.

"I do hope we can cut this short today," said Darnay with an oily smile. "I'm sure you've got much more important things to do, shootouts and battles and so on. You and your unit are such modern-day heroes, Lieutenant, aren't you?"

With a grim little smile Griks informed the ITAA captain that he absolutely intended to inspect each

and every one of the blast-pan sites and that he and his staff were armed, and that he doubted whether they'd be breaking for any kind of lunch that day.

Captain Darnay swallowed and groaned. He pulled out his communicator and informed his aides that he would be accompanying Lieutenant Griks on an inspection of all the blast-pan sites, beginning with Number One.

As he switched off he imagined the panic that piece of news would ignite. A lot of packages would have to be hidden, unauthorized personnel dispersed. It was going to be one hellish, uncomfortable day.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE WALKER WAS BURNING THE VERY LAST DREGS OF Hydropowder when it crept down the slope and into the narrow, overhung ravine that cut through the basalt flanks of the mountain. From a distance, everything seemed secure. Carney had the computer analyzing the images as they came in; nothing had triggered any alarms yet.

Still, this was the riskiest time. The last cache before he got home to Boldover. He'd cached way up here, because it just wasn't safe in the southern part of the park anymore. Hundreds of bandits combed the approaches to Beliveau City, hunting the walkers, and a cache was a perfect place for an ambush.

The walker picked its way down the slope, revving back, tanks virtually empty.

Carney hesitated; fifty meters more and he was there.

Did he commit? There didn't appear to be any danger. He sent the machine forward.

At the bottom of the ravine a small rivulet wound through pools worn in the volcanic rock. The northern bank had been undercut, forming a shallow cave. Under the black sand along the wall of the cave, Carney had buried his hydro cans. In the deepest part of the cave a black perma tent blended in nicely with the dark slate walls. It was invisible from the air, even from the top of the canyon, from anywhere in fact except the bottom of the ravine.

All was looking good.

The walker crept in under the rock and idled, its motor expired with a gasp.

Carney let out a little whistle of relief. "Made it, baby. Let's see about that refueling now." He opened the cab and stepped out. It felt great to be able to stretch his legs, exercise his back, move his arms up and down.

He had his sidearm strapped to his thigh, with the retainer clip off. Carney was a quick hand with a gun, and he carried a big WAK .55 magnum. Slug carried enough punch to penetrate military-grade body armor. Heck he'd even seen a charging gigacrab stopped dead by one shot.

Still there was no sign that the cache had been visited.

The alarms were still set.

Carney pulled a small trench tool out of the cab of the walker and dug up the cans of hydro. He attached the pumpers and sank their nozzles into the walker's fuel intake.

While the walker guzzled gas, Carney strolled down the rivulet a few meters, to a point where it dropped over a waterfall twenty-meters high and sank into lush forest on the lower slope. An opening through the kinkpines there allowed a view across the Lisette River to the plains of the Beliveau Valley.

Some carrion feeders were spiraling far off on his right, to the north. Beyond them the Black Ruks continued to tower: Mount Abner, then Mount Galors and the dim, distant crag of Ravenhook.

He was thirsty and hot and hungry and grievously in need of a wash, but for a moment Carney hungered for just standing and stretching and breathing in the mountain air.

The view was inspiring. Philosophically you had to admit that though the gig was getting far too dangerous, it also took you through some beautiful country. The air up here was so fresh, the sun shone, the trees whispered in the breeze... He breathed it all in.

An ominous buzz broke the peace of the mountains. He looked up instantly.

An inch-long redfly had swooped into the clearing, was circling, drawn by the smell of sweat.

Carney backed slowly up the ravine to the perma tent. The damned redfly was a big one, and they were terrific biters. Redfly were actually flying crabs the size of hummingbirds, who drank blood the way hummingbirds drank nectar. Their bite was like being jabbed with a small hypodermic. The welts they left were the size of tennis balls and lasted for weeks.

The redfly was swinging up the canyon in big questing loops, seeking the scent. Carney backed away, hand outstretched behind him for the wall of the cliff.

The blasted redfly had his scent! It swung toward him, buzzing excitedly, and he batted it aside with his fist. It buzzed angrily and extruded its centimeter-long proboscis and came back at him. He knocked it away with his boot when it came in low. It circled, then tried again. Carney missed, the fly swooped, he ducked, and it buzzed along his ear and fell away.

Carney broke and ran for the tent. He had to crawl the last couple of yards under the overhang. There was a loud buzz of triumph—the damn thing was on his neck! He ducked and scabbled frantically at it, felt it on his fingers for a moment, and then there was an angry buzz and he was inside the perma tent and had the doorflap slapped shut. With an audible thump the redfly landed on the outside. Determinedly it stabbed away at the door. He watched with little trembles of horror as the brown proboscis punched through the flap.

He felt weak, sick to his stomach.

Then he felt a cold metal object press into the back of his neck, and a deep voice grated in his ear. "Don't move a muscle, my friend. Just put hands behind back, otherwise I'll be forced to just blow your head off and take my time finding your load."

Carney groaned. Suckered. He'd even bet this bandit had released that redfly.

The gun barrel prodded harder. "Hurry up!"

Carney did as he was told.

Handcuffs clicked into place. The WAK .55 magnum was pulled from his holster.

"Outside now."

"Hey, there's a goddamn redfly out there." Getting taken like a sucker was one thing, being sucked dry by a redfly was another.

"I know." The voice chuckled. "Don't worry, I'll take care of that."

The door flap swung open. Carney was pushed outside. The redfly was still buzzing in circles around the clearing.

Carney turned, finally got a look at his captor, felt his heart sink another notch. He was the prisoner of Mad Yagu, a wide-faced Sino-Caucasian bastard, a legend among the bandits of Spacetown. Carney had seen Yagu many a time, drinking it up with his equally horrid cronies in the big Spacetown bars, like the Toxi and the Kaizer's. Yagu never touched TA45; he was an anachronism, he liked booze and women.

Yagu was wearing a green-gray camouflage suit and a bush hat. On the brim Carney saw a pair of tubes and a couple of hawkwasps crouched in their usual manner, with the thick black wings drawn up to their heads in an uncanny imitation of a tiny terrestrial vulture at rest.

The hawkwasps spied the redfly and were off in a flash, in a moment they formed a fury of buzzing wings around the redfly.

"You see," said Yagu, "I take care of everything. Now you show me where your stuff is hidden, or I kill you and take a little longer to find it."

The redfly was dead. The hawkwasps now cooperated in butchering it, severing those parts that they ate and removing them, then flying with them up to the branches of a nearby donkey tree where they settled to feed. When they'd finished they would return to their roost tubes on Yagu's hat.

A scavenger crab ran out of the underbrush and dragged away most of the remainder of the redfly. Carney felt sick. Caught so damn easily, after slogging for so far in that damned walker. The trip had become a total disaster!

Yagu prodded him forward to the side of the walker.

The refueling was almost complete. Carney couldn't help but feel bitter. Busted, probably dead, when he'd been so close to a big score.

Yagu wore a strange little smile; he extended the gun and pointed it right at Carney's head.

"Come on, walker-boy, tell me where it is."

Carney had opened his mouth to tell him when a gun shot echoed, a bullet whined off the rock above their heads, and they both jumped.

Yagu whirled around, dropped into a firing crouch, fired, the gun booming. Bullets zinged off the rocks farther up the ravine.

Carney looked the other way, and his eyes widened.

A slim young man in brown woods gear stood swinging an axe handle in both hands. He seemed to have come from nowhere.

The next moment he'd rapped Yagu sharply over the head and dumped him unconscious on the ground.

"All secure!" the youth shouted. On his bush hat three hawkwasps rode unconcerned through the turmoil, their wings hunched.

More people, in brown woods suits, with packs and camera equipment on their backs, emerged into the space around the walker.

"Looks like we got here just in time, eh?" said one of the people, an older gent in a very expensive cut of woods suit. The marks of Ultraextended Life were obvious all over the fellow.

"Hey, uh, thanks," Carney managed to say, though his knees felt like they might buckle at any moment.

"We couldn't allow a murder, you see," said the other in a calm, mildly pompous way. He inspected Carney with a curiously penetrating glance, seemed to see right through him.

"However, we don't intend to let you take your shipment any farther. So... if you'll cooperate and tell us where it's hidden we'll destroy it and be on our way."

Carney choked, then scoffed. "Oh yeah, tell me about it, man. Destroy it! You just want it for yourself. Admit it. At least be honest thieves since thieves is what you is."

The gent with the ExtraLife look smiled again. "Sebastian, I'm afraid our friend here isn't going to cooperate."

The young man turned around from inspecting the walker; he wore an unfriendly expression. "You know this walker is totally illegal out here in the planetary park don't you?"

"What?" said Carney.

"I think it's our duty to make sure that the machine is deactivated right here and now. Stop this damage to the ecosystem. So I'm going to dump the computer files, put the software on a disk, and leave the machine here for the park rangers to deal with."

Carney groaned. "Oh, man, no, don't do that. You're killing me, man, I gotta get all the way back to Boldover."

"Boldover, huh? Another Boldover walker jock. You guys are the limit."

"It's a living," said Carney defensively.

The girl grimaced. "If you call that living, lying around zonked."

"Hey! You never tried it, sister. You should; it'd change your views."

"No, thank you," she said coldly. "My brother does enough of it for both of us. He's about as interesting as a patch of spinach these days."

Carney sniffed, turned away from her. Self-appointed saviors were pretty common.

The one called Sebastian and the Chinese one were getting ready to dump the walker's controlling software. Without it there was no chance of getting the ungainly machine ten kilometers through this kind of country let alone the two hundred or so that still lay before him.

"Hold it. What if I tell you where it is."

Sebastian turned around with a big smile. "Well, that would be a different matter. A cooperative walker jock, now that would make it easier for us to forget about this machine's being in the park."

A few minutes later Carney watched in dumb despair as they opened the hidden compartments in the side walls of the walker and pulled out several thick plastic bags, liquid TA45 in a sixty-percent solution.

Meanwhile, the girl and the older man had been cutting brush, which they soaked well with some lighter fluid. They laid the plastic bags over the wood and set fire to it.

Carney watched in considerable despair as the wood caught fire and began to blaze. The bags melted, their contents spilled out into the flame and were consumed, forming a nauseating smoke with a strange scent. What was he going to say to the Fixers?

The smoke continued. They cut him free, and revived Yagu the Mad, who stumbled away into the forest.

"If I were you," the older man said "I'd get the hell out of this planetary park now and don't ever let us clap eyes on you again." The blond fellow even returned his magnum, without bullets.

Then the brown-suited folks disappeared, leaving him with the fire and the refueled walker.

CHAPTER SIX

THE ANALYSIS OF THE SMALL SAMPLE BROUGHT BACK from the surface of the silvery pumpkin was displayed on the main computer screen. Gathered in front of it were the Xermins and the Beshwans. Everyone wanted to stare at the silver pumpkin, two meters across, that floated against the starfields.

The material of the surface was extremely tough and hard to penetrate. The crawler had only managed to gouge a few molecules out of it with its hardest cutting blade.

From what could be determined from this tiny amount of evidence the computer software projected the surface to be made of an unknown class of ceramic, possibly a poly-ceram, duodec matrix. The molecules fitted perfectly but slid over each other at maximum stress. It was nearly impossible to cut.

Roger Xermin shrugged. "I don't think we can make much of a decision yet. It's hard to get much of a handle on it with this little data."

The Beshwans were scared to death. The thing glittered so, there was something uncanny about it.

"How did it get here?" said Pandi. "How could anything so obviously technological wind up out here in the asteroid belt of a system that has never had a technical civilization as far as we know."

"It's not from this system, Pandi. It's from outside," said her mother, tightening the grip of her arms around herself.

"Then it's come a jolly long way," giggled Sally Xermin.

Pramod Beshwan had a heavy frown on his face. The pumpkin made him very uneasy. "Don't you see, Roger, this is what the Proscription is all about. This could be some kind of bomb, it certainly doesn't seem to have doors or openings of any kind. If we try to open it, we may set it off!"

Xermin shrugged. "I don't exactly see how we're going to 'open it.' Maybe it's solid, have you thought of that?"

Beshwan hadn't.

"Well anyway I don't think it is solid. Nor do I think it's a bomb, looks too pretty to be a bomb."

"Too pretty?" Pramod squeaked indignantly. How he hated this business; the damn thing made him very uneasy. "Roger, this thing should be reported to the authorities. This is exactly what the Proscription is about."

But Xermin was intent on asking the computer what the likelihood was of the pumpkin being a solid. The reply was an almost immediate negative—"Probability Status very low."

"Right, common sense tells you that it isn't a solid. I mean what could it be, a big bar of soap? Gotta be a container for something, but what?" He grinned, sharkish, alive, the Xermin—a legend in several starsystems, at least in his own mind.

Pramod groaned and put his hands over his eyes.

"Look," Roger continued, "I want to set some micro-charges on it and see if we can blow a hole through that outer skin. If we can then I propose investigating further. With maximum caution, of course."

Pramod gave a little scream of horror. Xermin was mad! Determined to blow them to atoms. "What if it is a bomb you fool! You set off a charge and it will explode."

Roger laughed. "I'm not proposing to stay here while it goes off Pramo. I'll be quite happy to haul away ten or even twenty-million clicks if that'll satisfy you. No nuclear weapon this size could possibly harm us if we're ten-million clicks away from here when it goes off. I mean, we got some pretty good shielding on the Seed."

That much was true; they did have the maximum ablation shield.

Beshwan however was still agitated.

"But, Roger, remember the Proscription, man. This is exactly what it's about. The War of the Starhammer, the original war I mean, long, long ago. When it was first built."

Xermin waved a hand in dismissal. "The Proscription is the work of a bunch of bureaucrats, a lot of nervous nellies, grounders all. Got about as much guts as a handful of peanuts. Come on, Pramod."

"But, Roger, that ancient war was fought with terrifying technologies. If this is a bomb from that war, it could be some kind of system-destroying device."

Roger chuckled indulgently.

"Look, Pramod, I know about nukes. You'd think you'd remember that. I spent five years working with Nuke charges for ice engineering, so I know a few things about explosives. And nothing this size could harm us if we're ten-million clicks away, not even hi-grade phoenix fusion devices could do that. Not that size, anyway. So let's stop worrying about it."

Beshwan waved his hands to regain the initiative. "Roger, no! Listen to me, think of the Hammer, my friend. Everyone knows what that can do."

Xermin nodded at that. "Sure, tipped over the Laowon for us. Ended the Tyranny. It's been a lot better ever since. Better for them, too, I'd say. At least they have a variety of government types now the Empire has dissolved."

"Yes, of course it was good for us, Roger, but the Hammer—the Hammer sends stars into nova. It was the ultimate weapon against star-dependent lifeforms."

"The Starhammer is also several kilometers long and high. This is no bigger than a big roid charge."

Beshwan's expression made Roger snort impatiently. "Look we'll stand off twenty-million clicks if you like. No nuclear device known could harm us much at that distance. And then we'll blow a hole in it and then we'll watch it and then if it doesn't explode we'll come back and have a look at it."

Beshwan wriggled. "I do not like this, Xermin. It is exactly this sort of object that the Proscription is against. We don't know what's in there, what it is, what it might do."

"Well if you think anything's alive in that, don't worry, it'll be dead long before we get close. We're going to puncture that thing; I want it opened to vacuum, that'll sterilize it."

Beshwan still wriggled. "But what if it's a work of art, some priceless treasure from a long vanished civilization? And you dynamite it?!"

Beshwan raised his hands as if to ward off the scornful gaze of Shiva. Could he accept the guilt that came with this terrible burden? How could he live with the defilement of such corruption of spirit?

"If it's a work of art then we'll be extremely wealthy folks afterwards."

"But what if it shatters?"

"Software says it's unlikely to. The surface is crystallated, but the shape is so complex, with those heavily fractalized curvatures, that it can only be a thin layer. Underneath there must be something more flexible, so a microcharge should just poke a drill hole through and let the air out."

Xermin swung a screen wand, tapped his hand with it. "And exterminate anything nasty that might be inside it with the cleansing power of pure vacuum."

"What if it explodes?"

"Well, in that case we'll have blown our best chance of founding financial dynasties. We'll just have to settle for being rich, not fabulously wealthy."

Beshwan had another worry. "It could easily be detected."

"Mmmm..." Xermin thought it over then shook his head. "Nope, there isn't much to look at in this quadrant of the sky. We've got no big planet anywhere near where it would have to be to get any astronomy buffs on Saskatch looking out this way. And we're too far for any satellite around Saskatch to

pick up more than a burst of static."

Roger nodded some more, with heavily pursed lips. "No, we're too far for casual detection, I'd say. But if it is a bomb, some warhead lying around after that weird old war"—he chuckled—"I ask you, could there be anything crazier than that war, frogs against jellyfish, wasn't it? A billion years ago, too! I mean, if this is some kind of bomb, then we'll have done our duty in destroying it. If they call us on it, if they notice it way out here, then we'll just say it blew up as we approached, for no reason, that we were scarcely aware of it before it blew."

Beshwan wrestled with this. But he knew that if it were some work of art or a piece of alien technology then they were fabulously wealthy.

He and Tili would be able to afford megahabitat lifestyle when they got back to Nocanicus. The ultimate dream of fabulous wealth, a private estate, hundreds of square miles in extent aboard one of the luxury megahabs.

Pramod had always dreamed of a space on one of the Marwar habitats. Marvelous re-creations of ancient India, with slave clones instead of the untouchables and forty-square kilometers per person. He would keep a white mare and ride her through his own park. Tili could build her Taj Mahal, he his Red Fort. They would be legendary in their own times. A couple who had come back from economic exile on the frontier and stormed the heights of society in the Hindi milieu of Nocanicus.

He had defiled himself in joining with Roger Xermin three years before, and he agonized endlessly over it. But to have continued as the manager of a tree farm in the boondocks of Saskatch colony would have been a kind of death for him. And this was a great chance, a chance that could only come once in a lifetime. If he'd turned it away he might never have had another and would have ended his days, early, in brutish circumstances, on a dim frontier planet.

So Pramod had joined. So he was here. So there was no end to the impurity, the disgusting acts that he must do in order to redeem himself in his own world, the world of "illusion."

So they would do as Xermin desired. If Xermin was right then it would be to the good.

The crawler was loaded and sent across to the pumpkin. It placed three micro charges, the second and third set to blow only if the first failed.

The crawler was retrieved. A small drone with sensor equipment was dropped. The Seed of Hope got underway on booster rockets and then swung around and ignited main drives and pulled away from the pumpkin, ahead of it and above it in the ecliptic.

When they were far enough away, they detonated the microcharge and watched the result via the TV from the drone: The charge produced a puff of dust as it opened a small hole, and there was a sharp release of vapor. The drone collected samples. The gases included oxygen, carbon dioxide, carbon monoxide, nitrogen, hydrogen, and some exotic organic chemicals including amino acids.

They waited, their eyes glued to the pumpkin. Seconds ticked away, and slowly they released a collective breath. It wasn't going to explode.

"It's not a bomb!" shouted Xermin happily. "You see, Pramo, I was right, it's not a bomb!"

Indeed the silvery pumpkin had neither exploded nor imploded. A puff of escaping gases, a small hole blown in one side. It continued to float, hardly even pushed out of its orbit by the detonation.

"It's inert; whatever's inside it, it ain't alive. Perfectly safe now, Pramo—you'll see, and we'll be rich!"

Seed of Hope got underway once more and accelerated back toward the pumpkin.

CHAPTER SEVEN

AFTER EXHAUSTIVE TESTS, THE MOMENT OF TRUTH HAD arrived. Roger Xermin boosted himself toward the pumpkin with the practiced ease of a roid miner on a perfect trajectory. Watching him on the main screen in the bridge were the Beshwans and Sally Xermin. Roger soon became a bright dot, slipping silently across the gap.

Windowed at the bottom left-hand of the screen was the video from the probe, inserted into the interior of the alien object.

Unsettling video, presenting a weird jungle of bizarre, organic-looking shapes. Stalactites, stalagmites, balls, tubes, coils, wires as narrow as floss, things that looked like spider webs, massive knuckle shapes, shining instruments that resembled knives.

It was all rather inexplicable, and it made Pramod Beshwan very anxious, but his anxiety was balanced perfectly by the thought that every bit of that alien interior was incredibly valuable. Not only was it very old but it was very alien, very alien indeed. Broken up into frame-able pieces it would be worth untold fortunes on the antiques market where collectors would pay first and worry about questions from the authorities later.

Scrapings had been taken from various places inside.

The samples had been examined in the laboratory by Xermin. Analysis had revealed a number of unusual alloys, ceramics and in one case a superpolymer of complex array texture.

"A coating of some kind, a super paint?" wondered Xermin, who was getting excited at the possible profits to be made from technical breakthroughs.

Beshwan had shrugged. He was worried about long-dormant disease. "Organic?" he'd said with suspicion.

"Well, yes, probably—but it can't be alive. That's a total vacuum in there."

"Disease organisms?"

Xermin had groaned loudly at this. "Oh no, not again. Pramod, you promised me not to go on about 'disease organisms' any more. And now here you are starting up again. We've exposed it to vacuum for fifty hours. We've sampled the expelled gases and we found organics, but we haven't found any inside, except this paint coating on the interior walls. The temperature in there is just a degree or two above absolute zero. There can't be anything living in there."

"Well, all right." Pramod was wavering once more. "But I insist on the adoption of some rules here. You will not collect any specimens yet, you will not bring anything into the ship. We must have a full rock miner's tent set up and all the tests must be made in that. Some alien virus may be in there. I want everything examined and irradiated before it is brought into the ship, even into the cargo sector, let alone the life-support module."

Xermin had smiled broadly. "Sure, Pramod—anything you like."

"And don't call me that! You know I hate it."

But Roger and Sally were already suiting up to go out and erect a miner's tent and lay power cables from the ship's cargo sector.

And now Xermin was maneuvering beside the pumpkin with a laser blade. A bright spark flared on the main screen. Roger intended to cut a hole through the outer skin.

Suddenly the pumpkin seemed to blink. —A gap appeared between two smooth segments wide enough to let Roger inside.

Tili screamed. Sally hushed her sharply.

The spark went off. There was a terrible second of silence. Roger's voice continued; he seemed

happy enough.

"Hey, Beshwan, I don't have to cut my way in. Must have touched off some automatic system. It opened a door for me. I can get inside."

"A door you call it!" Pramod exclaimed.

"Be careful, darling," Sally said.

"Yes dear, I will."

"I don't like this, Xermin."

But Roger was beyond listening to Pramod's worries. He maneuvered himself inside the thing until all they could see on the main screen was the lower part of his spaceboots.

On the viewscreen window with the interior video, Xermin had erupted into the jungle of alien shapes, pushing aside the delicate web things and springy coils, seeming to fill the interior in his bulky suit and helmet.

The computer expanded that window and shrank the other.

Pramod was struck rigid with doubt. The abrupt opening of the shell had been a terrible shock. The thing was not entirely passive.

Xermin examined the interior carefully, squeezing, pressing, using a collector tool to take small scrapings. He was enjoying himself enormously. "The stalactite-looking things are actually soft—they deform quite easily. I can't imagine what they are, but they are connected, seamlessly, to the wall material. Or at least they're covered in the same material as the walls. It may just be a shared coat of paint, or lacquer, I don't know."

"What about the central structures, what are they like?" Pramod's voice shook a little.

"There seem to be at least six different devices here in the central clump. There's something with long arms, other things that look like light bulbs, connected by threads in different ways. There's two things that might easily be carburetors if there were any reason why they'd want such things in here. I don't know for sure, but I'd say from looking at them that it's going to take us quite some time to figure out what these things are."

Xermin whistled tunelessly to himself for a moment.

"Or on the other hand they may be organic—maybe everything in here was just grown somehow." He chuckled. "Must've been quite a farm, wherever it was."

They watched while Xermin reached in and pulled at one of the central devices. It floated toward him quite easily, looking like a rectangular virus, a studded cluster of smaller modules, that was connected via a coiled tube to the central complex.

Xermin took out a power tool and examined the object. Later he managed to disconnect it and one of the others from the coiled tubes. The black cups unscrewed, with a single turn, moving quite easily.

Roger then brought two of these objects back to the miner's tent and began to examine them, "carefully," as demanded by Beshwan.

"For your own sake, Roger. The things might explode if you try to open them."

Xermin laughed at Beshwan, as usual, but he did refrain from trying to cut into the devices. He placed them in the surveyor one at a time and the computer ran a check.

One device appeared to be a kind of gas generator, a vaporizer, or both. An input tube led to a small, reinforced chamber with several nozzle points.

The other instrument was more mysterious. Complex passageways existed between the modules that were grouped in a dodecahedral array.

Both devices were made of unknown materials, primarily a very tough polymeric substance through which were threaded long gangliae of a silvery metal. The metals turned out to be alloyed aluminum and palladium. When subjected to an electrical current of 6 amperes, at 100 volts, the viruslike object abruptly emitted small pinpoints of light. Roger darkened the chamber. The pinpoints burned hot and bright. Something about their dispersal from the viruslike module made him think of a planetarium star-field projector.

He mused on this idea for a moment. Was it perhaps, a navigation system? He moved the virus module, still with the electrical leads clamped to its working end, across to the inner skin of the tent.

When he was three feet from it, the microbeams became focused, scattering millions of tiny lights, which Roger was certain were fields of stars, across the fabric of the tent wall. As he turned the thing in his hands, more stars were shown, a projection that seemed uncommonly close to a view along the center of the galactic plane. A distinct thickening of the stars in one region betrayed the galactic core.

Now besieged with excitement, Roger returned to the work station and disconnected the alien device. He examined it again, more closely. After a certain degree of probing he found that the viral submodules were assembled in a pattern like that of a three dimensional rubik puzzle.

He used the computer to calculate which submodule had to be removed first. When turned the appropriate way it unscrewed quite easily. A framework was soon exposed. Under it, suspended in a wire micromount, was a glittering jewel the size of his thumbnail.

He shut off the computer recorder. He entered a datacard with a fast patch program, secured a rewind, and eliminated all view of this particular aspect of the investigation.

Roger stared at the thing. Undoubtedly the artifact would fetch the price of a planet. A feeling of raw triumph, huge and unrestrained, surged through him.

Diamond? Roger examined it closely, with the computer record shut off. It glittered diamondlike. It was cut with hundreds of small faces. It spun easily within the mount.

Roger smiled. To hell with old Pramod Beshwan, to the brave went the spoils, so Roger had always believed. He reached in and clipped away the wire mount. He would test this item later, in private. He hid it carefully in the ziplock garbage bag he had floating overhead in the tent. No one else was coming out here; it would be safe.

He turned the computer recorder back on.

Eventually Roger turned off the equipment and put himself under the scanner. After two full negative readings he let himself into the airlock.

The adults convened a meeting on the bridge at once. Pandi however chose to watch her favorite TV show, "Surrender Yawns." Set in an alternate universe of magic and sensuality, it starred Torry Sturns, who in Pandi's private universe was the most gorgeous male in existence.

CHAPTER EIGHT

SASKATCH SPACETOWN FULLY EMBODIED THE CONTRADICTIONS in the ITAA stance toward the nominally unimportant frontier world. In its tight-packed strip of towers around the spaceport's southern rim could be found all the vices of more sophisticated systems. In the polyglot jungle of alleys and strips beneath the towers everything was for sale and anything could be had for money.

Huge hotel signs blazed above it all, welcoming the hordes of visitors who came to the frozen world

but never left Spacetown during their stay.

Of course the ITAA-approved brochures told a different story. In those glossy images, Saskatch was a wintry wonderland, with great skiing and spectacular ice fields. Tourists could watch the dramatic calving of icebergs from the arctic ice sheets. Glaciers, volcanoes, tundra, and dark forests—these Saskatch had in abundance.

Odd, then, that of the tourists that swarmed to Saskatch, so few ever left the warm confines of their hotels in the cool, wet Beliveau valley.

Strange, too, that the rule changes required to upgrade the policing of the Saskatch spaceport remained blocked in the Rules Committee of the ITAA.

Under the procedures normally employed by the Saskatch Drug Enforcement Police, undercover operations inside Spacetown had to be cleared with the highest levels of command.

Normal procedures had been forgotten. Johan Griks and his small team worked harder than they had ever worked, and mounted an extraordinary video surveillance of the Fixer Brothers. Griks was sure that through them he could get a glimpse of the high-ups in the Saskatch elite who were dealing most actively in TA45.

The Fixer Brothers moved constantly between favored hotels—the Luxor, the Edwarde, the Beverly—and certain bars and restaurants and gambling joints, where they did quite a lot of their business. Always they were accompanied by a full team of security goons, led by the indomitable Kow Huk, a Korean killer with eyes like black stones.

Griks and his team were looking for a key, a way to get a recorder into the Fixers' presence, to see just who it was they met with in the backroom of the Toxi bar on Kung Street.

They had been able to place an operative in a small gift shop on the corner of Kung Street within camera shot of the front door of the Toxi, and they had two operatives on the roof of a small row of tenements jammed together on the same side of the street, near the corner. Getting inside was much, much tougher.

Then came a windfall, the sort of opportunity that Griks had been waiting for.

A rickshaw deposited a known walker rider named Carney Waxx on the doorstep of the Toxi, and after a momentary frisking, he'd been allowed in. Not long afterward the street was cleared by three burly thugs and the Fixer Brothers' black limousine cruised up to the doors.

The DEP team signaled Griks. He ordered a chopper.

Inside the deep recesses of a bar painted black and muffled by senso screening, Carney Waxx sweated and prayed.

The Fixer Brothers were always impassive, but Carney knew, even as he spoke, that they were not pleased with his explanations. It was a full-size shipment, except that he'd lost half of it.

"So," said the left-hand brother—it was impossible to tell them apart under the senso veils. They wore identical clothes. "A bunch of nature photographers broke into your walker. After you'd been trapped by Mad Yagu. He confused you with a redfly. Your hawkwasps starved on the trip, you neglected them."

"So," said the other brother in a voice that seemed identical to the first. "Something went wrong."

The Fixers gave Carney the long, quiet look. They smiled, but not nicely. They took the half of the TA45 he'd brought with him: They let him get up from the chair, sweating dreadfully under the armpits, and turn and leave. They even gave him back his WAK .55 magnum, but without ammunition.

They ordered a video made of Carney's last moments. They were specific about the degree of humiliation involved in the murder: a severe beating and a certain amount of electrode work; the shotgun

up the anus; copies to be distributed to all Carney's known friends and associates.

Thus had the Fixer Brothers established a reputation in Spacetown; thus were they still in business, fifty years later. When you dealt with the Fixer Brothers nothing could be allowed to go wrong.

Carney came out of the meeting at a run. He just beat the thugs to the front door and darted out onto Kung Street through the dense crowds. It was drizzling again from a dark gray sky. The thugs were behind him, three of them headed up by Kow Huk, the Fixers' dough-faced killer. More thugs waited ahead of him on the corner of Beliveau Avenue under the lights of the Kwaidan Farms restaurant. The Street was walled in on one side by two big towers with bar restaurants at their base. On the other side was a row of narrow tenements.

He tried to dive into the doorway of the nearest bar, a glitzy Korean joint, Ruby Koo's, but found his way blocked by a giant bouncer in fighting armor. Word got out fast on Kung Street, where slender radio headsets were commonplace. The armored bouncer waved a fist lazily in Carney's direction.

He backed away. Kow Huk was getting close, impassive as ever. Kow Huk paused and spoke into his headset mike, marshaling his team.

Carney ran toward the corner, pushing people aside. Three more thugs were waiting, heavysset bruisers, wearing waterproofs and a certain amount of armor beneath. Without a loaded weapon, Carney was doomed. Wildly he looked around in the crowd. Everyone in Spacetown carried a gun of some sort; he would have to try and grab one from somebody.

Then a wisp of a Caucasian girl in a set of dark green overalls caught his hand and whispered fiercely in his ear.

"If you want to live, follow me." She turned in a flash and was gone behind a stall selling live crabmunk in little cages.

Carney dived through the gap between stalls, keeping hunched down. The girl was beckoning him through a low hatchway in the wall between two noodle houses.

Carney crouched down and scrambled through. The hatch clanged shut behind him. He landed on something lumpy with an overwhelming odor of fish. He groped around. He was lying on a lot of cold fish mixed in with ice. Around him were cool metal walls.

Then a small light came on a couple of meters above, beside a metal ladder. The girl beckoned. He followed.

Loud noises came from the hatchdoor. Someone was trying to pry it open.

He caught up with the girl at the bottom of a staircase.

They climbed it quickly. Every twenty steps there was another landing, with dim corridors stretching away on two sides. After three landings Carney was almost out of breath.

Down below he heard the hatch break open with a loud boom.

"Quickly," said the girl who had reached the third landing at the top of the stair. She pressed the wall and a slim doorway opened revealing a red-lit dimness. She slipped inside; Carney followed, squeezing his body through the gap. The door closed.

They were in a stairwell, smelling of oil, set into the roof of the building. Above them blazed an advertising sign for the Chai Wa Hotel, a twenty-foot-high red dragon with flashing green eyes. The girl ran lightly up another stair and vanished. He followed, cautiously, found himself on a wide rooftop.

The girl was nowhere to be seen. Instead Carney found two men, both wearing hoods, black raingear. "What do you want?"

"We want to talk to you, make a deal."

"Kow Huk is after me."

"We know, we've been watching."

Carney's heart sank. "You're DEP then."

"You got it. If you want to stay out of Kow Huk's hands you'll have to come with us."

CHAPTER NINE

THE MILITARY FORM TENSED ITS FABULOUS SKIN AGAINST the annihilation of vacuum and counted the moments remaining to it very, very carefully.

In flex stitch, the skin was exhausting to wear, but the devouring of its resources had been essential.

The prey was watchful. It had investigated in a cautious, hesitant manner that betrayed its suspicion of the pod. To lull the prey was essential. More forceful action could only alert the others in the ship; thus the Military Form had been forced to sit patiently through the rape of the interior of the pod, with the skin flexed tight.

The fifth visit was begun. The biped swung smoothly toward the pod on a perfect trajectory.

Now! The time had come. Beneath the surface, the skin began to re-knit.

During the previous four visits, the alien biped had wrestled clumsily in the heart of the pod, unscrewing parts of the equipment and carrying them back to a spherical enclosure opened near the extravagantly designed spaceship.

Nodes were readied for the assault.

Never had the Military Form dreamed of such a luxuriant space vessel. It was the size of a heavy cruiser and yet exhibited only the characteristics of an elitist yacht. No visible weapon systems, a bare murmur on the electromagnetic spectrum.

The soft biped things used radio to communicate. Judging by the modulations received, the Military Form deduced that they communicated through sound vibrations. Control of the respiratory system was thus imperative for first strike.

The urge to have host once more was almost overwhelming. The Military Form felt again a strange high mania. The wait had been so long!

The biped approached!

Roger Xermin had never been happier. In his trips to the pod he had removed five objects. Each was unique, two were extraordinarily beautiful, if considered simply as objects in and of themselves. They were all probably mere machine parts, functional equipment, no more, but to the human eye they were like pieces crafted by an artist with superb skill in casting ceramics and hard polymers.

Beshwan was sure they would fetch enormous prices. And there was also the diamondlike gem, as big as the end of his thumb. That was sure to fetch a fabulous price. Altogether it would make a formidable sum of credit.

And in his dreams Xermin was thinking of a Nostramodes baada yacht, just him and Sally, and the far star-fields to roam. The prospect of finally achieving this long-sought dream had given his spirits a tremendous lift. Now he would finally earn the freedom they'd dreamed of for so long. He'd finally make it up to Sally for all the bum jobs she'd had to take to keep them afloat, all the hard years in the outer orbits.

So he'd grown to feel fond of the little alien find, the ancient piece of space junk. He liked its funny

insides, the things made of some kind of superfoam, soft stalactites, rubbery wires. It was pretty easy to dismantle, too. He'd simply unscrewed things so far. All in all it was a lot more fun to work with than the usual mid.

It was time for the brakes—a couple of short squirts with his attitude jets and he came to a stop a meter or so away. He swung out an adhezopod to anchor himself to the gleaming surface.

The "door" remained open. Nothing had changed. He slipped inside. He'd brought a tool to tackle the soft stalactites. He was determined to remove at least one of them this time. And so he unpacked a small hand-held cutter that could be moved around in the confines of the stalactite patches, where the cones, each two or three-feet long, were packed together.

Roger positioned himself, got his feet up against the wall at one end, and pulled himself down onto a patch of stalactites. He grasped a nice long one with one hand and brought the cutter to bear on its base. The blade whirled, began sinking into the surface.

Aboard the Seed of Hope only Sally Xermin was on duty: Pramod was asleep; Tili, who was supposed to be on duty, too, was in her cabin with a "sick headache." But Sally was used to Tili's lazy little habits and had long since gotten over her resentment of them. She was also used to arduous prospecting trips in worked-out systems like Nocanicus, trips that were uncomfortable, long, and boring. Taking the shift by herself was no sweat.

And watching over Roger was her life's work, or so it seemed.

She laughed, which was a new thing. For years, Sally had not laughed much at the thought of watching over Roger Xermin. That year that she'd supported them by dancing in a "feel 'em" club in Grammation Habitat, for instance—that had taken her close to her breaking point.

But Roger had had collapsed lungs from too long on too-thin air. He was in the hospital for months. Without her he was dead, because no way did they have the credit required by Grammation law for him to be treated. Roger would have been left aboard his boat and allowed to expire.

So she'd go-goed, enduring the humiliation of the "feel 'em" customers, and he'd recovered and eventually they'd gotten out of Grammation in pretty good shape.

Sally shook her head. She had too many damn memories, that was the trouble.

The door hissed open behind her. Pandi came in, said hello, and took the next seat over. The bridge had seating for eight, four clumped together under the main screen and two pairs of seats on either side at the Astro-Nav station and the engineering section.

"I brought you a drink," she said and set an ice-cold fizz beside Sally's elbow.

Great kid. Sally wondered, if she'd had a kid, would that kid have been anything like Pandi. She hoped so.

"What's the matter, Sally?"

"Nothing. Why?"

"You're giving me this look like you're studying me or something."

"Well, I was just wondering how the hell you managed to grow up as sensible as you are considering the parents you have."

Pandi laughed. "Believe me, it was not easy."

Sally laughed, too, and then sipped her drink.

"You remember the time we first came to visit your house?"

"Who could forget," Pandi said in mock horror. "When Mother saw that Roger was wearing shoes

from 'outside' and told the servants to take them off his feet and throw them outside."

They laughed together.

Finally Pandi gestured to the screen. The bizarre interior of the pod was darkened by the intrusion of Roger Xermin's bulky form. The camera had a view of the back of his suit and that was all.

"What's happening this time?"

"Oh let's see." Sally flicked up a trip inventory on a small red window in the middle of the screen.

"Open and remove one of the cone-shaped objects. They don't unscrew or unzip or anything else. Have to cut them out it seems."

"It's all one thing at a time, then?"

"Absolutely. Each and every piece has to be brought out on its own and examined in the surveyor. We're going to be here forever, but Pramod insisted. He made a terrible fuss about some slipup on the computer recording that Roger made. Rog says he hit the wrong button, an accident, but Pramod went on and on about lawyers and court cases."

Pandi shrugged. "Later, when we get to the Nocanicus system, we're going to be rich, aren't we, Sally?"

"I think so, Pandi. We've got enough radioactives already, to make us comfortable for life on Saskatch."

The thought of her home planet suddenly gave Pandi a great pang of yearning. "I wanted to stay on Saskatch myself. I think I'd have been very happy there."

"But you changed your mind."

"Well, when Daddy said we'd be able to buy an estate on a megahab, I realized I couldn't turn that down. And if I didn't like megahab life then I could always sell out and come back to Saskatch."

"You'll like the life on the megahabs. We did a repair job once for Gloaming Splendor. There was this fairy castle on the estate, and it was so beautiful, and surrounded by this jewel like forest. You'd have loved it. I could have lived there forever."

Pandi seized on this.

"Then why don't you? Why don't you and Roger settle down? Come and live on megahab with us."

Sally laughed. "You know Roger better than that, dear. After this he intends to buy his own Baada-drive ship. Then we're off to the remotest frontiers."

"Then we'll never see each other again!"

"That's very probably. true, relativistic effects being what they are."

"Oh I will miss you, Sally. You're my very best friend."

Sally put a protective arm around Pandi and hugged her. "Well we have been good friends, Pandi, and we will be for a while yet. It'll be a year or so before we're ready to leave for Nocanicus. There's a lot of business to be done before then."

"Oh, I know, but then, someday, when we've reached Nocanicus, you'll both leave and we'll never see you after that."

"I'm afraid so. But this is something you'll find in life, Pandi—you never can hang onto people. You find friends and you ride with them for a while but then you part and you gradually lose them. It's happened to me more than you because of this crazy life I've led, hopping from one place to another."

There was a sudden red flash on the screen; the radio howled. Roger was in trouble. Roger was

screaming! The figure in the pod thrashed madly, seemed to jump and twitch in a violent dance.

"Something's wrong!" Pandi screamed.

Arms thrashed madly around. Ice formed over Sally's heart. The screams were terrible, and they went on and on.

"Enlargements, especially on 46x25," Sally said in a near croak. She opened the voice link.

"Roger, darling?" Her throat was so dry that she almost choked as she said it.

But there was just the screaming, piercing, horrible screams that rang and rang.

Roger's helmet enlarged to fill the screen, side on, mostly hidden in shadow.

"Roger? Rog? What's happening?"

His face was contorted in a rictus of agony.

Sally had her fingers stuffed in her mouth. What was happening to him?

And then the screams cut off, abruptly, with a slight squeal as if choked by a powerful grip.

The violent movements inside the pod continued, however, for several seconds longer before suddenly halting.

The screen view cut back to the longer shot. Roger floated. The camera caught his legs rotating, then his chest and head swung by. Sally extended the probe for a close-up of Roger's face, bathed in sweat with eyes closed.

Her voice cracked as she demanded. "Vital signs?" she punched studs. The computer responded that transmissions from the suit's medical unit had ceased during the violent struggles.

"What's happened to him?"

Sally found her voice quite remarkably firm when she answered, "From the look on his face I'd say suit puncture and a lost limb. He's not dead—we can see he's breathing."

"How could his suit puncture?"

Sally groaned, shrugged. "Spacesuits are made to have holes in them. It's like anything else: Don't trust it unless you absolutely have to. And then it'll go bust on you, you can count on It."

Sally was already heading for the lower airlock. "I'm going to get him."

Pandi's eyes went wide. What if Pramod woke up?

"You're not going to bring him inside the life-support zone, are you, Sally?" Pandi wished she hadn't said it from the moment she saw Sally's face go cold.

"No, Pandi, I'm not going to do that, but I am going to get him into the miner's tent and find out what piece of him I've lost."

Sally chewed her lip for a second, her blue eyes flashed in anger. "I just hope he manages to survive long enough for you to thank him for making you so very, wonderfully rich."

Sally vanished.

Pandi looked back at the silvery pumpkin. Tears were running down her face. She felt awful for what she'd said, but she was frightened of her parents' reaction when they found out what had happened. She knew they would want her to wake them at once. She also knew that they would be very angry if she didn't.

But they were likely to do terrible things, like take over the ship and leave Roger and Sally behind.

Pandi had no illusions about her parents. They were cold people, very cold and very selfish. They would think about themselves first, second, and third.

Pandi stared at Xermin's silent form and did not know what to do.

CHAPTER TEN

SALLY XERMIN KEPT HER RADIO OFF, SO SHE COULD MAKE whatever noises she wanted while floating out to the pod. Mostly she wailed to herself, not always softly.

Why did things always go wrong like this? Always, always, always, with Roger Xermin, things screwed up somehow.

Every so often she stopped cursing and prayed he hadn't had a complete suit failure. Let it just be one limb, she murmured, or even just a part of a limb. A foot, that would be the easiest for a spacer to get by without.

If it could just be one foot, please.

The video showed him still breathing, still alive. This while the suit's electronics were out, the commo link was dead, and everything was running on emergency automatic systems.

Looming ahead of her was a job she didn't even want to contemplate, but that she would have to undertake.

Once she'd got him back to the space tent, she would have to strap him onto an operating frame and amputate whatever was left of his damaged limb. The word made her shiver inside her suit.

She prayed she could bring herself to do it. She doubted if she would have any help from the Beshwans, Pramod would have a fit when he woke up and found out what had happened.

She tried not to contemplate the other questions, but it was hard not to. Would Roger's brains be scrambled? How much of his suit had failed? The questions pounded in her head remorselessly. It seemed to take forever to get there, floating through the dark void.

And then she was there. She braked with wrist attitude jets and floated slowly past it. She braked again. Roger was floating outside the thing, his body slowly rotating head over heels, limbs bent.

She checked the suit for collapses or open tears, but saw nothing. She peered in through the face mask. He was bathed in sweat, unconscious, but clearly alive, still breathing, and the suit's air supply continued to function, although the commo unit and the suit computer had broken down.

Quickly she fastened the rescue harness around Roger's chest and shoulders and slung it beneath his arms. Then she turned and boosted herself back toward the Seed of Hope.

When she reached the ship she braked and pulled Roger's body into the space tent. As soon as the tent was zipped up and re-inflated to twelve pounds per square inch, she removed her helmet and went to work on Roger's suit. It opened easily, releasing a powerful stench of excrement. The waste system in the suit had malfunctioned somehow.

There was nothing to be done but to get him out of the suit. Screwing up her face against the smell she eased it off his limp body and stowed it and its nauseating contents in a big snap bag, which she lashed to the sidewall of the tent.

She could see at once that something strange had happened. It looked as if Roger had not eaten in a week. His face hung with the pallor of exhaustion, his ribs were showing, his eyes were sunk into his cheeks.

His pulse was high, his blood pressure, too. Little shudders ran through his body.

Small red marks, like pimples, were scattered around his body, and a larger mark, almost like a small boil, was on his back.

She checked his temperature, found it high. She realized abruptly that she needed the medical scanner and software that were in the Seed's infirmary. Something strange had happened to Roger—a surprise heart attack, a seizure of some kind—she didn't know what, but she was determined to find out.

Leaving him strapped to the stretcher she inflated the tent's airlock and floated back to the Seed. In the ship's airlock she found Pandi waiting.

Sally stripped off her suit without speaking. Pandi stared at her, outraged and afraid. "Well, is he all right?" she finally said.

"He's alive," Sally snapped. "I think he's had a heart attack, or a stroke."

"He's paralyzed?"

Sally turned distraught eyes on her. "Don't say that! Don't say that ever again!"

"You shouldn't have done this to me, Sally!"

"Done what?"

"Put me in this position! Pramod will kill me when he finds out I didn't wake him."

"What? You think I should have left Roger out there? Because that's what Pramod would have done? No way, Pandi, and if I'd thought you'd rat on me, I'd have made sure you couldn't—so don't worry your head about it. Now, get out of my way. I need the medical scanner, have to find out what the hell has happened to him."

Sally pushed herself down the tube into the rotating, gravity section, got her feet on the floor, and stormed off to the medical bay.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

IN THE EARLY AFTERNOON, AFTER SEX AND BEFORE HIS fruit, Rieben Arntage rested his two-hundred-and-eighty-five-year-old body for an hour in an ergonom, swinging inside a bay window on the fourteenth floor of the Arntage Trading Corporation tower. From that vantage point he had sweeping views over Beliveau City, the river, and Spacetown, bristling on the higher ground on the far side.

It was a good place to do serious thinking. Copulation always provided a calm, centering feeling afterward. Even on the days when little Bruda Dara had been to visit, bringing her boundless energy and plump, sexy little body to bear to the point of physical exhaustion.

In that calm, lying in the ergonom hammock, Rieben thought about things other than trading or credit exchange transactions and the power politics that went with them.

He tried to think about the higher things, the greater causes. Since he was a man who had everything, and had had it for two and a half centuries, it was the realm of nature and natural beauty that now most fascinated him.

Unfortunately one couldn't buy one's own planet. The man or woman who wanted true privacy in a very big environment was forced to build his or her space habitat. Usually such wealthy people compromised and bought into an established megahabitat and took a large space, one hundred or even one thousand square kilometers. But Rieben had tried megahabs; after a while the artificiality bored him. He wanted the natural feel of a planet, with its unpredictable weather and rough terrain. He wanted wildness, a habitat with insects, where snow and paralyzing heat occurred more often than was allowed

on megahabs.

But humans couldn't own whole planets, not even whole continents. The precedents had been just too upsetting. So it had been since the earliest days of NAFAL colonization.

Under the ITAA all colony worlds were to be apportioned under the Strict Allotment Rule. A minimum of fifty thousand people was required for diversity, and there were a few rules concerning constitutional government norms, among these the right to vote, the right to competitive information and entertainment media, and the right of ultimate appeal for justice to the ITAA Sector Court system.

The earliest outlaw colonies that ignored these basics had become legends long ago, legends of the most unpleasant type. The pictures of gibbets and the steam-powered guillotines always haunted the videos of the subject.

So human colony worlds were now opened under ITAA auspices. Corporate-dominated democracies were the usual result. Development of course varied with the planet involved. For every warm-water world like Earth, there were a thousand desert worlds, a hundred glaciated snowballs.

Rieben Arntage had wanted a planet for a long time, a planet that he could save from the onrushing human invasion he saw everywhere around him.

Since the liberation from the Laowon a thousand years before, it had been building, a wave of humans, riding on Baada drives, spreading Out into the galactic arms. The ITAA had grown a hundred-fold, with officers in twenty-four thousand solar systems. And still the frontiers abounded in mad tales of violence, piracy, and planetary assault and extortion.

And now they came to Saskatch, a world of incredible beauty, a gem for those who loved the warmer snowballs. Except that the new people came, not for the natural beauty, but for TA45, a scourge that Rieben could see producing explosive growth of the worst kind.

Unless he could perform some jujitsu on the huge bureaucracy of the ITAA, forcing it to act, compelling it to intervene and interdict the planet.

A soft chime sounded at the door. The security system checked and then admitted the nurse with Rieben's fruit.

The nurse was wearing her official white suit, with the hat and badge of the ITAA Red Symbol. She set the tray across the ergonom's frame and set down a bowl of mixed pieces of fruit.

She took his temperature, checked his pulse, and took a tiny blood sample. Then with a smile in the direction of Bruda Dara, the nurse gave Rieben a number of pills and some water with which to swallow them. "Day forty-one of the pancreatic cleansing, Monsieur Arntage."

"Uh huh." He groaned. Sometimes Extended Life wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Fourteen pills filled his hand. Slowly he started swallowing them, with sips of water between.

"A nice healthy young girl this time, monsieur?" The nurse nodded at the reclining form of Bruda Dara.

Arntage snorted. The nurses came from Beiveau hospital; they were local people with local mores, used to the old colony ways of fifty years before. They talked of his women friends as if they were prostitutes. It always irritated him.

"She's a marvelous biologist. Degree from Beliveau University."

"Indeed, monsieur, but that's not all she learned about in the lycee, eh?" She gave him a roguish wink. He groaned.

The nurse left, the door chiming as it closed behind her.

Bruda Dara stirred, then rolled over, her heavy hips and breasts curving the blue sheet most attractively. He wondered idly if Bruda's innocent strength of passion derived from the same root as her

passion for biology and fieldwork. Rieben believed he'd experienced it before in female biologists working frontier planets. Was there some connection? Did a passion for natural life go hand in hand with a passion for making more life? As if life itself was some kind of self-creating urge, a tidal force that they rode this way and that, fluxing through the universe. Were natural biologists more closely grounded than other people? Was there something in the discipline that attracted sexually explosive types like Bruda Dara? A form of natural selection? The thought amused him for a moment.

Rieben swung the ergonom with a tiny shift of his hips. It swiveled to afford a view to the east. Dark clouds were drifting there, passing up the valley toward the distant Black Ruks.

By the window was the telephone, a handcrafted piece by Balnev of Martian Moscow on twenty-third-century Mars. It had been carved in the shape of a grizzly bear from a piece of Martian teak.

The handset was the grizzly's head, jaws gaping in a snarl of defiance. One spoke into the left ear.

He gave a seven-number code and listened to the rings. Outside the window in the west it was starting to be a sunny day. A rare enough thing in Beliveau City to make it special. Across the valley the towers of Spacetown sparkled like so many multifaceted jewels, completely overawing the drab downtown of Beliveau itself.

"Senator Grogan speaking," said a voice into his ear.

"Mike, Rieben Arntage."

"Aah, Monsieur Arntage—yes, I have news for you."

"Yes, the motion will be tabled this week. I have lined up Jervis Forster to enter it in the Senate, to disguise our interest somewhat."

"Good. What about the Tusseaus; are they moving?"

"They seem to think they will win their case in the court. I'm told that Old Man Tusseau made the decision himself. They will rush in to oppose the legislation as soon as it's announced."

"But they will not win their case in court. We have them. We have good precedent, and the recent Salido 3 decision."

"Well, monsieur, as you know, Monsieur Tusseau is not entirely rational in this matter. He hates you, monsieur. He will go down fighting rather than give in on an environment bill, even if he knows he cannot win."

"But you think we have the votes?"

"I think so, monsieur."

"It'll be a great day, a day to put in the history books, Senator."

"I think it will come, sir. As long as, well—"

"As long as what, Grogan?"

"As long as you win the case in the Sector Court." This softness in Grogan's support always irritated Rieben. He snorted. "Grogan, we have the precedent of Xantus 5 and the recent decision in the Sector High Court concerning the rape of Salido 3. The environment of this planet is endangered by rampant immigration and the local authorities are powerless to deal with the corruption induced by Tropic Acid 45. Only by bringing in the ITAA and forcing the upgrade of the spaceport to Class A, with Full Security Measures, can we hope to stop what's happening."

"But of course, as you well know, there are forces in the Senate who are not opposed to the TA45 trade. They get rich from it."

"We aren't attacking them directly. We're not even calling for the ITAA extension ourselves. But if we can get a motion through the Senate that actually calls on the ITAA to upgrade the spaceport's designation, then with the decision of the court we'll finally be able to force the ITAA's hand. Spacetown will become an official ITAA sector and will have to be policed to the same level as any other similar system. That will put the onus squarely on the offworlders."

"You will basically cut out all the colonial families; you're trying to absolutely end the export of TA45. If you succeed, there'll be no more gravy train. No wonder they hate you, Monsieur Arntage, eh?"

"No wonder, Senator, no wonder at all."

"Fortunately, monsieur, you are already very, very rich, no?"

"Fortunately, Senator, that is true." Rieben broke the connection and reset the antique grizzly bear head handset on its shoulders.

Little Bruda Dara was awake. "I love you, Rieben," she whispered turning onto her belly with her plump, sexy haunches lifting the blue sheet in a way that immediately caught his attention.

"And why would you love a withered old stick like me?"

"Because of the effort you're making to save Saskatch. You really love this planet, don't you?" There was something so pure, so earnest in her soft brown eyes that it made his heart feel heavy for a moment or two.

"I do, little Bruda Dara. I really do. I like this world, with its ice and snow and endless dark forests. It's cold, it's not comfortable, but it's a clean world, with the bare minimum of people. At my age you see, you get tired of people."

"Especially the offworlders who only want to destroy everything. I mean I know that's a generalization, but they do! They're terrible."

He shrugged. Individually the offworlders were no worse than the Saskatchers but with hundreds of thousands of them coming here and then spreading out, Saskatch would soon have mega cities and everything that went with them.

"They can only get away with it now because they maintain the spaceport's current designation. If we can get a Sense-of-the-Senate motion, because of the outrages, and put it with the result of our case in the Sector Court, the ITAA will have to move, anything else would be too revealing."

"All they care about is getting TA45."

CHAPTER TWELVE

IN THE SPHERICAL SPACE-MINER'S TENT, THE WORK WENT on. Sally Xermin completed the medical scan using the portable unit. She fed the scan data directly into the small computer she'd brought out from the ship to run the medical diagnosis software.

The data swished back and forth inside the computer for a few seconds and then opinions and optical illustrations from the scan began appearing on the small screen.

Brain activity was that characterized by coma; no evidence of a coronary or of a stroke; Roger's heart beat strongly despite his weakened state.

There was evidence of crippling damage to certain parts of the nervous system. Axons had been splayed open in many places, the myelin sheaths broken and disrupted, destroying the axon's usefulness. Neurones were dead on certain circuitous pathways through the nervous control centers outside of the brain.

On the basis of this evidence the diagnosis included mention of a possible freakish attack of one of a small number of nerve-destroying diseases, such as multiple sclerosis.

The software estimated that Roger had lost about a third of his nervous system outside of the brain. He would have very poor motor control of his limbs once he awoke, if he awoke. It was doubtful that he would ever speak again; the nerves connecting to the vocal apparatus had been blitzed. Virtually nothing was left.

Sally gritted her teeth. There was weird stuff here. The software indicated a massive loss of weight. A search for tumors had produced nothing. The white cell count was high but there was no other evidence of cancer.

The software was very familiar with Roger Xermin, it worked on him every day as part of his Extended Life treatment. Anything like a microtumor would be picked up instantly. And a sudden tumor massive enough to cause that kind of weight loss was simply unimaginable.

In short, Roger's condition was inexplicable.

Analysis of body fluids revealed a few trace elements in uncommon abundance plus a number of organics that were alien to the human norm.

Sally shuddered as she read this. Pramod must not find this! Her immediate instinct was to override the software and to rewrite the diagnosis to leave out any mention of "alien organics."

So she edited the diagnosis quickly, then ran it through again and then removed the data module.

After attaching drip feed and IV she put her helmet back on and inflated the little airlock. Using attitude jets she moved over to the Seed of Hope.

As soon as the ship's airlock closed behind her she sensed the change. The Beshwans were awake; mad panic was tangible in the air. Tili was screaming somewhere, probably at Pandi, way down the vertical passage to the Beshwans' suite.

Sally marched determinedly down to the lab and fed the data module into the ship mainframe. She set the diagnostic software in motion once more, scrolling the diagnosis over the screen.

She heard Pramod scuttle in behind her, literally huffing and puffing.

"What have you done?" he screamed in a hysterical, raging shriek.

"Saved my husband's life, that's what!" Sally snapped back. "Take a look at this stuff will you? Try and help for a change, Pramod."

"How could you endanger us like this? How dare you! After everything we had said about this!"

The little brown moonface was purple with rage. "You had no right to so endanger us! What if he has alien disease? We may all get it, because of your incredible stupidity."

Sally rolled her eyes to the ceiling. "I know, I know, you'd have had me leave him there, still alive, dying by inches, my own husband. To hell with you, Pramod."

"No, by golly. it will not be 'to hell with you, Pramod,' it will be that you are listening to me from now on. Or I shall be forced to take steps."

Sally looked at him a moment. The pompous, little Hindu was threatening her? She'd flatten him if he so much as dared to raise a finger against her.

"Look at the diagnosis—he's in a coma, he's suffered nerve damage, and he's lost weight. But he doesn't have disease, no disease organisms turned up on the scope."

Pramod's delicate nostrils flared. "If you are willing to trust your life to a piece of computer software that's fine with me, but I won't be a part of it. I forbid it. Roger was warned from the beginning on this. If

anything happened because of that alien object we were going to leave him behind. He agreed, you remember."

She snorted, as if they didn't entrust their lives to different bits of software every second of their lives aboard ship.

"Look, Pramod—I'm not going to leave my husband behind. All right, you got that! He's in a coma, he's never going to speak or move again, but I still love him, can you understand that?"

Pramod purpled anew. "I will not stand for this. You force me to take action."

He gathered himself on his slender five-foot-nine-inch frame and pulled out a slim .22 WAK derringer.

"Raise your hands, Sally, I'm going to have to put you under restraints."

Sally looked again. The little monster had decided to chance his luck. She measured him carefully as she slowly stood away from the computer console. The pistol was ridiculous, the barrel so short that even at this range, about eight paces, she doubted he could hit her as long as she moved quickly enough.

"Look, Pramod, you don't have to do this, you know."

"Be quiet. You are to go to your quarters now, where you will remain until I make up my mind what to do about this mess."

Pramod gestured with the gun, a fatal mistake.

"Whuf!" He gasped as Sally spun into him, knocked the gun aside, and brought her knee up hard into his midriff.

He doubled over, dropping the derringer at her feet. She grabbed the hair on the back of his head, yanked him back to the vertical, and clobbered him with a forearm smash.

Pramod went down and curled into a fetal ball, sobbing.

Sally picked up the gun and slipped it into her pocket. She ignored Pramod and put the diagnosis in for mainframe analysis by the ship computer.

Out in the little spacetent the portable computer continued monitoring Roger Xermin's motionless body. A TV camera scanned back and forth over Roger primed to detect any changes in his appearance.

This video signal was constantly fed to whichever screen Sally directed it to, but no changes were detected.

However, no cameras were trained upon the bag that contained Roger's fouled spacesuit and helmet. Thus nothing recorded the sudden opening of the bag, or the very brief appearance of the spiny-limbed thing, an eldritch insectform a foot long and an inch thick, with wire-thin limbs.

Floating above the head were sensory organs, including small visual pods on segmented stalks.

The thing hesitated for a fraction of a second, as the sensors absorbed the available information, and then it leapt across the open space to the rear of the diagnostic computer's carrying case and unscrewed the maintenance panel.

The optical organs were inserted. One of them produced a moderate phosphorescent glow to illuminate the interior. A quick check revealed a dual network system, with photonic systems embedded in electronics and the whole powered through neatly networked microinputs.

The circuitry was set up on slabs, with spaces between. There was quite a lot of room. The exploratory module released a mouse-sized messenger that drove itself back to the floating spacebag with a single boost from its large hind limbs.

The zip slowly opened; the messenger darted within.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

THE BELIVEAU DETENTION CENTER WAS A GRIM STONE pile set close beside the northeastern boundary of the spaceport in the northern half of the city.

Inside the single massive cellblock as many as fifteen hundred male inmates were stored while they served ITAA sentences, mostly for TA45 offenses.

The place was an infamous hellhole, inflamed by overcrowding, gang fighting, and an insidious trustee system that made some of the most violent, long-term prisoners virtually guards for the others.

Akander Ra Sub had been in the BDC for five months, serving a six-year stretch for smuggling. He'd adjusted, but it seemed that the joint was getting just a little too lively.

It wasn't the roar and rumble of the booster rockets taking off from the spacefield, so loud sometimes you thought your teeth would come loose from it. You got used to that; you even got used to the fumes that drifted in every time there was a launch and the wind blew the wrong way.

Nor was it the pecking order on the fourth floor where Akander was bunked. Akander had worked for the Fixer Brothers; he fitted in with the Korean thugs who ruled the fourth floor and who also worked for the Fixer Brothers.

Instead Akander had a problem with the mysterious Blood Ritual Brotherhood. They'd almost got him that very morning, after breakfast in the mess hall. While he was on his way out, two brothers of the blood jumped him with wire knives. He was alive only because some medical orderlies happened on the scene at that very moment and used stunners to knock the brothers down.

He was relatively safe on the fourth deck, where Big Kim ruled as representative of the Fixer Brothers. But outside the fourth deck he was without such immediate protection. He wondered if he would make it through lunch.

The problem, as Akander saw it, was that the accused rarely knew why or how he had been selected for death. As far as Akander knew, he hadn't done anything to offend anyone. Which might mean that someone had tagged him with a rumor, just to see him jump.

He'd thought about volunteering for a Hard Labor option. He could get his sentence reduced, but he'd have to serve in the Penal Logging Settlement, up in the tundra, working to feed the Chaebol sawmills. But Akander didn't think he could stand the cold, the bone-chilling, day in, day out freeze of the Saskatch tundra.

On the other hand it now looked like he was going to have to get someone to smuggle food out of the mess hall for him. The thought of what he might have to do to get such a big, and continuing favor done, gave him the chills it was really depressing.

Even worse, Big Kim was starting to give him those looks again. If he was going to have the safety of the fourth deck it looked as if Kim had a price in mind. Akander shuddered. Kim was a big, brutal fighter, schooled in many martial arts. Akander had severe doubts concerning his ability to take on that monster.

Life was just getting to be too painful to endure. Avoiding Big Kim he slipped up to his cell and lay on his bunk and tried not to think about anything.

Thus it was that when the message came from the front desk, Akander was instantly on his feet.

He did demand an escort on the stairs, and after an argument he got one, and was rewarded with a surly guard, with a repeating shotgun.

Thus protected, Akander descended to the ground level and made his way to the administration wing, an afterthought that had been tacked onto the main building's front facade.

He was passed through the double grills and was shown into a small office. He recoiled in surprise. Carney Waxx was sitting there, looking decidedly pale.

"Waxx, what are you doing here?"

Carney got up and shut the glass door, then turned on the scrambler. He pointed to a nearby chair. "Sit down, Akander, you got a chance to get out of the joint and off planet without having to serve out your time."

"I do?"

"You do."

Akander swallowed. His prayers were answered.

"You'll be offered a double-level deal. On the surface, a straight-line deportation order. Under the guise of Section 12. That's just cover though, it ain't real. Instead you have to do one little job for the DEP first, then the depo order will take effect."

"It's hard to believe I'm hearing this from Carney Waxx."

Carney shrugged. "I got no choice, Akander. You don't have too many choices either."

"What do you mean by that?"

"The Blood are after you. They tried to kill you this morning."

"Did the DEP set that up? Are the Blood after me because of some shit that those bastards told the Blood?"

Carney shrugged again. He didn't seem too concerned.

"Oh man..." Akander groaned, suddenly feeling helpless and very vulnerable. "Did you do that to me, Carney? I mean, this is Akander you talking to. Did you set the Blood on me? I thought we were friends, man."

Carney shook his head. "No, I didn't. But you have to understand, it isn't up to me. I wouldn't even know if they did do that."

Akander understood. DEP had Carney on a string, too.

"Look you got a chance, but you have to do one thing."

Akander lifted weary eyes.

"Yeah, what is this one thing?"

"You have to wear a recorder, video-audio. It'll be surgically implanted. You have to wear it to see the Fixer Brothers. You see, we got a line that tells us you got fifty ounces of liquid luxury stashed up in the Black Ruks. You offer it to them, cut-rate, because you have to pay off the BDC people who let you out early. The DEP guys think the Fixers will buy that and so they will finally get a case on the Fixers that'll stand up in court."

"Oh great, and if the Fixers find out, they'll give me to Kow Huk."

"So you have to work hard, keep them convinced."

"And if I survive all this?"

"Then you'll have to be a witness for the trial, along with me."

Akander groaned again. Another death sentence. "Oh, now I've heard everything! You just want me

dead, that's all. You're just afraid to come right out and say it. How come, that's what I want to know? What did I ever do to you? You put the Blood onto me now! I'm doomed."

"You'll get protection. Which is more than you'll get in here."

Akander rolled his eyes, put his face in his hands. He had no place to hide. He decided to be pragmatic. If he took the deal he would live a little longer than if he stayed in the BDC. "Better not have to wait around too long for this trial if you want me to still be alive when it happens."

"The trial of the Fixer Brothers will not be delayed more than a few days once you get in and out of there with the microrecorders."

"What if I don't get out?"

Carney pursed his lips. "Well, uh, I guess the DEP will pay for burying whatever remains they find. What were you expecting, a medal?"

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

SALLY XERMIN RETURNED TO THE SPACETENT, TOWING the insulated medical container that held a fresh supply of liquid diet and some small IV drip feeders.

Inside the tent a curious salty smell made the hairs on her neck stand on end. She shivered involuntarily, then shook her head to dispel the strange feeling. She pushed the medical chest into a wall web and strapped it in place. With brisk efficiency she floated over Roger's pale figure and attached the IV drip.

It made her heart ache to see how emaciated he looked. She turned away. "The hot-headed spaceman is a dead one"—so ran the ancient truism. She had a lot of work to do, and she couldn't allow herself to break down and have a good weep just now.

With the IV attached, she moved over to the little computer to check Roger's condition. And got a shock. The computer had malfunctioned somehow; the screen had nothing but a scrabble in orange and blue; a stuttering storm of static came from the audio when she turned it up.

Sally cursed. These things never broke down; the machine was a Chaebol-quality unit used in dozens of star-systems. The failure rate was abysmally low.

She banged the top of the machine with her palm. Shook it and yelled at it. Then she collected herself. Tried to re-contact the software through the keyboard. All that appeared were occasional "Error Message" declarations bubbling up from the operating system.

She was going to have to take the computer back to the Seed and get the ship's mainframe to take a look at it.

She prayed that it was just a software problem; they had spare sets of the medical pak. She mumbled to herself as she disconnected the thing and tugged it gently over to the airlock.

It floated beside her, back to the ship and into the ship's airlock. Once in the inner airlock she strapped it to a palette and pushed it out and down the corridor to the life support zone.

Once in the gravity zone the palette rolled on its casters behind her as she tugged it along the ramp, to the maintenance shop on the first level.

She moved the machine onto the repair tabletop and returned the palette to the airlock. Then she headed up the ramps to the second level, where she'd left the Beshwans tied up.

The social rules had collapsed. She'd had to physically fight both Pramod and Tili. How could they ever keep up the polite facades again?

But she knew perfectly well that if Roger was permanently vegetative, she would need Pramod's skills more than ever. She'd need a lot of money, just for his medical costs. He needed the very best medical if he was ever going to regain the use of his limbs or even come out of coma.

So she set her chin and gritted her teeth and went in to see the Beshwans.

She heard them quarreling long before she got to their quarters.

"There she is," cried Tili. "The traitor in our midst."

"How dare you confine us like this?" Pramod shouted.

"What choice did you give me?" She replied, as coolly as possible. "No way I can trust you when I'm out of the ship not to just take off and leave Roger and me to die out here. You've virtually told me that's what you want to do. So..." Sally looked away from them both. Looked at the Hyderabad School mask of Shiva, with its mischievous, sly eyes.

"Anyway, I'll let you all loose now. There's something wrong with the medical computer unit. Ship computer will assist me in a diagnostic search."

Pramod was not appeased. "This treatment is in violation of the ITAA central code. As a spacefarer I must protest your actions."

Sally tried to stifle her giggle. Pompous little brat! And she did release them, Pandi first.

There was a certain coolness about Pandi; she ducked her head to avoid Sally's eye, then turned her back and went quickly to her own room.

Once free, Pramod gave Sally a baleful glance, but he did not try to attack her as she'd feared he might. Pramod was a realist about some things, it seemed. Instead he moved quickly to embrace his wife, who had resumed active sobbing once released from her bonds. Sally Xermin left Pramod to cope with her and returned to the repair station.

The maintenance shop was a cylindrical space, ten-feet wide and twelve-feet high, crammed with shelving for tools and spares and portable power packs. In the center of the bottom floor was the table with the medical computer sitting on it, a chunky, white, rectangular case in aluminate ceramic with a detachable keyboard with three dozen keys.

She knew that the problem was not with the power. The batteries were still going strong. She decided to let the ship computer work out what was wrong with the unit, and she rummaged around in the cable section until she found a connector that would mate with the medical unit.

She ordered the pendulum cart to drop down from the ceiling and offer the mainframe interface board. She plugged the connector in.

A screen came on, on the pendulum, above the plug-board.

The mainframe's software turned on a screen.

"Hello, Ship," she said.

"Hello, Sally."

"I need a diagnostic check on this medical unit. It's gone berserk. Power source is fine, batteries are still close to full charge, but either the software is bust or there's something seriously wrong with the central processing unit. Doesn't even turn off."

"I will investigate."

There was a brief hiatus as the ship computer opened interface channels and began to investigate the status of the small computer unit. Then the audio blurted something, and there was a hellish screech from the speakers, like steel being scraped with steel. The screen dissolved into scrambled symbolage. Lines

of numbers scrolled occasionally through the rest. An Error Message signal blinked in red letters.

Sally stared for a long moment. That was unheard of. What was going on?

At a grinding noise, she looked over to the small computer. Its data drives were running hot.

"What is it?" she said in a desperate voice while hammering the override key.

The overhead lights flashed and went out. For a second there was a spooky darkness. An alarm bell rang.

Then the back-up computer system came on-line. Emergency lighting flared. A set of small speakers throughout the ship were operated solely by this computer system. They announced "Condition Orange, computer emergency," in a reassuring male-toned voice, like that of Ship, and repeated it over and over.

Little screams sounded from up the ramps, and Pramod came running down, his arms windmilling the air. "What is it? What is happening?" he screamed when he saw her.

"I don't know, Ship is dying, Pramod—something's destroyed its upper level tecture."

"What?" Pramod turned and ran for the bridge on the upper level.

The alarm continued to ring, the ship screen blinked rapidly and then went off.

Sally reached out and tried to pull the connector cable from the socket on the medical machine. She put her palm down on the casing and received an electric shock that sent her sprawling back into the shelves with a shriek of pain.

A patch of badly burned skin on her palm throbbed miserably. She felt suddenly very dizzy and nauseous. Groggily she got to her feet and stumbled out of the repair room.

She took the ramp to the third level. She had to keep an eye on Pramod; there was no telling what he might get up to. Roger was out there in that spacetent, with very little protection against the void. If Pramod cut in the ship's engines now, he'd probably crisp the spacetent.

The sound of her spacesuit, squeaking faintly as the o-rings rubbed, faded from the repair station.

The screws on the back of the medical computer unscrewed with bewildering rapidity. The inspection hatch opened, and the Military Form's exploratory module appeared and darted out the door on spidery limbs for a swift reconnaissance of the ship's interior. It moved with an insectlike rapidity almost too fast for the human eye to follow.

The main computing engine aboard the ship had been temporarily disabled by the introduction of deadly worm programming that ate through the delicately laid roots of the higher level architectures of the artificial intelligence.

The exploratory module returned in a few seconds and released a messenger that darted into the open computer cabinet. The module then took up a guard position by the doorway ready to attack anything that appeared, while the Military Form itself emerged from the computer cabinet, in a sudden rush of segmented coils that moved on hundreds of small, muscular legs.

Never had it been more vulnerable than at that moment. But the enormous length of time that had passed had consumed much of the original bodymass reserve. It had been given up very slowly but it had eventually been given up. All that remained now were the central brain nodes, a minimal transport system, and the exploratory module.

The central nodes must find safety first; that was the most immediate need.

The Military Form crawled smoothly down the leg of the table and then ran at a stately three miles an hour down the corridor behind the exploratory module, which bolted along rapidly ahead on its spindly legs.

At the ramp the waddling mass of the Military Form, a gross, flabby, rat-size caterpillar, went down, then rounded the first corner, where the exploratory module was unscrewing the clamps on a maintenance port that led into the cable area behind the walls.

Once the port was open the exploratory module lifted the central brain nodes and assisted them into the open port.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

PANDI BESHWAN'S REACTION TO THE ALARMS CLANGING through the ship was to simply block them out. Seed was hundreds of millions of kilometers away from any feasible assistance from another ship. Indeed, except for planet Saskatch, the whole system was proscribed. There was no possibility of any assistance reaching them, so the only thing to do was to turn on the TV and forget the stupid alarms.

She turned on Tony Sturns and drifted into a miniseries of romance and intrigue among the wealthy set of a fabulous megahab in the Hyades. Everyone wore the most fabulously elegant clothes and took them off at the slightest opportunity.

Torry was just such a superbod. In the clinches he kissed like he really, really meant it. Pandi was transfixed, able to forget the heart-stopping terror she'd suffered when those alarms went off and Pramod went bolting down the ramps to the repair shop.

Alarms. Her fingers in her ears, she bent over on her bed with a sheen of sweat covering her forehead and chest. Then the desperate movements: jamming the mini-series cassette into the TV, holding her eyes on the screen until Torry emerged.

The alarms faded away, Tony's sensual magic seduced her once again, and she drifted in a pleasant state of semi-arousal, with overtones of torpor.

She was only awakened from the trancelike state by the sudden appearance of Sally Xermin herself.

Sally wore an odd, abstracted expression. She looked like she was operating under great pressure, on the edge of a nervous breakdown. She kept bobbing her head back, looking over her shoulder nervously. "Pandi, I think something very strange is going on. I'm seriously worried about the ship."

Pandi felt her heart pound uncomfortably. If Sally was worried then it had to be serious. Her voice emerged in a humiliating little squeal. "What is it?"

Sally peered at her for a moment. "I don't know." She sounded distracted, lost. "It's hard to say exactly what it is but the computer has gone completely berserk. We've just about lost the prime software of Ship."

"How?"

"Pramod has a weird idea, at least I thought it was weird, but now I'm not so sure. Some kind of worm program got into the computer, and it's destroyed most of the organized files. We're going to have to make it the rest of the way without it."

Pandi's sunny brown face turned a deathly gray. "Something that came from the pod?" She barely managed to say it.

Sally could barely meet her eyes. Could she face this? Could she really? "I don't know, maybe. I can't understand it. But something strange happened to Roger, and then something strange happened to the portable medical computer. And when I hooked that unit up to the ship computer, it blew Ship to pieces."

Something turned very cold deep inside Pandi. "Oh no—it is turning out like Pramod said it would!"

Sally hated to admit it; Pramod would be insufferable from here on out. "Anyway I'm taking some precautions; I'm going to activate the lifeboat."

"What might it be, Sally? Some kind of alien life?"

Sally tried not to scream at the suggestion. "It can't be life, not if it's infected the computers. How can life infect a computer, Pandi? I mean, I'm not a tech, but that seems improbable."

Pandi's worst fears were coming to life around her. She caught at Sally's arm. "An alien disease of some kind? Something that can pass from people to robots and so on?"

Sally shook her head. "No, that's madness. Nothing could have been alive in that pod; it had been exposed to vacuum for fifty hours! We went over that thing with the cameras on max."

"But something happened, something that could only have come from that pod got into the computer. It must have, Sally."

But Sally had turned away, heading for the small dorsal docking structure that contained the lifeboat. A small ship, with supplies and minimum life-support zone for five people.

When she'd gone, the hatch slid shut behind her, and Pandi was left groping. She tried to organize her thoughts.

She felt a desperate need to find out more, and at the same time she was desperately afraid of what she might find out.

Hesitantly she went through the apartment to her mother's room. But Tili was in the shower, with the "Do Not Disturb" sign up. That was Tili's way of escaping the unpleasant realities of life.

Pandi knew better than to disturb Tili when she was taking one of her hours-long showers.

So she went on, out into the state room and then up the ramp to the bridge where Pramod was hunched over a computer terminal, hooked into the auxiliary computer system, a backup unit with limited memory, able to run only slow software, with a rudimentary, resident artificial intelligence.

Pramod looked up; tears were running down his cheeks. Pandi was shocked. She had seen her father upset on many an occasion but never had she seen him weep. "The computer is down, wicked daughter. The thing is damaged, permanently I think. We have lost ninety-three percent of all data files. All the central personality modules of Ship have been destroyed. It's gone."

"Oh no"

"I do not understand this. There was no detectable mechanical activity inside the alien object. How could something then do this to our computer?"

Pandi didn't want to think about that, not just yet. "We can get back to Saskatch though, can't we, Father?"

He turned on her a mask of naked dislike, almost hate. "Yes, we can get back. We can compute our own orbits for the return to Saskatch. We have the auxiliary computer backup for instance. But that's not the point, though of course a thoughtless, selfish girl like you would never have considered it. Without Ship we will be unable to maintain Extended Life. Ship had all that information, and it is gone—all our medical records, every detail that has been collected through our lives. There are copies of a lot of it, of course, and if I could reload Ship then we would be all right, but I can't. The central data paths are blocked; the computer scrambles files as it accepts them. The auxiliary is too small, too damn slow to run Extended Life for us."

He broke into sobs. "We will age. Oh Pandi, Pandi, we will age!"

And Pandi knew what that meant. Pramod was centuries old, and without the constant monitoring and prescription of dozens of microdose drugs and immune boosters, Pramod and Tili would age dozens

of years each year, perhaps more depending on the level of stress. If they should contract some senility cancer then they might even die.

In an attempt to reassure Pramod she blurted, "But we can be back on Saskatch within three months."

Pramod waved a hand dismissively. "I know, and we'll probably lose the ship, and the acceleration effects might break our fragile old bones, because you know that one of our first problems is going to be the failure of artificial calcium uptake."

She stared at him in dismay.

"So we'll have to take it a little more slowly, say five months to get back. By then my condition will have virtually collapsed, Pandi. I will be like a man in his late seventies of natural life—feeble, barely able to move around! Tili will be a hag in her sixties. How do you think my vain, beautiful wife will feel then? And once you have aged you cannot grow young again. We will have lost precious years of our youth and middle age."

Pandi stared at him. Pramod's tears were drying on his cheeks but his eyes had become rather wild. Pramod had always been very vain about his youthful looks, the result of Extended Life treatments from the onset of puberty, a mark of the old Beshwan life-style on Hyperion Grandee.

"Oh, Father, I'm so sorry."

His eyes focused on her. "Sorry, you? Wicked, evil girl who is no credit to her parents, you are so sorry?" He raised his hands over his head and brought them down with a thump on the command countertop.

"How did we let ourselves get into this mess?" he demanded. "How did I ever let that fool Xermin get me into this? We're months out of range of any help whatsoever and if we even dare call for help we'll end up in the ITAA penal system for a few years because we are in the proscribed zone. No Extended Life there; your mother and I will be dead, that's for sure. You see now what we have risked for you, you damn fool girl. We risked all this so that you would be able to attend the best schools in Nocanicus system and make something of yourself. And how are we paid for this, eh? We are paid with the loss of all the best years of our lives."

She would have laughed at the absurdity of his claim, knowing as she did that Pramod and Tili were just economic exiles from Nocanicus, reduced to living on a moderate estate on a cool-climate frontier planet, but Pandi found the madness in her father's eyes too disturbing to confront; she turned on her heel and ran to her room, fighting back the tears.

Back in her cabin she moved around restlessly, wondering what to do. Pramod was out of his mind, Tili was in the shower; it all seemed to be going to pieces around her.

In desperation she turned the TV on again, gazed for a few seconds at Torry Sturns, and then turned it off again. She was past the point where TV could help her stop the thoughts running through her head.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

PANDI PACED IN CIRCLES IN HER ROOM UNTIL SHE COULD stand it no longer, then she flung herself out the door to go find Sally. She needed to talk to somebody, and Sally was her only chance of finding someone rational.

She headed through the Beshwans' lounge, a place rich in motifs of old India, and stopped as her mother appeared, wrapped in a long blue towel, with another around her head. "Where are you going?" snapped Tili.

"To find Sally."

"Why should you want to talk to that one! She who has brought such misfortunes upon us!"

"Mother!" said Pandi with considerable irritation.

"Wicked child, you are no daughter of mine!" Tili gave her a look of hatred and pushed past and went on into her own room.

Pandi shrugged. Tili was not handling the crisis very well, no surprise there. Tili was a refined Hindu princess who had come down in the world. She hadn't handled anything very well in twenty years.

Were other people's mothers like that? Somehow Pandi doubted it; her schoolfriends' mothers on Saskatch had always seemed so much nicer than her own. Relaxed instead of tense, casual instead of so desperately formal, able to enjoy themselves without such endless concern over purity and spiritual pollution.

She opened the hatch and stepped out into the corridor that led to the ramps.

As she did so, while the door was still open and in her hand, something like a small red broomstick hurtled across the ramp space at the end of the corridor. It was traveling at waist height, bounding along on legs that looked like wires. She froze, her mouth open, her heart pounding as it had never pounded before. She prayed she was just hallucinating.

The thing reappeared, swinging around the corner with a terrifying rapidity.

Pandi jumped backward, slamming the hatch while her shriek of fright bounced around the suite. She slapped the lock button and heard the bolts chunk across.

Which was a very good thing since the door mechanism was being cranked furiously at that very moment.

Pandi peered out of the oval door window set five feet off the floor. A red stick, tipped with a small four-fingered hand, slid across the plastic. It was followed by a cluster of pink ferns on yellow stalks. Pandi jumped back. When she looked again, something—an eldritch insect—was outlined at the far end of the corridor; the next instant it was gone.

Limbs like wires, a narrow, serpentine shape, a very small body. Pandi wasn't sure she could believe her own eyes. But she screamed anyway, good and loud, stamping her feet, shivering violently.

Her mother reappeared. "Pandi, stop making that awful noise! You know you are forbidden to slam the hatch like that."

Pandi rubbed her hands together so hard they hurt.

"Mother! I saw something out there, something alive, something from that alien pod."

"Pandi! What is this nonsense you are talking?"

"Listen, Mother, we must call Father. There's something aboard the ship! It just tried to get in here!"

Tili paled, her eyes locked rigidly on her daughter.

"We must warn him, Mother! We must warn Pramod!"

Tili hesitated. "Describe this thing you say you saw!"

But Pandi had already swung around and grabbed the wall phone handset. That thing moved so fast! She called the bridge. "Father!" she screamed in relief when Pramod answered.

Pramod looked up, obviously annoyed. "What is it?"

"Father, there is something alive, aboard this ship. I just saw it!"

Pramod stared at her a second, his mouth framed in inquiry. "What?" he started to say. There was the sound of the door opening behind him, and he turned his head and let out an odd little cry of despair. The next instant he disappeared from video view in a sudden flurry of limbs and was dragged below the countertop. His feet came up, kicked furiously, then vanished. A long shriek of horror was cut off in awful gurgles and grunts.

A red sticklike arm swung over the countertop followed by a waving bunch of pink ferns. It reached the video camera and the signal died.

Tili sprang forward and banged on the access button with a frantic energy. "Pramod! Stop this, Pramod, stop this fooling! Respond. It is I, Tili!"

But her pompous little husband was far from fooling. Instead he was thrashing in an extremity of horror, a scene from the most evil of nightmares.

The thing that held him, a slim scarlet cucumber with tentacles of enormous strength, grasped him fast at the thighs, around the throat, and almost around both arms. It held him off the floor horizontally like a baby while he scabbled desperately with the arm that had thrust his own handkerchief into his mouth and gagged him.

With both hands he could only slow the wire-thin hand down. The linen in his mouth was choking off his air; there was a roaring in his ears.

That oddly delicate little hand, but so strong! The obscene pink ferns, like small kings, waved above him. His legs kicked desperately and succeeded in occasionally forcing the thing to shift position, but he could not free his thighs, nor his throat, nor remove the gag from his mouth.

It tilted him suddenly, pressing his head down to the floor where he saw another horror waiting, a bloated white centipede thing the size of a rat. It rose up on a dozen muscular little pink legs.

Dimly he heard his wife's voice over the commo audio, and it was as if he were beneath an ocean and she rode a boat on the surface, drifting farther and farther away.

The centipede thing reached him. It crawled up his face, onto his chest. In desperate revulsion he tried to shove it away, but an arm of wire snapped across and pinned his wrist.

He felt his shirt suddenly ripped open and something cold and oily lay against the skin of his chest and belly.

A pricking began in several places, sharp pricking that got worse and worse, and then the thing was stabbing him with hot needles, in a dozen places on his stomach and chest. The needles worked under the skin; they spread, they passed, agonizingly, along the major nerves. The fire in his belly was burning, molten metal roasting its way through his tissues, acid searing his nerve endings.

Now Pramod's body was convulsing with desperate energy, the struggle of an animal in a metal trap, and he might even have regurgitated the handkerchief if the slender little hand had not come up once more and shoved it back in, good and deep. Thereafter his screams echoed only inside his brain.

Pandi and Tili stared at each other for several long, cold seconds.

Finally Tili turned and ran into Pramod's study. She reemerged with the .45 service revolver that had been the Beshwan family side arm for generations.

"No, Mother, you mustn't. I've seen that thing, you won't have a chance!"

But Tili pointed the gun at her. For a moment there was a mad look in her eyes, and Pandi wondered if Tili was going to shoot her. Then Tili opened the door and ran down the corridor, the long towel flapping behind her.

Pandi crept out in her wake, shivering. She saw her mother disappearing up the ramp to the bridge.

A moment later Tili reached the bridge. There was a shrill scream and a shot, then more shots and then more screaming, long, spine-chilling shrieks that went on and on while Pandi ran down the ramps to the lifeboat docking bay.

She slipped through the hatch, locked it behind her, and ran for the lifeboat in its ejection cradle. She found that it had been manually activated and readied for launch, but that Sally wasn't around. Pandi waited nervously, looking back over her shoulder, while the lifeboat airlock cycled and finally opened.

Once inside with the door shut safely behind her Pandi punched into the communicator searching for Sally, but her voice spoke into empty rooms. Sally was nowhere to be found.

Pandi cut into the bridge audio signal; there was still no video signal. Tili's screams had subsided into muffled sobs of a most appalling woe. And beneath them there was another sound, occasional sharp grunts and sticky squeals as Pramod was taken as primary host by the Military Form.

With the insights into the human body that the Military Form had garnered from subduing Roger Xermin, it now worked efficiently and quickly to transform Pramod and make him more useful as host. A new wad of brain tissue was growing under the muscles of his shoulders, while his skin changed dramatically and his internal organs were improved to boost metabolic rates. The host thing was surprisingly old; the Military Form had to undertake an immediate program to strengthen the skeleton and connectives.

Pandi cut off the awful noises and broadcast a general alarm call for Sally. There was no reply at first, and then at last a channel opened.

"Pandi! What is it?"

Pandi let out a gasp of relief. "Sally, where are you?"

"In the spacetent."

"Sally, oh thank the gods! Sally there is a thing on board the ship. A thing, oh a terrible thing. It is killing them, it is killing Pramod and Tili. Oh it is horrible, horrible. It almost got me, Sally!"

Sally didn't reply for a long, long second. "All right, Pandi, where is it?" She sounded resigned, doomed.

"On the bridge, Sally, on the bridge. We must get out! I'm in the lifeboat. I'll pick you up; I'm ejecting right now. That thing was terrible, a red broomstick that moved so fast! could barely see it?"

Pandi had activated the launch procedures; the warning klaxon wailed.

"What about Roger, Pandi?"

The lifeboat slipped into the ejection lock. The air vanished around it and then the lock opened. The sight of the vacuum outside, the distant hard points of the stars made something grow cold and tight inside Pandi. "Sally, that thing has already had Roger. I won't pick up two, only you. If you had seen it, you would understand why."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

SALLY XERMIN FOUND HER HEART POUNDING IN HER chest so hard she thought it would break in half. Her throat was dry.

A thing! Aboard the Seed, and it was killing the Beshwans.

Pandi had been definite; she had seen something. One of the oldest nightmares in spacetime lore, a deadly alien something—a disease, a monster, a robot—that was unstoppable. The idea had been there from the beginning of space travel.

Slowly, very slowly, Sally looked around her. Roger's body remained still but for the slow steady chest movements indicating that he was breathing. Nothing alien and alive could be seen, although the various pieces of the alien pod were visible, on the other side of the spacetent, enclosed in clear plastic capsules.

She stared up at the zip bag. It floated up by the airlock, with Roger's bloody, fouled spacesuit in it.

The zip had been pulled partway open. She was certain she hadn't done that herself. No one else had been out; Pramod and Tili hated spacewalk, had hardly ever put on a spacesuit.

So? The question begged some immediate response.

With shaking fingers she opened a comline to the bridge. No video signal was available, but on the audio the damndest sounds could be heard: chirrups, squeals, a queer hissing.

She turned it off. Her skin crawled.

Something strange and terrible was happening on that bridge, and Sally looked back to the zip bag. She picked out the largest scalpel in the medical kit; it had a whisper-thin blade two-inches long. Holding it in front of her, she pushed herself across to the bag and tore the zip open with a quick jerk.

Its contents were released. Weird shreds of the spacesuit, cleansed of any available organic molecule. The waste-disposal unit on the leg of the suit had been disembowelled, turned inside out, and refabricated into something large and unrecognizable. Other things were attached to it, and tubes ran from it that ended in thin air. Sally stared very hard. Her heart felt turned to stone inside her chest. Something had been in there.

Her head turned, her body whirled, and she looked back to where the portable computer had been clipped, to the side of the medical trolley, tethered to Roger's stretcher.

The computer malfunction! She gulped. Something hammered in her chest. She could barely breathe. Tears were in her eyes. Something glittered in the air before her, a sparkling sphere. She reached for it without thinking and came up with a gem like nothing she'd ever seen in her life.

It was huge, hundreds of carats. Cut with a thousand tiny facets. She stared at it; where had this thing come from?

She zipped it into her pocket and looked back to Roger strapped to the stretcher. He couldn't be brought back; he might even be incubating some kind of alien spawn. She could do nothing more for Roger Xermin.

Tears were on her cheeks, but she slapped her helmet back on and opened the collapsed airlock without inflating it, finally tearing open the outer seal and letting the tent deflate explosively.

Sally felt the air in the tent rush past her, expelling her along with other bits and pieces into the void.

The tent collapsed, forming a shroud over Roger Xermin's remains, which continued their orbit of the ship.

Sally tumbled head over heels for a while until she brought herself into stability with her heel and helmet jets.

Lights, red and green, were approaching. Calmly, passively, she watched the lifeboat wallow toward her on its attitude jets, then brake and come to rest fifty meters away. She jetted gently over to the airlock.

Pandi's voice crackled in her headset. "Sally, I want to see your face on the screen. Please look up to the camera."

Sally gave the little dark circle a wintry smile. The airlock opened.

"I'm sorry, Sally, but I had to know it was you," Pandi said hurriedly.

Sally passed through the airlock, joined Pandi in the tiny single cabin of the lifeboat. She looked out the view-screen to the Seed, floating peacefully nearby. It seemed to her that her life was ending, as completely as if she'd been killed instead of Roger. "I want to get to Saskatch as quickly as possible."

"What about the radio—should we call for help?"

Sally shook her head vehemently. "Not unless you want to spend time in an ITAA prison. Believe me, those are hellholes that deserve the name."

"But we've got to warn them, don't you think?"

"Shut up, Pandi! For one thing, they won't listen to us. For another, if they find out what we did we'll pull thirty years or more. Our only hope is to get back unnoticed. That means we go in fast and hard, landing at night somewhere outside Beliveau City, maybe up at Blue Lake—whatever we can manage."

Pandi stared at her. An alien horror was at work on the Seed, let loose in the system. "But we can't leave it like this—not with the ship. It'll get away."

"No, of course not, we can't. But there's something we can do about that." Sally took control of the lifeboat and turned it and sent it drifting down the length of the spine that connected the Seed's life-support torus and the fusion engines of its main drives.

Sally put her helmet back on, checked her airtanks, and exited the spaceboat. She pushed herself across to the cinch module that clamped the engines to the Seed. In case of a fusion runaway, the engines could be dropped from the boom by the detonation of eight explosive retainer bolts.

As Sally opened the exterior manual override box, she blessed Roger's memory for insisting on manual overrides on all vital systems. Roger had that natural spacer's instinct for safety and hands-on control. Poor Roger, his instinct for safety had failed at the last. He was always so weak where the big score was concerned!

She pulled down the override switches, and lights came up in yellow, then red. She keyed in her code authorization, her crew number. The lights began to blink. It was set.

Sally looked up, located the lifeboat, and got her legs under her and pushed. Expertly she used her attitude jets to control yaw and spin.

The retainer bolts blew and sent the engines drifting away from the Seed. In twenty minutes they would explode. It was possible that they would vaporize the Seed when they did so, as well as the hateful alien pumpkin.

Sally floated into the narrow airlock door. It closed behind her. The inner door opened, she directed the lifeboat computer to execute the programmed acceleration burst, and strapped herself down beside Pandi in the crash couches that were to be their homes for the next few months.

The engines ignited and the spaceboat moved away from the Seed on a course for planet Saskatch, two hundred and fifty million kilometers away.

In their crash seats, Sally and Pandi stared grimly at the main-screen picture of the Seed. It rapidly receded, became a dot that had to be refreshed again and again by the imagizer until it began to blur somewhat. Minutes ticked by.

"Are we far enough away?" Pandi asked between sobs. The tears on her face were sticking in streaks, and her mouth was dry; lifeboat air was not the pleasantly humidified atmosphere of the Seed. But worst of all the acceleration effect of the four-gee burn that Sally had initiated was making her ache all over.

"Yes, I think so."

"Will the engines blow up the ship?" Her lips were like big rubber balloons; her face felt like it was going to collapse.

"I don't know, Pandi. There's a detonation delay, gives the Seed time to get clear. If anyone's on board who knows how to master the controls on the bridge and use the Seed's emergency booster system."

"How long do you think it'll take us to get to Saskatch, Sally?"

"With the fuel available it's going to take about five months. That isn't bad; Rog and I had to hitch a ride once on a comet, took us a year and a half to get where we were going."

"Do we have enough food?"

"There's enough concentrates for a crew of five. We should make it with plenty to spare."

Pandi stared around her at the cramped little cabin. The sanitary facilities were minimal. There were five crash couches. The ceiling was two meters from the floor. They would be there for months. Her head and neck hurt from the acceleration. "What are we going to do, Sally?" she wailed.

Sally restrained the angry retort that rose to her lips. This kid wasn't a bad one, just scared out of her wits. "Oh, we'll watch a lot of TV and we'll sleep a lot, I'd say."

Pandi's sobbing subsided. Sally considered their situation. The boat was built for five but there were only the two of them. So this trip would be virtually luxurious compared to some she'd been on. She composed herself. She would survive.

"We'll start with an inventory of ship's systems, kid. Like on any trip—see what we've got and whether it's working. Later, well I guess we'll watch TV. That's about all this boat is equipped with. We can pick up whatever we like from Saskatch."

Pandi didn't reply. The acceleration continued.

They were examining the water still and the recycler system when the twenty-minute mark came up. They turned to the view screen.

A brilliant burst sparkled suddenly against the background of the heavens.

BOOK TWO

AUTUMN

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

THE IRRADIATED HULK OF THE SEED OF HOPE CONTINUED slowly inward across the asteroid belt. Much of the ship had been lost, fragmented by the blast. But the life-support section and the storage compartments had survived, intact behind the massive shielding required on any human ship.

Orbiting the hulk was a new ship, half-constructed, built from scrap. Small, advanced ion drives now decorated its stern. Alien technologies abounded inside the little ship. Outside, a gas separator unit was busily converting the remainder of the Seed's water to hydrogen and oxygen, which were stored in liquid form in tanks slung beneath the new engines.

The plan was simple. A "storm assault" on the central reef organisms of the bipedal aboriginals of the bright water world. The fat disk beckoned, a glow of hope that was on course to a conjunction with the

Military Form's present position.

Activity continued at a frantic pace.

What had been Pramod and Tili Beshwan were now reorganized into a central controller, resident within the Pramod form, a slaved controller, resident in the Tili form, and three smaller forms, pups, hatched within the Tili form, employing the aboriginal reproductive tract to bring them to term.

The Pramod form had, as yet, undergone less radical transformations. The Military Form sat within the chest cavity with control nodes inserted into the host brain. Other control threads were spread throughout the human nervous system.

New organs of several kinds had been added. Things like large orange chrysanthemums grew from the eye sockets. Sheets of pink sensory tissue were grown out through the shoulder region. A forest of small tentacles had sprung from the wrists, and beneath the jaw a mass of thick green polyps had appeared, but beyond these changes the Pramod form remained recognizably human.

Indeed, the Military Form had not yet subsumed the mind of Pramod Beshwan, which in a macabre half-life, survived inside his brain. For a moment the aboriginal brain was required. It was a good brain and easily controlled since it was highly differentiated.

The Pramod form worked on an intricate lattice array of rods of metal that had been coated with a copper alloy and fastened to the central module until the whole resembled a metallic sea urchin.

The tentacles wove a merry dance around his hands, which were relegated to holding and lifting tasks.

Pramod drifted in and out of consciousness. Being awake involved considerable discomfort—he still received pain signals from various parts of the body, although they were fading. At least the initial agonies were over.

The worst part was that he retained his sanity, even when the orange things that usually blocked the view from his tormented eyes moved far enough to give him a glimpse of what Tili had become.

He would never forget watching her give birth to the little alien pup things, with their doglike "heads" and simian limbs.

Dully he wondered why he had been chosen to play out his accursed role, the golem of a terrifying alien life-form. When capable of reflective thought, he managed to remember enough of what had happened to be able to blame himself. Oblivion was always a relief.

Sometimes he heard the alien howling in his brain, an endless roar like the passing of an express train. There was no communication that he had ever detected. He felt the thing, he knew it was in his body, he'd watched it grow its way in. But he could not talk to it, and it seemed uninterested in communicating with him.

Tili was no longer even approximately human. Her body was lean and gaunt and stood close to six-feet high. Her head had shrunken, changed shape to resemble something more like an arrow head than a human skull. The orange chrysanthemum things waved an inch or two from her face on their pink stalks. Green polyps wobbled in the mass beneath the head. Arms sheathed in battlehorn moved in a blur of constant motion.

A beep from the computer caught the alien's attention. It scrutinized the display plate.

A tiny flare from a small ship had been detected. It was a long way ahead and was on course to the water world.

The Military Form was galvanized into fresh activity. Parts from a vacuum cleaner were modified and rebuilt into a small missile. In the tiny foundry that had been made from the stainless-steel parts of the kitchen, metal parts were cast and fashioned.

The Tili form built the guidance systems from a melange of disassociated electronic components. Quickly the little missile took shape.

It was a typical autumn day for Saskatch colony. Cold rain fell in sheets through a leaden sky. Out of the north blew a chill wind that had everyone's collars up underneath the wide brims of their "Saskatcher" hats.

Akander Ra Sub ducked inside the entrance to the Toxi Bar on Kung Street, close to the ITAA line. He took a deep breath. Once again he was on the line, with an unpleasant death just a whisker away.

The doormen nodded him through the hallway, a dark zone covered by cameras and hidden sensors. The rain was drumming steadily on the skylight somewhere, but the rain rhythm wasn't soothing, in fact his nerves thrummed to it.

In fact Akander Ra Sub was about as nervous as a man could be, and on reflection, he had damn good reason. He peeled off his rain coat and handed it, with his hat, to the Korean girl in her booth who took them without a smile. Akander put his finger under his collar and tried to readjust his white silk tie. It wasn't easy to tie a tie when you were as nervous as Akander. His gray check jacket had small damp patches in the armpits.

He felt a sudden massive grip on his shoulders and spun around.

Kow Huk, the terrifying killer for the Fixer Brothers, gave him a bizarre little smile. The black eyes belied the smile; there was no readable emotion in them whatsoever.

Kow Huk patted him down with expert motions, probing everywhere for hidden equipment. Then he led Akander on into a small, darkened room. For a moment Akander wanted to turn and run. Then he got a grip on himself. When he spoke he was surprised to discover that his voice didn't tremble. "All right, how long do we wait here?"

Kow Huk's little smile vanished. "Not long."

Akander looked around the room, a back alcove with matte black walls, completely featureless. There were no windows other than the skylight, and only one way in or out. There was just the one table, the four chairs.

If anything went wrong he would never make it out. As if to emphasize his vulnerability, the tiny microphones imbedded in his nipples itched unbearably. The wires under his skin ran down into the soft flab on his belly that they'd made him grow, six pack by six pack, on a diet of eight thousand calories a day, until he'd had enough to accommodate the equipment, a micro recorder the size of a thumbnail. On humid nights the itching was unbearable.

But as Lieutenant Griks so cheerfully put it, if he was going to finally hit the jackpot, the suffering was an essential requirement. The Fixer Brothers were too careful for anything else.

And this time there was every indication that the jackpot was in play. There were four chairs in the room—that meant there would be someone present other than the Fixer Brothers and himself. That "someone" could only be the shadowy "Mr. Big" that they had trailed so long and so arduously.

All summer Akander had brought packages of TA45 to the Fixers. Each package had been bigger than the last, and now they were negotiating over a full thousand liquid ounces, a deal involving mega credit.

And so, at last, the elusive Mr. Big had decided to take a look at Akander, who had become such an important source of supply.

They were coming. Akander put his hands flat on the table, as stipulated by Kow Huk. A pair of bulky figures, their faces vagued by holoveil, wearing identical black wide-brimmed hats, with bulky bodies packed into near identical black suits and white shirts, each boasting a massive diamond stickpin, strode

in and sat down without a word.

Akander felt himself under that fierce, feral gaze again. The legendary, dreaded Fixer Brothers.

When they spoke it was through voice modulation, cool, emotionless, like industrial robots. "Your plan interests us," said one of them. As usual you couldn't tell which one of them was speaking at any one time.

"Great," Akander said, trying to hide his nervousness under a smile and a shrug.

"It also interests a friend of ours. He wants to meet you.

Akander did his utmost to hide the elation he felt. The big fish was coming, he was sure of it.

Almost immediately another figure entered the room. A taller man, a portly figure, wearing a black cape and a wide-brimmed Saskatch hat.

His face was barely visible in the shadow under the brim of that hat, but Akander would have sworn he detected a mustache. A man with a cleft chin, a long nose, and a mustache.

"This is an interesting proposal you have made," said the newcomer, without any modulation that Akander could detect. An old Saskatch accent, heavily nasal.

"More than a proposal, we have the stuff."

"So I'm told, but I don't quite understand where you're getting it from. You aren't known to the other walker groups. I know; I've checked."

"We're freelance. We deal with the juju men down in the dankwood, we run it up ourselves. We very good at that you understand."

"Mmmm, so you must be if these totals are to be believed." Mr. Big was examining a small noteslab.

"Fifty, sixty ounces a time, and then two hundred, and now much more. You guys are pretty busy."

"You right about that."

"I also know who your walker jock is, and I find myself wondering about that."

Akander tried not to tremble.

"Carney Waxx is the name of the gentleman I believe. A name that my colleagues here will be interested in I'm sure."

The Fixer Brothers swiveled in unison to stare first at Mr. Big and then at Akander.

There was nothing for it but to brazen it out, keep talking, sound a lot, lot calmer than he felt. "Yeah, you got our man. One of the best in the biz you know. He's been over the plateau more times than most."

"Indeed he has," Mr. Big agreed. "Waxx is from the old club, one of the early ones. I'm surprised that he's still alive, actually."

The Fixer Brothers conversed briefly in a modulated, computer language. Odd alien sounds and phrases rasped the air. They turned back to the others, their faces too vague to be readable, the colors miscible, like TV screens out of tune. "Why have we not known this before?" said the one on the left.

"Huh, what does it matter? I'm the one you deal with. I know Carney had a disagreement with you, but he's made up for that by now I'd say. Anyway he's just our runner. I'm the man you deal with."

The colors crawled. "We have not settled all accounts with Mr. Waxx."

"Well, one of these days I guess you'll have to have a meeting and work this out. Mr. Waxx feels right now that you are perhaps a little too excitable on the issue. With the fullness of time you ought to see it more clearly, as a small thing, an early error in what will be a long and profitable relationship."

"We do not forget matters of this kind."

Akander was sweating. "Look, this is a very profitable relationship we got going here. I'm bringing you the Tropic in good quantity. It's pure—our wild friends in the jungle have good chemistry. You're getting big packages, at very good rates, on a regular basis. Why disturb that?"

We have a hot walker jock gentleman, a man giving us the best rides of his life; why don't we just ride with him and forget the unpleasantnesses of the past."

It was impossible to deal with the Fixers like this. Akander's skin crawled every time he looked at those shifting pixels, vague antimorals, bright pastels.

Akander looked to the dark figure of Mr. Big. The hat brim was pulled down, but Akander saw a thin-lipped sardonic mouth.

Mr. Big said nothing.

Akander started feeling really desperate. Kow Huk was within earshot; there was no getting out of there in one piece unless they let him.

The Fixers spoke together again, quick blips of scrambled speech. Then the one on the right spoke. "We will consider this. You will tell Mr. Waxx that he will still have to repay us what he owes. But for the moment he is allowed to live."

Akander swallowed; his mouth and throat had dried up. "Well that's good, I thank you. I'm sure Mr. Waxx would, ah, do the same. You'll let him live, he'll keep running over the Thompson Plateau, and we'll keep dealing with our jungle men."

He coughed, then recovered. "And we'll all get richer, too!"

The Fixer Brothers gave no sign of emotion. Mr. Big was grinning, however. "You know I'm glad to hear that old Carney is still alive. Still a few of the old gang out there. It's such a dangerous sport. We've lost so many." Mr. Big sighed, as if he were lamenting the deaths of favorite racehorses, then stood up slowly, ending the meeting. One of the Fixers grunted something in Korean to Kow Huk.

Kow Huk snapped his fingers with a hard crack. In the darkness of the bar, barely visible figures moved to cover Mr. Big's exit.

Akander took a deep breath. The interrogation was over, he'd survived. And he had the stuff now, unmodulated voice on the wire from Mr. Big.

Were the Fixers Korean, Akander wondered briefly. They were legendary but very little was really known about them. Akander had always thought of them as Saskatch Caucasoids until now. But few people learned Korean, and all Koreans spoke some Interlingua.

On the other hand Mr. Big was a Cauk and from an old colony family by the sound of it. Akander knew they'd want to cut the tape out of his belly after this session.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

THE APARTMENT WAS ON THE FIFTH FLOOR OF A WALK-UP on Quebec Street, a block north of East Avenue A in downtown Beliveau City. The patisserie on the ground floor sent up the aromas of pastry and coffee every morning, and they usually ate breakfast there.

The rest of the building was a tenement jammed with illegals, who paid high rent for tiny spaces with no questions asked or residence permits required.

According to Johan Griks, the place was perfectly safe.

They were next to invisible down there among the throngs of illegals in the East Avenue A section.

Like most older Saskatch buildings their building was massively built, of stone and brick. The corridors were narrow, the rooms generally small and thus easy to heat.

Too easy in fact, on that autumn day. Even though temperatures outside were dropping, the apartment was sweltering as the radiators whooshed and roared.

Carney Waxx had the windows open, and a little rain came in every time the wind gusted enough. But Carney took no notice; Carney was lost in the heavens. He was also in bed, cloud-surfing, with the covers pulled up over his head and his eyes tightly shut.

The clouds were soft, white, fluffy cumulus, with towers and ramparts and billowing sails. Carney flexed his wings and dove through them, the warm sun on his back, the cool moisture on his front, on his wings. He wheeled, and turned, and far, far below was a patchwork green-and-yellow farmland.

Carney contemplated the dream castle once again.

Within lay the princess that he must rescue. He drew the magic sword and plunged toward it.

The dragon would be waiting, that hissing, horrid monster of his own creation. But he would slay it, as he always did, with deft strokes of the sword, hacking through its ugly head and limbs. And then, the princess, and hours and hours of...

Akander Ra Sub crashed open the front door and stumbled in. His Coat and hat shed rain everywhere.

"Hey Waxx!" he yelled.

Carney didn't reply, too intent as he was on the dragon and the princess.

"Waxx!" Akander stomped toward him, big feet in heavy wet boots.

The door to Carney's room went down, the Akander dragon was inside.

It reached out and twitched the sheet away. Carney came up with a shriek and leapt out of bed and swung the magic sword, this way and that, carving the dragon of his imagination in pieces.

Akander was not amused. "Waxx, you promised me..."

Carney fought on. Akander came close to losing his temper; he shoved Waxx back onto his bed and stomped over to the windows and banged them shut. "You stupid fucker, Waxx. Letting the rain get in here!"

Carney groaned and twitched on the bed. Akander was raging mad. "You promised me, man, you promised. No Tropic until we got out of here!;"

Carney moaned.

"What the hell happened, Waxx? Why are you doing this?"

Carney sat up, allowed his vision to fade, finally opened his eyes, slowly. The dirty white-walled reality crashed home again. "Oh shit, what are you doing back so early?" He groaned.

"Caught you out, eh? Weren't expecting me back so soon, eh? Thought I'd be in the fucking hospital all night, did you?"

Carney didn't nod, but he had.

"Well you goofed, Waxx. Griks is too nervous to even let them take the wire out in a hospital. They operated on me on a desk in the old police building, you know, over the river in the Vieux Carre.

"Shit," mumbled Carney.

"Right! And then they sewed me up, sprayed me with antiseptic, and got me a taxi."

"Shit."

"And I find you flying, after you promised me that you wouldn't touch Tropic until we're off this planet."

Carney made a weak gesture of dismissal. "I'm sorry, man. I didn't think you'd find out."

Akander stared at him a moment. "You dumb bastard," he said at last. "While I'm over there in Spacetown talking with the Fixers, risking my life, you sit around here all day watching TV and goofing off. Griks brings over the stuff, and I take it in and give it to those killers. All you have to do is stay sane and sober until we get through the trial and get our tickets out, and what do you do instead?"

Carney roused himself. "All right, Akander, I agree, I let the side down. It's my fault, my stupid fault. Look, it's over. It was only a light dose; I'll take it down now. It's over."

Carney got up, lurched into the bathroom, fumbled around in his shower bag, and came up with a maroon snap case. Inside was a trunk spray; he cocked it, opened his mouth, and took a couple of squirts.

Within ten seconds the balmy, blissful feeling was gone. Carney sank back into the arms of tedious reality. His mood collapsed like breaking bubbles. He felt sweaty.

Akander was still staring at him sullenly.

"All right, all right, it was wrong. I won't do it again."

"You promised, Waxx."

"Yeah, I promised, but it's boring in here, day after day sitting around. I never did like TV, I'm tired of reading, I can't log onto the computer net, I'm a hunted animal, and I daren't show my face anywhere. It ain't that much fun, Akander, so I thought, I'd, you know."

"Yeah, well to hell with that, Waxx. You're staying straight the rest of the way, or I'm going to make you wish you had."

"What does that mean?"

"Maybe you want to find out?" Akander threw his coat on the bed and squared his fists.

Carney shook off the last effects of the Tropic. With so much trunk in his system he didn't really want to fight, but it looked as if there was nothing else to do. He went into a defensive crouch.

Akander came quickly, tried a kick that Carney parried, and swung a hard right hand that only missed by a fraction. Carney dodged away but not far—the room was too small. Akander caught him with a low kick, then socked him with a left that sent him crashing into the wall. Carney palmed away a pile-driving right hand but took the left in his solar plexus.

He gasped, the breath went out of him. The imaginary dragon was one thing, but the real-life Akander was quite another. Somehow he pushed Akander away and then went after the bigger man with a flurry of kicks and chops.

Akander withdrew into the next room, the little living room. Carney heard him curse volubly. The phone was beeping.

Carney followed him out, found Akander pulling off his shirt. The violence had disrupted some of the stitching on his stomach and chest.

"Oh shit," muttered Carney and he clicked on the phone.

The scrambler was on so all images were just vague pixeltry. A scrambled voice said, "Direct forty."

"Thirty-one," Carney replied.

"Direct eighty."

"Oh come on. I know it's you!"

"Direct eighty!"

Carney sighed. "All right, all right. There is honor amongst thieves."

The screen unscrambled, and Johan Griks appeared. He looked drawn, concerned.

"What's up?" said Carney.

"We have a date in court tomorrow morning. Judge Feinberg has cleared her calendar for us. I want you two to be in good shape for her, so I want you to get a good night's sleep: We'll pick you up in the morning."

"It's about time."

"And I want you packed tomorrow. You won't be staying there past tonight. After tomorrow I'm putting you in another safe house."

"Where to this time?"

"You'll find out when you get there, but it's nice and quiet there."

Griks signed off. Waxx fumed.

Akander had some tissues out and was swabbing the blood from his belly where the stitches had torn.

"Damn it, Akander, look what you've done."

Akander gave him a vengeful look. "If I were you, Waxx, I'd keep my mouth shut. I got enough grief with you already."

"Yeah, yeah." Carney went to the bathroom and brought back the skin spray. He sprayed the bleeding section a couple of times and started new skin growing over the wound.

"Just wait until you're healed up before you decide you want to fight, all right?"

Akander stared at him, then grunted something and dropped his head. Fighting was forgotten. Carney decided to try and patch things up. He slipped on his holster and the big WAK magnum.

"Let's go get something to eat, then turn in. Griks wants us to be nice and shiny in the morning for Judge Feinberg."

Akander took a few seconds to agree, by which time Carney had his Saskatch hat and heavy raincoat on.

They trod down the stairs and out into the rain, which was lashing down fiercely now.

"I want to live somewhere warm my next planet," said Carney as they hunched into the gusting wind and strode up the block to the Relais. "Warm and dry."

"I second that idea," grunted Akander. The wind was throwing the cold rain into their faces.

"Winters soon coming."

"Well at least it ain't snowing."

But the cold wind hinted at the snow to come as the Saskatch glacial winter got underway.

The Relais sign was a pair of bottles crossed at the neck, with "Relais" written beneath in green and red neon. They descended a few steps into the warm cave of the restaurant, redolent of food and wine.

The Relais was another relic of the early colony days. A salous approach to cuisine, a wine list featuring dozens of costly imports and less costly synthetics, and the decor of the rough-hewn log cabin that it had originally been, lit by candles and fireplace.

Carney announced that he would pick up the tab, and he ordered some imported champagne which they sipped while they waited for their roasted mule crabs.

"Time to celebrate, Akander my friend, time to celebrate, don't you think?"

"Yeah?"

"The case is made, the hard part's over. We'll be out of here in another week or so."

"Well I guess so."

Akander sipped the champagne, *Domaine LaRose*, shipped from the fabulous megahabitat *Gloaming Splendor* in the *Nocanicus* system, hundreds of light-years away.

"Mmm, Mr. Waxx, I have to hand it to you, you know your drinking. This is a lot better than that old *Saskatch* whiskey we used to drink back in the old days."

"That's not saying much—that was fuel not booze."

"Remember how we used to drink that stuff in the bottle with the red label—what was the brand?"

"Old *Tusseau*? Who could ever forget. You could take varnish off your skis with it."

"When we were all staying in the *Maison Rouge*, on *Boldover Highway*. We'd drink that stuff and then go out and race the walkers up the highway."

They smiled and sipped, thinking back to the old days when they were both young walker jocks, the first generation to ride the big walkers over the *Thompson Plateau* and down to the dankwood jungle in the tropical zone.

Carney shook his head at the memories. "It's a wonder that any of us are still alive," he said with a shrug.

Akander agreed sadly. More than half the old gang from the *Maison Rouge* were dead. Quite a few others were incarcerated in the *Beliveau Detention Center*.

"Yeah." He raised his glass. "Not many of us left now."

"Trial won't last long."

"What about after the trial?" said Akander.

"We carry some extra weight out of the spaceport here. Enough to make us rich men on the far side."

"They'll let us do that, just walk through the spaceport?"

"They have to; they need us too much."

The mule crabs arrived, their heavy forelimbs cracked open, the soft tasty meat buttered and steaming. While they ate they traded dreams of their wealthy futures. Far planets, high-tech habitat systems, personal palaces—it was right there, within their grasp; they could almost feel it.

However, while they feasted, other wheels were turning. Colonel *Henri Tusseau* was receiving some intriguing information. Judge *Judith Feinberg*, doyen of the *Colony Court*, had cleared her court docket for the following morning. A special case was coming in, a very important case.

An important case that *Tusseau* knew nothing about. He picked up the phone, began the process of finding out what the mysterious case might be and who it concerned.

A survey of the police building however produced no further information. Nobody seemed to know,

unless it was Lieutenant Griks, and Griks wasn't available all of a sudden.

Tusseau pushed back his chair, spun it around, and looked out the window at the rain pelting down over Beliveau City. Traffic was still heavy over the bridge and on Cotes des Neiges. Tusseau's antennae for trouble were tingling.

On an impulse he switched the phone on and called the Beliveau Detention Center. He wanted to know if they knew anything about a Mr. Akander Ra Sub.

CHAPTER TWENTY

AFTER THE CRABS AND CHAMPAGNE, CARNEY AND Akander chose the Relais's famous Chantilly fruit pie, served with whipped cream and toasted nuts.

When they were done they sipped coffee, paid the bill, and left the restaurant's warmth for the damp streets and made their way back to the building, via the newsstand on the corner with East Avenue A.

The rain had slacked off, and something of a crowd was out on East Avenue A, which made progress slow since so many umbrellas were in use.

Carney paused at the newsstand to get the late edition of the Saskatch Express.

They turned up the block to Quebec Street. At the entrance to their building, Carney stopped and looked around. The dreary five- and six-story walk-up tenements were a dull gray in the fine drizzle. Yellow street lamps were lost in vague nimbi. Traffic slowly chugged downhill to the avenue.

He wouldn't miss East Avenue A he decided, and with weather the way it was for eight months of the year on Saskatch, he was looking forward to somewhere with sun and warmth, even if TA45 wasn't as readily available. "Last time we'll see this particular landscape," he said with contempt.

"Never did like the city, did you, Carney?"

"Not this little dump. I preferred living out in Boldover County, with woods all around."

"Yeah." Akander nodded. "I did, too. I lived in a city when I was a kid."

"Chesak?"

"Yeah, sure."

Chesak was a city on a colony world not far from Saskatch, a couple of light-years away.

"A lot of Chesak people came here it seems."

"Things are bad on Ligana, since the climate turned down."

"Right, it'll be as cold as this place in the end."

"Yeah. But there's a billion people on Ligana. They have to go somewhere."

"Yeah." Carney shrugged, felt a chill wind. "But I bet not too many come here."

They pushed into the front hallway and froze in horror. Kow Huk was waiting for them, with a pair of minions beside him. He was thwacking a little leather-covered truncheon into his palm.

They turned and opened the door again. More of Kow Huk's men stood there. Carney tried to get his gun out of his holster, but it jammed inside his coat.

Akander didn't hesitate, ramming his forehead into the nose of the nearest thug, then pushing the fellow backward down the steps.

Carney came right behind, taking a blow from a truncheon, going on and getting his right foot up into

the groin of the second man, who folded up with a dry gasp.

They were in the street, Kow Huk close behind. More Korean fighters in front of them.

Akander sprang onto the hood of a passing automobile, jumped down on the far side.

Carney heard the sharp ripping sound of an automatic hand weapon. He dived and rolled, out into the traffic. Explosive needles tore into the car Akander had hurdled, its windows blew in, and it came to a dead stop.

Carney came up with his magnum at the ready. His first shots sent Kow Huk and his friends diving for cover. The automatic spoke again, but Carney was already rolling down the street, head over heels, to the next car. A hydrotank exploded somewhere behind him. There was a lot of screaming going on.

He stood up and started running down the street to East Avenue A as fast as he could, dodging through the traffic. Akander was slightly ahead of him, almost at the corner.

Akander stopped to look back, saw him, signaled to the left, and started running again.

Carney glanced over his shoulder. Kow Huk and the others were running for their jeeps. They'd catch up in seconds. "Akander, wait—we need a car!"

Akander slowed. "Yeah, we do."

The light ahead, at Rue Ardennes, had turned red. Carney sprang from beneath the crowded umbrellas and ran to the nearest car, a big green Road Demon. He reached down and tried to yank the door open. It was locked, but then the window came down, and he found himself staring into the belligerent face of a real country "habitant" in a check shirt, with a woods hat and hawkswasp tubes.

Carney brandished his pistol. "Get out of the car!" he yelled.

The habitant tried to jam his car out of there but too much traffic was crossing the avenue. Carney slugged him with the gun, which just got him really angry. The door burst open suddenly, and with an oath the big man erupted from the car. Carney hit him again with the butt of the pistol, but it barely slowed him.

Kow Huk and his boys were getting into range. And then Akander slid across the front seat of the Road Demon and got both feet on the habitant's behind and boosted him onto the sidewalk between two parked cars.

Carney jumped in, kick-started the big car, and caught the light as it went green. The Road Demon touched one hundred kph on the next two blocks of Avenue A.

"Where we going now?" said Akander.

"That's a damn good question. I don't know."

Behind them jeeps loaded with Korean muscle were hugging on grimly.

They charged across the Bridge Road and then hung a right down the hill to Avenue B where they jumped a light and swung back to Bridge Road. There they turned right and headed back up the road and jumped another light and headed south on the Kwaidan Farms road.

"So we're going south."

"Nope, we'll take the St. Anne's turnoff and get on the Boldover Highway. Maybe we can get a wood shack somewhere in the north county, some place that doesn't have an address."

The Road Demon paced the traffic south to the junction with the Boldover County Highway. The jeeps hadn't appeared yet behind them. They coasted up to the light.

A police car, lights flashing, was positioned in the middle of the traffic stream. Another was visible out

on the highway itself. A couple of helmeted police were striding purposefully through the cars toward them. Both cops carried big shotguns.

"Uh oh, something tells me we're in trouble." Akander opened the door and jumped out.

Another pair of cops had appeared behind them.

"Freeze, don't move a muscle," screamed one of the cops. The shotguns waved menacingly.

With a groan Akander raised his hands over his head. A moment later Carney was yanked out and relieved of his handgun. Handcuffs clicked behind them and they were shoved into police cars and driven off in a wail of klaxons and whirling red lights.

At the blue-glass police building they were hustled out and rushed to the top-floor office of Colonel Henri Tusseau.

They found the colonel in a reflective mood. He spun in his leatherback chair, and tented his fingers beneath his chin.

"Welcome, gentlemen. I believe you owe me a few explanations."

Carney looked to Akander. Akander seemed depressed.

"What's the meaning of this?" bristled Carney. "How come we aren't being charged downstairs? What's going on?"

Tusseau shot him a withering glance. "Monsieur Waxx, please stop that. Whining will get you nowhere. I know what you two have been up to."

"And what is that?"

"Fronting TA45 for a certain officer in the colony police. Quite sizable quantities, too. We could get you forty-year sentences apiece, I'd say."

"Now wait a minute." Akander was moved to protest.

"No, there's no reason to wait. We'll have you safely locked up in the detention center in less than half an hour. Tomorrow you'll be arraigned in Beliveau City Court."

"You can't do this!" Carney was shouting.

The cop behind him dug a truncheon into his back.

"You'll keep your voice down, Mr. Waxx, or you'll be gagged. Is that understood?" Tusseau stood up, adopted a martial pose.

"Where's Lieutenant Griks?" said Akander. "We demand to see Lieutenant Griks."

Tusseau sneered, turned his back on them, and looked out his window. The city lights spread out in blurry streaks across the dark.

"Lieutenant Griks will presently be under arrest along with you. He will be charged with conspiring to smuggle large amounts of Tropic Acid. As will you. We have a large amount of evidence, much of it gathered, of course, by Lieutenant Griks himself."

Carney's heart sank. Tusseau had discovered the sting operation just in time. If he laid charges against Griks before Griks could present Akander and Carney to Judge Feinberg, then the whole case could be rendered hopeless.

And Carney and Akander faced almost certain death once they were inside the BDC.

They were formally charged and then hustled back to the elevators, down to the garage, and into the back of a police van. With another car in escort they drove down the Bridge Road, across the bridge and up the long climb of Cotes des Neiges.

The bright spires of Spacetown rose on their left, bristling on the heights above the river.

But instead of Spacetown they were heading due north on the truck route to the Chaebol Warehouse Section in North Believeau. There they ground up Central Street to the detention center.

The gates swung open and the police drove in. Akander was giving way to a fit of morbid resignation. "I expect those bastards will do it real slow, you know."

"Shut up, Akander!"

"I expect they'll want to draw it out. Probably strangle us by inches. Probably strangle us with our own guts."

"Yeah, I know, but shut up about it."

Once inside, the procedures went awfully smoothly. They were expected. A big guard named Demetz kept repeating their names and chuckling to himself. They were tagged, blood sampled, fingerprinted, retina printed, and registered. Then taken to the first floor and shoved into one of a series of small cells contained behind solid-steel doors with very small windows. Twelve-feet long and six-feet wide—luxury accommodations in the BDC—the cells lined a central rectangular space, some eighty-meters long and five wide.

"Well at least they put us on the first floor."

"Yeah, the best seats in the house."

"I wonder why they didn't just put us up on the second floor, in with the brotherhood."

"Perhaps they want the pleasure of killing us themselves."

Carney felt a shudder go through him. "Kow Huk!"

"Why not? He'll just come for a little visit."

"But what about the bodies?"

"Oh, those they blame on the brotherhood."

Carney hugged himself in despair. "Oh great, now we've had it."

With a sudden clang their door opened on the burly figure of Kow Huk. Behind him stood the Fixer Brothers.

Kow Huk strode in purposefully and slammed rock-hard hands together in front of their faces.

He gave them a merciless smile.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

KOW HUK WHISTLED A LITTLE TUNE WHILE HE WORKED, obviously enjoying the task. His big hands slammed into his victims with precision and skill while his minions held them down. Carney's cries for mercy brought only little giggles from the Fixer Brothers. Kow Huk whistled on.

After a few minutes Carney's nose was running crimson, and spatters of it were flying all around the cell. The Fixer Brothers said something in complaint, and Carney was kned in the guts and dumped on the floor.

Kow Huk turned to Akander and began to pound away on the bigger man, producing gasps and then groans, but no cries for mercy. Akander knew that begging would only make the pain last longer—the Fixer Brothers liked to see men beg when death was their only hope of relief.

Kow Huk continued to whistle, his big hands slamming into Akander's body, lifting him off the

ground, grinding him into the wall.

Akander spat up a tooth, and tried to get it as far as the Fixer Brothers, where they stood by the cell door. The tooth fell short but a glob of reddened spittle landed on the trouser leg of the brother on the left. He kicked Akander savagely in the groin. Both Fixers said something to Kow Huk.

Kow Huk reached into a little black bag that he had laid down in the corner and produced a strangling pillow. His thugs forced Akander down onto the floor, and Kow Huk knelt over him and positioned the pillow over Akander's face.'

"Good-bye, Mr. Sub," said the Fixer Brothers with an unusual degree of detectable emotion.

Kow Huk began to apply pressure. Akander squirmed, fighting for life, but the odds were impossible. Carney watched with horrified eyes, too weak and sick to move, let alone to fight back. The Fixer Brothers were clapping their hands together in childish glee as Akander's long legs kicked and twitched.

And then there was a loud commotion outside the door which ended with the door opening again with a clang. Blue suits moved in, with automatic weapons leveled.

The Fixer Brothers looked up in stunned surprise.

Could Tusseau have set them up, too! Rudely they were seized and frisked for their handguns.

And then Johan Griks walked in. Kow Huk snarled and surged off the floor. A trooper took the opportunity to nail him with a gun butt to the side of the head, and Kow Huk went down with a crash.

"Release these men." Griks indicated Carney and Akander.

Carney uttered a dismal croak. Somebody handed him water. Akander's face was dark purple, blood from his mouth was smeared all over, and his hair was stiff with it.

A woman in her later middle years, wearing a gray raincoat and rather stout walking shoes had entered the cell. She had a lean jaw and gray hair pulled back into a bun. She gave Carney a keen glance. "We were just in time it seems." She whirled on the Fixer Brothers. "And you reptiles might as well know that I'm going to deal with you next. You're not getting out of this building again for a long, long time."

Carney approached. "Excuse me." He reached inside their suits and ripped out the sensor modules they wore. The pixel haze vanished. A pair of pudgy Caucasian faces appeared, bloody cheeks, fat noses, close-set eyes.

"Well now I understand why they kept the world guessing so long," said Carney.

"Certainly no beauties," said Akander, who was mopping blood from his stomach where his stitches had pulled.

The Fixer Brothers were hustled out. The burly figure of Kow Huk was lifted from the floor.

Griks ordered the prison medic, Doctor Trench, to examine Carney and Akander and when that was done and their worst cuts and bruises treated, they went out to a waiting police van. This time however the driver was Henry Young from Griks's personal team.

Griks climbed in the back with them and an armed guard.

"Where are we going now?" said Carney through badly bruised lips. "You know that Tusseau knows about the case and everything?"

Griks nodded. "Sorry about all this, you two. We're going to make it up to you."

"Boy, I hope so," grumbled Akander. "So far this has been a helluva way to get a sentence reduction."

"We're going down to Judge Feinberg's court. She's agreed to hear the case immediately, in open session. That way it will be logged with the ITAA and no matter if they kill all of us, the case will come up and eventually all of them will go behind bars."

"Oh great," muttered Carney. "By that time we're all recycling in the biomass."

The police van raced through the streets, klaxon wailing, lights flashing, and drew up outside the colony court building downtown, not far from the police building.

They went through the proceedings quickly, arousing the dozing guards in the courthouse and getting the lights turned on in Judge Feinberg's court. The ITAA deep link was connected, and the case was docketed.

Indictments were read out, naming the Fixer Brothers and Colonel Henri Tusseau. The case was opened.

Judge Feinberg's gavel sealed it into the records and they left, with Griks and a team of six loyal police officers around them like anxious sheep dogs.

Outside the courthouse they braved a stiff, cool breeze to the waiting van. Then drove east to Bridge Road. At the junction there was a police road block. Armed men in SWAT uniforms were waiting.

Griks climbed out the back. "Sergeant Dare."

Dare didn't salute. Instead he waved his assault rifle. "We're supposed to put you all under arrest." Dare sounded slightly uneasy about his role.

"Sergeant, do you recognize the lady riding in the front of the van?"

Dare ducked his head down for a moment and then gulped as he confronted the famous wintry smile of Judge Judith Feinberg.

"I'd be very careful, Sergeant," she said. "The ITAA is notified of all this now. The Tusseaus and the Beliveaus won't get away with murder this time, you know."

Sergeant Dare's beefy features were drawn up in a scowl. He turned away and spoke into his communicator, then he went off to a police car and conducted an argument over the videophone. After a few minutes he returned, looking pale but determined. "All right, you can go. I'm not putting myself into ITAA business."

They drove onto the Bridge Road and down to the bridge. On the north side they took the first right turn and drove into the Old Town, which had been the colony's administrative center in the earliest days.

There, just a block from Cotes des Neiges, stood the old police building, built of stone blocks quarried up at Blue Lake in the earliest days of the colony. The building had heavy steel doors and window shutters. Defenses that had once been necessary against lynch mobs and their ilk.

When they reached it, the heavy front gates had already been wheeled back and the van surged inside and came to a stop. They scrambled out.

"Defensive positions, hurry!" Griks called. Men in blue jumped to shut the gates. Others ran by, carrying rifles. "Shang-Watts, Corporal Marsh, help our friends inside, will you? Judge, I think you might want to go with them, I'm expecting a certain amount of violence in the near future."

"Violence? They would dare to attack us, Captain?"

"I'm afraid they most certainly will. The Tusseaus have ruled here for a hundred years and they've never shown any qualms before about killing. We are most indubitably in their way."

"But a sitting judge?"

"I know, but in this case they know it's them or us. We've got the word out to the ITAA and so they

know it's only a matter of time before an ITAA task force looks into the matter; we have to be dead and long gone by then."

"How long can we hold out?"

"In here? Weeks—we've got water, food, weapons, and high visibility. We've really set them a problem. I'd say the Tusseaus, right this moment, are just about down to chewing the rugs off the floor, especially Old Man, he must be raving."

The doors opened, and the judge went inside. Leaning heavily on police officers, Carney and Akander followed her.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

RIEBEN AND HIS FRIENDS WERE GOING TO MAKE ANOTHER attempt to film the gray nightfeeder. Rieben ordered a limo made ready and they got started in midafternoon.

The traffic on Boldover County Highway was abominable at first. There had been a tractor-trailer wreck at the Kwaidan Farms junction, and one wreck was all it took to screw up the whole south side of the city.

The Saskatch road system was entirely inadequate, of course, designed as it was to serve the needs of the legal population, then scarcely a fifteenth of the whole.

Of course, the fact that Rieben had been the one person most responsible for keeping the road system in its infancy, by his persistent blockage of road-building maneuvers in the Saskatch Senate and the courts, didn't keep him from complaining bitterly about the masses of traffic. "All these damned illegals—they're a plague, a deadly plague," he growled out the windows at the slow-moving lines of trucks, drays, and automobiles.

The others in the big limousine agreed wholeheartedly.

The traffic choking the county highway could have used the Trans Colony, if it had ever been built. They continued to crawl eastward, past straggling apartment towers and old line suburbs.

Once they were past St. Anne's the traffic slowly diminished and soon Rieben was distracted by the autumnal glories of the wet hillsides. Winter was running in fast, and the Elizabeth oaks were already ablaze with scarlet foliage. The wutternuts were great thatches of gold fingerlings, and the donkey trees were pink. Rieben loved the turning leaves. The sight reminded him of his home-world, far, far away in space and time, where the hills had once changed color in just that way every autumn.

The higher they went the more they saw bared hillsides. And then they glimpsed new real estate developments, clusters of houses, and narrow lanes snaking over the hillsides. More and more walls in adobe brown and white, roofs in green and gray, split-levels, fresh gravel-top roads, shopping precincts, even a few totally illegal billboards with holopulse lettering. "Civilization" was pouring into easygoing Boldover County.

Rieben scowled at the burgeoning development.

Sebastian Liesse was at the wheel, and noticing Rieben's sour mood, he tried to change the subject. "The weather report gives us two clear days. Conditions for filming should be perfect tonight."

"Gray feeders are on migration, it is confirmed from Naturalist Society report," chipped in Yen Cho.

Rieben nodded, but his mouth was working in distaste at the sight of the buildings lining the road. "Acme Arms," "Number One Safe Deposit," "Feasters Foods," "Chung's Guns"—the signs rolled past perched on forty-meter display poles. Rieben shook his head.

The swathe of commercial building around Finnegan's Corner began to recede behind them, but before it disappeared from view they passed a mammoth new restaurant complex. Rieben gaped at the huge stone chimneys, the three-story walls of creosote-black logs, the huge illuminated sign above that read "Hungry Hunters."

"It's the human invasion at its worst, my friends. If we're going to save Saskatch, we're going to have to win a few in the next session of the senate."

"We'll be ready, sir," said Sebastian quickly. "We've got Senator Grogan on our side. We're getting a much better reception now from the Koreans on a number of issues. I think we can do it."

"Of course we can," said Bruda Dara. "We stopped the Trans Colony Highway, we can stop the expansion of the Spaceport."

"We thought we had it stopped the last time."

"Well, er, yes," said Sebastian lamely, "but Old Man Tusseau played us too well. A 'Holding Motion,' to allow 'active consideration' by one party or another can be kept up forever. He need never allow it to be brought to the senate floor."

Even at the age of two hundred eighty-five, Rieben could still hate his enemies. "Tusseau will have the speaker's chair again in the next session. We've got to find better ways of getting around these damned parliamentary tactics."

"We've got to lock on an early slot for the introduction of an Urgent Necessity Motion. Tusseau can't deny it, nor can he detour it: all UNMs have to go on the docket. If he doesn't put us on then we'll have just what we need to bring a case before the ITAA court, and that is the one thing he absolutely will try to avoid," Sebastian said.

Rieben had to agree there. Old Man Tusseau was wily enough to know that only his downfall could be found in an ITAA court.

They passed a walker, in timber-company yellow, striding along on its rubberized feet, and then they reached the turnoff to the two-lane road that went up the Lisette Valley, to the Black Ruk Planetary Park.

"This time we going to do it, I know it," said the stocky, imperturbable Yen Cho.

"Well, I damn well hope so," said Rieben.

"It's going to go well, we've got clear skies tonight and tomorrow, and I just know we're going to get the gray nightfeeders on film at last," Bruda Dara said gaily.

"Well, if we can do that, we'll be in the running for the Bengstrom prize."

"The only known flying mollusc in the galaxy," chimed in Sebastian.

"And such a long-distance flyer, too," said Bruda.

"They're just amazing."

"Indeed," said Yen Cho, shifting his camera bag on his lap. "Only long-distance molluscan aviator. We get them on film this time, we do a good job."

They could see the Black Ruks now, a row of white-capped peaks thrusting above the forest in the distance.

The big limousine rolled up the gravel top, spitting stones up behind it.

One hundred thousand kilometers away from Saskatch, zipping toward the planet on a tight, intersection orbit, came the lifeboat from the Seed of Hope.

Inside the lifeboat Sally Xermin snored softly in her crash couch while Pandi watched a soap called "Mirrored Times" set on a magical space habitat, a fantasy megahab with dragons and fairy princesses. While she watched, Pandi munched a protein bar.

After five months Saskatch was close; planetfall was a day away or less. The planetary disk was clearly visible.

Pandi had grown used to weightlessness, but the periods of acceleration and deceleration had been tough.

Sally had insisted on the tightest orbit and quickest passage to Saskatch.

Pandi had also grown used to watching TV all day. There was nothing else to do except work out in the exercise program that Sally insisted on, every day. But after the first month conversation had palled. Sally had grown increasingly morose and uncommunicative.

So Pandi spent the "mornings" watching Saskatch news and weather shows, then switched to longer midday programming and always made sure to catch the "MidDay Laugh Hour" with Geb Brillet from downtown BVC on KWZ TV.

In the afternoon she hooked into the various soaps that she liked: "Antares Home," "Surrender Yawns," "Splendor Sky." They rolled on hour after hour after that, gaudy and preposterous and sensual, finally breaking at about seven in the evening for more news and weather reports.

Pandi always listened to the weather for Beliveau City and St. Anne's, and when she did she always thought of her home in the Beshwans' house on Rendezvous Boulevard on Larchmont, overlooking the downtown section. She visualized the tall, terrestrial elm trees planted along the boulevard and imagined the rain drumming down on the solar roofs.

She felt a great need to be home once again, and she wondered desperately who was living there now. What would they say if she turned up on their doorstep and told them she wanted to move in with them and have her old room back?

What would they say?

In her fantasy she would enroll back in school, dear old South Beliveau High, and see all her old friends again, Trisha and Gabrielle, Sukie Beekoms, everyone. And she would forget all about space travel and Seed and even her parents. If anyone asked her about them, she would say that Pramod and Tili emigrated to Nocanicus and left her behind.

It was strange how comforting the fantasy was. Daydreams about South Beliveau High helped a lot in getting through the long days of TV watching.

Sometimes Sally woke up and watched with her, but mostly Sally slept, or Sally did exercises in her seat. Stretching, toning, keeping her muscles from degenerating. She exhorted Pandi fairly constantly to do the same. Resentfully, Pandi obeyed.

In revenge Pandi ate too much. She pigged out on protein bars and she knew it, but she couldn't stop herself.

There were supplies for five people, far more protein bars than they needed, and the sweet-and-sour bars were one of the very few pleasures left in life.

a small section of the screen, upper right-hand corner, a window projected the disk of Saskatch, by then steadily growing in size. They were almost home, almost there. It had become a blue-white ball, sparkling at the poles, with a shining crescent presented to the sun.

Lazily she stared at that crescent, during commercial breaks mostly. For weeks it had stayed irritatingly small and unchanging, then finally in the last week it had swollen visibly, day after day.

Suddenly the lifeboat's computer emitted a beep and flashed a warning. An orange-bordered radar screen overrode the soap opera and began to scroll data.

A small blip was gaining on them rapidly from behind.

Pandi stared at it. She had no idea what it might be. After a couple of seconds though she reached over and shook Sally awake.

"Sally, something's behind us."

Sally came awake with terrified eyes. She gasped as she caught the implications of the radar trace. "Something's following us, something small."

Little time remained, but what there was could be used. Sally unlocked the manual-control stick and jerked it erect. "Strap in, kid, this is gonna be wild." She hit the manual-override button and then pulled the levers to activate the main jets. They coughed into life and slammed them both into their seats while Sally used the attitude jets to shift the boat around in a wild spiral that sent g-forces surging to dangerous levels.

The blip on the radar came on remorselessly, tracking them closer and closer.

Sally had the boat arcing down toward Saskatch on a full collision course. She pulled it around farther, until they were squeezed sideways into the crash webbing. The gee was somewhere between nine and ten, they were close to blacking out, but the blip was right on top of them, matching their maneuvers.

For a frozen second the blip seemed to merge with the center of the screen.

Sally gave a shriek and threw the ship into a wild gyration with crushing gee and then something struck them from behind. There was a heavy shock and the lifeboat tumbled, slowly, end over end, rushing on toward the blue-and-white disk of the planet below.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

THE GRAY NIGHTFEEDER EXPEDITION MADE CAMP THAT evening on a bluff overlooking the upper Lisette River, with Mount Servus looming just to the east. The dying rays of the sun made the mountain's cap of snow an ethereal blue-white that shimmered in the sky. The sky had cleared of clouds, and cool air from the north and east was flowing past hinting of colder things to come.

In the center of the clearing the wind kept sparks dancing from their fire. Bruda and Sebastian laid on more kinkpine twigs and debris. Rieben held his hands up toward the blaze, glad of the warmth, despite the arctoswear parka and hood he wore. It would be cold overnight; he knew he was taking a bit of a risk. But with Bruda Dara to keep him company in pop tent and sleeping bag, he was sure he'd make it without any problem.

Yen Cho was out building a camera blind not far from a perfectly ripe chauve-mamelon tree, a baldnipple pseudo-pine, native to the Black Ruk region.

After years of careful research, Bruda Dara and her team of young assistants had discovered that the so-called baldnipple kinkpines were essential to the migrating gray nightfeeders. In their turn, the nightfeeders were the normal pollinators of the trees. At that season, as the night-feeders were heading south once more, the trees came into season and gave off a great quantity of sweet nectar from the pink, nippleshape, cone buds that proliferated on the branches.

The nightfeeders, flying south on membranous wings, required great amounts of nectar at every meal. The trees were relatively rare, spaced out in small clumps right across the temperate zones. The nightfeeders tracked the ripe ones with sensitive olfactory organs.

Sebastian Liesse joined Rieben and Bruda Dara. He pulled out a slim flask, took a swig, and passed it around the fire. Rieben took a sniff, then passed it on with a pang of regret. Such things as distilled spirits were for one's first century of Extended Life. At Rieben's age he treasured every organ in his body. Ninety-proof whiskey was designed for younger stomachs and livers than his; he waved a can of fruit juice in Sebastian's direction. "I'm sorry but I must decline your excellent whiskey, Sebastian. I'll join you in a toast, nonetheless. To the Black Ruk Planetary Park!"

"I second that proposal," cried Bruda, who did take a sip from the flask. "Mmmm, that's good. Which one is it?" she said.

"It's my family's own, Liesse twelve-year-old."

"To the park!" shouted Dara. She took another sip.

"To the park!" replied Yen Cho, returning from the gathering darkness.

Bruda handed him the flask. Yen Cho took a tiny sip, just enough to enjoy the flavor. "The blind is finished. I have put the cameras in. I think we will be lucky tonight; there are signs of feeding at several of the mamelons."

"To the gray nightfeeders !" said Bruda.

"Indeed, let's drink to the mighty molluscs." Sebastian took a sip and passed the flask.

"And let's not forget the Bengstrom prize," said Rieben, raising his fruit juice.

As prize winners they would flare suddenly, brightly on the vast human sphere of science and exploration. Briefly they would have the opportunity of placing before the human media world a plea for sanity in the matter of the illegal migration to Saskatch. Such an opportunity could not be missed. They would need every advantage they could accrue in the coming struggle to save Saskatch from the human invasion.

After one more round of the flask they set to the evening meal. For the younger folk there were concentrate patties to be grilled over the fire, with canned beans and toasting wafers. For Rieben Arntage there was a self-warm can of blend and a small wafer for masticatory inducement.

Rieben fairly ached for the half-remembered flavors of things like baked beans. He hated blend and puree and all the rest, but he knew that Extended Life treatment was built on the pillar of "science diet." Deviation from it left him weak and shaky the next day. Out there, on an extended hike in the woods, with frost expected that night, he was stretching the protective powers of his medical plan to their limits. His body didn't need the insult of crude foods.

He shifted his inner focus to enjoy the company, the crackling fire. How their faces danced as they talked about the upcoming photography. How excited they were!

Rieben loved those people: he had carefully nurtured his friendships with all of them, even though Yen Cho was his bonded bodyguard, and had been for forty years. Together they had all made a great stand for the park, holding back the tide of the invasion.

They ate, they drank water that Bruda brought up from the Lisette, cold and very clear, and they watched the first stars appear.

The northeast wind picked up, and the donkey trees, scattered through the kinkpine forest, began to hee and haw.

"Brr, be glacier breath tonight," said Bruda.

"We'll be needing those sleeping bags tonight," agreed Sebastian. "Glacial air mass arriving, I'd say."

"Look, there's the Pleiades." Yen Cho indicated a bright patch in the north. Beyond that patch somewhere lay the home stars and Earth itself.

It was time to go in search of the gray nightfeeders. They left the camp, with microlites on their boot tops illuminating the way ahead, and made their way through thickets of kinkpine saplings and occasional donkey trees, their knotted limbs creaking loudly in the wind.

They rounded a group of boulders that humped ominously above their heads and came on the hide, set between the trunks of a pair of massive kinkpines of the ochre-berry species.

Ahead, illuminated in infrared, was an open-crowned twenty-meter tree. Nectaries the size of large apples swelled from the tips of most branches.

The hide was just wide enough for the four of them to crawl in, behind the mounts for the smart-camera systems. Yen Cho crouched beside the camera computer, a set of four expandable screens carried current video images from the various camera locations. Eleven cameras were focused on that tree, which was in a state of perfect ripeness. Yen Cho riffled through the camera views on the screens, closing or enlarging the image windows in turn.

Sebastian and Bruda were using big bulky Jagnox binoculars that rode on tripods. Rieben himself had brought a pair of smaller, humbler Koper f-100s.

He lifted them and scanned the tree in a state of high excitement. Where were they, the legendary nightfeeders? Never before filmed, known only through a handful of still photos taken fifty years before.

He saw nothing but bark, bundles of pine needles, and the swollen mamelons.

"There's one!" said Sebastian in an excited whisper. The camera indicator lights were on signifying that the computer had detected a flying visitor, too.

"Where?" said Rieben.

"Oh, sorry—down about three o'clock, on the right side of the tree."

Rieben jerked his binoculars down but was rewarded with nothing but a trembling mamelon bud; the feeder had gone.

"They're so quick, so hard to see," said Bruda lightly.

Rieben stared out of the hide, unable to see anything. Were there gray nightfeeders there? He had to admit he couldn't tell.

"Now!" cried Bruda. "Up on the left side, under the topmost branch—do you see that one?"

Rieben raised his glasses and trained them on the spot. Was there something? For a brief moment he thought he glimpsed something like a scrap of paper flash along the bark and then there was nothing but a quivering mamelon.

"Oh my, look there at the crown of the tree. A breeding couple, it must be." Sebastian's excitement was contagious. Rieben raised his binoculars once more, struggled to find the crown of the tree, and caught perhaps another swift flicker of movement, perhaps nothing but the images in his imagination.

"A pair, on the lower branches, they are feeding," announced Yen Cho. The camera indicator lights were winking red again.

Rieben desperately dropped his binoculars to cover the lower branches. The autofocus shifted, and there was a blurred something, and then it was gone.

"Aren't they magnificent?" said Bruda Dara in a girlishly happy voice.

Rieben fought down the urge to scream. That sort of thing was bad for his blood pressure. "Yes, they are," he said with considerable force.

There was a sudden, loud rumbling noise behind them, like a huge belch, and then they heard something crashing in the undergrowth.

They tensed, listening hard.

"Crab?" whispered Sebastian.

"Maybe, but it's pretty big for crab."

"What if it's a gigacrab?" said Bruda with a degree of audible anxiety.

"Well gigas are pretty rare up here, aren't they? I've never seen one in the Black Ruks." Sebastian tried to be reassuring.

The thing belched again, and more crashing sounded in the thickets. A heavy stink wafted over them, the smell of peculiarly pungent dung.

The crashing redoubled its intensity.

"In fact they say there's only a handful of the really big ones left," continued Sebastian.

"The gigacrab is a tropical species," said Rieben, hoping suddenly that he was correct in this opinion.

"Yes, it is, of course—how silly of me," said Bruda.

The crashing in the thickets had ended.

"So what's that out there?" said Sebastian.

Rieben stared off in the direction of the mysterious noises. The smell continued to waft. It was enough to make you gag, and when at last it cleared, they all looked up. Rieben's eyes were watering.

"Pooh! I'm glad that's over," muttered Bruda.

"That was awful stink. Whatever it was out there it was moving bowels pretty thoroughly," Yen Cho said.

"Indeed," Sebastian said.

Rieben was still thinking of the great land crabs though. "Poor things, the gigacrabs survived unchanged for maybe a hundred million years, and we've almost wiped them out in a century."

The gray nightfeeders were gone by then, and the winds were growing chill. The Saskatch moon, Leopold, had risen, showing a small silver disk that moved quite swiftly across the starfields. They could easily see the dark crater called the Moon's Eye and pick out the shadows left by the three mountains called Leo's Teeth, which rose below the eye.

They started back along the trail and reached the tents and the dying embers of their fire.

They observed at once that the campsite had been visited. The fire had been virtually extinguished and buried under gravel cuffed into it from its surrounds. Sebastian's tent had been opened, but Sebastian found no evidence that anything had been stolen.

"Very strange," said Sebastian. They agreed, but after flashing their handlights around into the woods and finding nothing, they decided to turn in.

Rieben stripped off his parka and quickly scrambled into the big sleeping bag. A few moments later Bruda snuggled in beside him.

She reached for him and began to warm up his cold extremities. Long before she had finished, however, Rieben was fast asleep, and she wrapped her arms around him and settled down herself.

Rieben slipped quickly into REM sleep. And as he did, the dreams began. Strange, unpleasant dreams, in which Rieben wandered half-naked, with chains wrapped around his body, and wires, looped around his arms and shoulders to heavy weights that he dragged behind him through freezing slush. Dark skies hurried past above, lightning crackled. Something terrible and evil rode toward him on a steed of fantastic power, the terrible thing cracked a whip that shattered worlds.

Hundreds of voices sounded in his ears, all crying with woe, screaming with sick ecstasy. A face flashed into view, a dreaded face from memory, his Uncle Varna, horrible old Varna, who'd tried to rape him in the summer house one afternoon when he was just nine years old.

It was just as it always was; Varna came toward him with that horrible leer; Rieben thrashed out, throwing his punches again and again, but it was no use. Varna was too strong. He would not escape this time.

And then Uncle Varna was gone, and instead there were two women, with harsh faces and knowing eyes. They smiled, and their teeth were not teeth but hollow steel tubes, syringes, designed to pump a victim dry within minutes. The women fell upon him, laughing, their jaws agape, the syringe teeth coming down.

He was helpless, unable to move. Their eyes were like yellow marbles; there were no pupils; they were not human eyes at all. They looked upon him as if he were no more than food!

Rieben screamed.

And they were gone, but the dream had shifted to new, nightmarish grounds. He was in a long dank tunnel, clothed in wet freezing rags, running through ankle-deep slush. It was snowing up above on the street, and they dared not leave tracks for the thing that followed them to find. But it was difficult not to leave tracks and the thing was coming and it was implacable, monstrous, huge, striding on a hundred rock-hard feet.

A voice was crying in his ears, a hand on his shoulder, and Rieben awoke, shuddering, sweat running down his face and neck. Bruda Dara was stroking his bald head, kissing him gently on the forehead and lips. "Rieben, it's all right, it's only a dream. We've all been having them, the most terrible dreams."

He gave a great gasp of relief. "Terrible dreams," he murmured. He felt sick. Sweat was pooling inside his sleeping bag.

"Everyone's been waking up screaming the last minute or so. Sebastian was the first I think; he and Yen Cho woke me."

Rieben came awake in a flash, understanding the implications at once. "Incredible."

"That creature we heard, it must have been a bulmunk," she said.

"Oh my..." The rarest, most fabulous creature of Saskatch. "Yen Cho!" he shouted as he shifted to find his parka and boots.

"He's already gone to look for the tracks. Sebastian's with him, and they've got a camera, too."

"To film the bulmunk itself, at last. Oh wouldn't that be wonderful." Rieben felt utterly young again, as he hadn't felt in a hundred years or more.

"Hasn't been done in eighty years. No one's even reported seeing one in these parts for more than thirty."

Rieben was getting his boots on in a hurry. "But everyone had the dream?"

"Right."

"Then it's a classic encounter. We disturbed it. It's trying to drive us away with mental projections. They really do have ESP, powers beyond our comprehension, just as the old settlers claimed."

Rieben struggled into his parka and clambered out of the tent. The legendary bulmunk was an oddity within Saskatch's compacted megafauna. Since glaciation had begun in earnest, more than one hundred million years ago, Saskatch had lost most of its ancient fauna. Only the bulmunk was known to have survived unchanged from that era, an elusive, shy creature, larger than a man, with a completely unknown role in the planetary biosphere. Bulmunk had fur, six limbs, arms tipped in complex pincers, and heads

like those of terrestrial lobsters, only ten times the size.

Rieben followed Bruda down the trail, huddling against the cold wind which tore at his parka and whistled inside his hood. The stars were hard and bright in the sky, the kinkpines were waving and shaking, the donkey trees' creaks filled the air. They found Sebastian and Yen Cho, crouched on the trail, using their handlights to illuminate something on the ground.

"It's close" said Sebastian. "I can feel the damn thing; it's trying to make me nauseous."

Yen cho pointed to the tracks on the ground. "Look at these." They were deep. The ground was relatively soft at that point on the trail.

"See the long narrow heel, the six toes or claws, or whatever those things are. It has to be a bulmunk."

They stared off down the draw where the brush grew thick.

"He went down there." Sebastian pointed vaguely.

"How do we know it's a 'he'?" said Bruda. "It might just as easily be a 'she,' or neither. We still don't know if bulmunk have sexuality."

Rieben stared uneasily at the brush.

"Well whatever it is, it went down there," said Sebastian. "We'd better follow it before it gets away."

The wind blew up sharp and cold. The brush looked terribly tangled, and there were loose rocks everywhere. Rieben Arntage suddenly wondered if he'd bitten off more than he could chew, even with the fabulous teeth his dentists had given him. It was freezing, in the middle of the night, and he was chasing an angry bulmunk around in the woods.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

IT SOON SEEMED THAT THEY'D BEEN STUMBLING ABOUT IN the brush for hours, getting soaked in mud holes, tearing their parkas on the sharp little branches of saplings, losing their hats and their tempers.

Rieben Arntage felt a chilling exhaustion stealing through him. The front he kept so bravely erected to the world, required that he keep his exploits to a readily calculated amount of effort per day. This terrible business of blundering around in the dark was much more taxing than mere marching. His two-hundred-and-eighty-five-year-old body was on the point of collapse. He'd gone too far; soon he would be revealed for the frail, ancient fraud that he was, a ghost kept alive on a fortune in Extended Life process.

His young friends would be kind and solicitous, but behind his back their attitudes would change. He knew; he'd seen it before, that reaction of the shorter lived, when they were confronted by the limitations of a billionaire's near immortality.

The moon continued to ride across the sky, its light enabling them to see among the kinkpines.

On they went, right down to the river's edge, deep in a canyon choked with secondary growth. Steep bluffs rose on the other side of the river, which babbled and murmured with ice-cold water from the mountain.

More tracks were there, and Yen Cho and Sebastian argued furiously about which way they went for a few minutes until Bruda pointed out that they were both throwing a tantrum, and that the bulmunk was probably causing it.

Grimly they continued the pursuit, and soon they came upon a generous pile of feces, freshly

deposited on the bank, directly in their path.

"Perhaps this symbolizes what bulmunk thinks of humans?" said Yen Cho with a chuckle.

"All too likely," replied Bruda.

A few steps farther on and they were struck by an odd nausea. An unsettling feeling that grew in power until they were gagging on it, but still they kept on, splashing into bogs and reed beds, struggling across ice-cold streams that came up to the knees.

Yen Cho almost lost the triple-cam video in one sticky spot, but after floundering briefly in waist-deep water the stocky bodyguard regained the shallows, cameras intact.

They were all shivering, their innards upset, their clothes soaked and covered in mud, when they emerged from the dense thickets onto a sandy spit in the Lisette River. The stars above were bright and hard.

"Hold it, there it is," whispered Sebastian.

Rieben lifted his exhausted head, forced his eyes to focus.

At the end of the spit stood a tall figure with a strange hump instead of a head. It appeared to stand on two legs, with heavy shoulders hunched up, and with its back turned to them.

They stared at it without speaking, struck dumb by such proximity to one of nature's greatest mysteries.

The creature remained absolutely immobile, as if it were lost in thought, stargazing. Yet it had to have heard them, panting and cursing through the bogs the last quarter of a mile.

Rieben stared; he felt the psychic compulsions lifting. The aura of discomfort, the nauseous pressure—all of it faded away. Was it distracted by something? Or were its powers weakening? Or was it toying with them? Mad, capricious creatures—that's how they had always been described by the early colonists.

Yen Cho had the camera up. Bruda Dara had her sound equipment off her shoulder and in action. The camera was silent in all high and medium frequencies. As far as could be seen, it didn't perturb the bulmunk one whit.

The water of the Lisette babbled past them. Yen Cho kept filming; the modules he was using would give him up to ten hours of image time on each.

"Should we go closer?" said Sebastian.

"No," said Bruda in a tight whisper. "We might disturb it. Let's just see what happens. We're getting great film; that's what counts right now."

So they waited and watched. An hour passed. Rieben began to shiver uncontrollably inside his parka. He was desperately tired. His eyelids were lowering themselves remorselessly across his pupils. He whispered to Darn. "I'm afraid I'm going to fall over any moment, young people. I think I've overdone it a bit." He felt his legs going; he began to grow limp.

Sebastian was there. A strong young arm slid around his shoulders and held him up. "Mr. Arntage, it's all right. I've got you,"

"Thank you, Sebastian, thank you."

Yen Cho said something in surprise. Bruda gave a gasp.

The bulmunk had turned to face them. They could see the big lobsterlike head clearly, long feelers waved in the air in front of it.

It took five swift strides toward them, until the unreadable insect mask, the feelers, the brushlike optical organs, loomed over them. It was close enough so that they could smell the thing's faint fishy odor. The exoskeleton was pale gray, with paler fur growing at the joints. The feelers waved vigorously.

With a jerk Rieben straightened up, glaring back at the thing. Did it intend them harm?

There was something, a tinny cry somewhere, in his ear, or just echoing inside his brain? He could not be sure. He stared at the creature, feeling rather than hearing that metallic tone. A scraping almost, as of gigantic bronze crickets.

"What?" he muttered and raised a hand to ward off the gaze of the thing, which he now "felt" burning down on him with terrible intensity.

It stepped forward in a single bound and reached out to grasp his shoulder in the largest of the six paired pincers that made up each of its hands.

Sebastian pulled out a handgun, barrel silver in the moonlight. Rieben croaked a warning.

"No, Sebastian, don't shoot. It isn't hurting me, it doesn't mean us harm." Rieben stared up at the thing. It was easily a meter taller than he, and he knew for certain that it was trying to tell him something. The eerie scraping sound was a voice pushing at the communications boundary between them.

"It's all right, Sebastian," he gasped. "It's trying to tell me something, I think. Let's all just be very, very quiet while I try and listen with my mind. There's something going on, but I can't quite decipher it somehow."

The bulmunk's feelers waved in his face. He stared at the tufted optical organs, like so many blueblack boot-brushes.

And then he had it! As if suddenly tuning into a station on the radio dial. There was fear! Aching, echoing terror, because the bulmunk was terribly afraid of something, something it had no control over. Something from the dark, something dreadfully cold and cruel.

Rieben gaped. Did it fear them? Him? A little old man with no more strength than a kitten at that moment. It seemed incongruous.

Rieben put out a trembling hand, grasped the end of one of the larger feelers, and shook it gently. "Don't be afraid," he said.

The feelers waved furiously. The dark, the fear, the other in the dark. Rieben sensed icy cold, and then a freezing contempt. The bulmunk made a loud, wet noise and turned and hopped away. In a moment it had slid through a gap in the wall of brush and was gone.

Sebastian was shouting something. Bruda Dara looked up and gave a little scream.

Rieben stared at her a moment, feeling terribly faint. What made the bulmunk so afraid. The dark? The freezing cold? But bulmunk lived outdoors on Saskatch! If they weren't inured to the cold, what was?

Rieben's thoughts on the subject were interrupted by sudden oblivion however as he fainted and fell backward into Bruda Dara's arms.

Thus he missed entirely the sight of the small craft, trailing smoke and flames, that flew a couple of hundred meters over head in the direction of the mountain.

He also missed the bright flash of light that announced its arrival at the mountain, shortly followed by the sound of a considerable explosion.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

PANDI BESHWAN FLOATED DOWN TOWARD THE DARK trees with considerable apprehension. She had never worn a parachute before; she had no clear idea of how quickly she was traveling, or how she would get down from a tree if she ended up in one, and from the look of the terrain below that seemed very likely.

She looked above and behind her but failed to sight Sally's chute. At least the ejection seats had worked well enough. Pandi prayed that Sally's chute had opened properly. The ejection controls had been damaged in the descent from orbit. They'd come so close to a fiery death! Only Sally's skills as a pilot had brought them through.

She saw a flash of flame as the lifeboat struck the ground with considerable violence a few kilometers away. A pillar of smoke began to build into the moonlit sky.

Now Pandi could see that she was coming down into a small valley, the slopes carpeted in dark trees.

A strong, cold wind tore at the exposed portions of her face around the oxygen mask. Her visor was up, and it was too late to push it down now.

She gripped the control pulls of the chute harness with hands so tense they were like claws. But she saw no open spaces to aim for, nothing but the trees—and the trees were getting closer, fast. The crags were above her head now, and she caught the silvery gleam of a pond, below, and then she drifted into a stand of tall trees and there was no more time to see anything.

The chute hooked itself to something and she was swung, hard, into a mass of short, sharp, kinkpine branches that almost impaled her. She finished up wedged between forty or fifty narrow branches as if clutched in some giant hand. It was almost impossible to move since she was tethered to the chute above her.

Carefully she examined the controllers on the chute harness and squeezed the release mechanisms.

The chute locks broke and released her and she tumbled abruptly—her helmet tearing off, her hands clutching frantically at brittle branches—some thirty feet to the ground.

Unfortunately the ground was covered with small rocks, and she struck at a bad angle, her head slammed against a tree trunk, her arm caught beneath her.

When she awoke it was to a world of pain like nothing she'd ever experienced before. Her right wrist throbbed with a hot, sick intensity. The back of her head hurt, and when she put her good hand back there to investigate she found matted blood dried in her hair.

She tried to stand up and failed. It took a couple of efforts even to get herself on to her knees, whereupon she found that her right knee was very sore. Her leg throbbed as she pulled herself to her feet.

For a moment she stood shakily, then reached behind to steady herself on a sapling. It gave way suddenly and she fell once more and struck her left hip on a head-size rock.

She heard a sobbing sound, and after a moment realized it was she. Tears were coursing down her cheeks, but she hauled herself up, despite shooting pains from her wrist that were quite excruciating. She was certain that her wrist was hurting worse than anything had ever hurt her before. But the fact that she could use it still reassured her that it could not be broken.

The sobbing stopped. She stared around her, trying to make some sense of the place. She was in the midst of a dense thicket of trees; it was virtually pitch dark. The ground was littered with stones and small rocks. Seedlings jammed together wherever a mature tree had fallen. There was no path, not even enough light to see a path if one had been there.

Pandi held her sore wrist to her chest. If only it would stop throbbing like that! The pain made it really hard to think straight.

Sally had warned her that they would probably get separated after they ejected from the boat, that they were in the mountains somewhere, the terrain and ground cover were going to be difficult. "Difficult" seemed an understatement; Pandi thought them more likely impossible. She really wanted to cry again, very badly.

But she knew that she had to get on, she had to get out of the forest and get some help. A wind sougled through the treetops, and she felt the chill trickle along her cheeks. If she didn't get going she would freeze to death.

She had no real idea where she might be, and her radio had been stripped off with her helmet and was dangling way up on the tree somewhere above her. With a sore wrist she was never going to be able to climb back up and reach it.

It was Tenth month, Octobre to the Saskatchers, the first month of snow. There would only be a few hunters out in the forest; she might never see a soul before she froze to death. To live she had to move, perhaps many miles.

But after looking around her, in the depths of the dense, dark thicket, she could see no obvious direction to take. She felt a wave of despair threaten to overwhelm her, but she fought it down and selected a direction that she imagined to be upslope. She thought vaguely that up-slope the trees might be more widely spaced and it would be easier for her to make her way.

Working through the dense thicket of saplings and tree trunks was terribly hard work. Keeping her wrist protected at the same time made it even harder. The little trees grew in thick clumps, and their kinked branches were sharp and resistant.

What seemed like hours went by as Pandi traversed a hundred yards or so of kinkpine jungle and wound up in a thicket as dense as any she had seen so far. Utter despair gripped her heart.

She stopped. Hot tears were coursing down her cheeks. What was the point of struggling on? She would just lie down in the impassable thickets and wait for death to claim her.

Then, feeling that she was observed, she whirled around and glimpsed another presence, standing tall and massive among the saplings she had fought her way through, a sinister, shadowy figure.

She gave a shriek of fright, and the shape disappeared. She stared around, eyes straining into the darkness, trying to locate it again.

But there was nothing to see, and only the sougling of the wind through the damnable little trees to listen to.

She sucked in a long sobbing breath. Her imagination was running away with her.

She turned back to the direction she thought she'd been traveling and pushed herself, sideways, between two ten-foot saplings. They gave way grudgingly, their little branches digging at her thermal suit, which already showed a dozen rips and holes. It would be in tatters by the time she ever escaped from the tangle, if she escaped at all. The next set of trees was even closer together, but somehow she battled through, trampled some smaller growths, and almost fell over them.

More trees, identical to all the others, rose in front of her. Behind them little kinkpines stretched away all around her, thousands, millions, all wedged together as tight as brush bristles.

She wept, holding her battered wrist. She was doomed. In every direction there was nothing to see but the trees. The next moment she bumped into something solid. She turned her head and glimpsed something like an enormous lobster peering down at her, long feelers waved around her head.

She started to scream but before it really emerged from her throat she lost consciousness and slid backward under the trees.

When she awoke she found herself in a dimly lit space. A curious soft sound filled the air, along with the moan of the wind. She groped around herself; her wrist throbbed evilly, and she gave a gasp of pain and stopped moving.

She was in a place with solid walls, lying on a bed of something that had the feel of hay or straw. She reached up with her good hand and felt the wall curve tightly around her. It was irregular, rough stone.

She shifted her body around, her wrist complaining mightily, and caught sight of a triangle of light, not far away.

She could see the walls now; she was in a narrow cave with the ceiling a few feet above her head.

She turned and began crawling, using her elbows, toward the light.

It was faint, pale light and when she got closer she realized why. The sun had risen but snow was falling, and dark clouds filled the sky. That was the sound she'd heard, the muffling of the wind. The snow was coming down thickly, and it was starting to stick on the ground.

She shivered.

She realized that she must have been unconscious for hours. That thing in the woods had brought her here.

It had saved her, but why?

Looking out the narrow cave mouth she glimpsed a clearing, where a pair of big wutternut trees lifted bare branches to the gray sky. She eased herself out of the cave and stood up, taking a deep breath.

To her right a slope led down into a valley of treetops. Was that where she had been? In that nightmare jungle?

In front was a trail of sorts, a way open through thick brush. The trail appeared to keep to the ridgeline.

Snowflakes blew into her face; they tasted cold. She considered the prospects and reached with her good hand for the protein chews she had in her breast pocket. She fumbled one out and pulled off her spacesuit gloves and opened it with shaking fingers.

It tasted wonderful but didn't seem to last very long. She opened another and ate it, too. Then she inspected her spacesuit and boots. Although there were several tears in the outer layers of the suit it was still keeping the worst of the chill out. How long it would do so now that the integrity was breached she did not know however.

She counted the remaining protein bars; she had seven. She opened and ate another and had six.

By which the wind was getting fierce, and the snow was being driven horizontally across her field of vision.

She decided to crawl back into the cave. Wait for the winds to die down a bit. Besides, it would be warmer.

She hunched herself in against the wall of rock and wondered where Sally was. Had she found shelter somewhere, too? Had her chute opened properly? If she'd made it down safely would she call for help, try and get a chopper sent in?

They had argued at length about calling for help, right up to the terrible ride down through the atmosphere in the damaged spaceboat.

Pandi knew that Sally wouldn't call for help for herself unless she absolutely had to, to survive. Sally had been insistent about the fact that they had to avoid detection after landing. Sally had warned Pandi again and again that she would have to change her name, and avoid everyone she'd known in her

previous life, if she didn't want to wind up in an investigation by the ITAA.

Sally's angry words rang in her memory. "Remember, girl, you're a wanted criminal now. If they ever get you into court, you'll do time, and you'll sell me out. You'll have to because that's the only way you'll get your time reduced from twenty years to less than five. Look, I know about the ITAA. I know how those bastards work."

Pandi didn't know what to do. If she managed to find some help she might get out of the mountains alive, but then she'd end up in the grip of the ITAA interrogators and they would want to know everything.

If she couldn't get help she would certainly die. Eventually she was going to have to try and walk out of the place, heading west. She knew that she had to go west to reach a road. In the east were only more mountains and, finally, the ice sheets that occupied the center of the continental mass.

All in all it was not an encouraging situation. She eased herself down until she was lying on her back and let herself drift into a sleep of evil dreams.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

THE UPPER FLOORS OF THE OLD POLICE BUILDING HAD been empty of life for two decades. The offices had been stripped of everything except their dust. Cold and dark they'd waited in silence since the day the police moved across the river to the new building.

Now they resounded with the movements of Captain Johan Griks's specially recruited squad of eight men and three women officers from the Saskatch police.

All had volunteered when given the chance, all knew the risk they were taking, and all saw that it was up to them to bring down the Tusseaus and their clique. The corruption and murder that had been running the colony had to be stopped.

They used hand and headlamps to get around. Small portalites were set up in a few rooms on the inside of the building, with windows opening onto the central courtyard.

Heavy automatic weapons were set up on the fourth floor, with fields of fire covering the corners of the streets around the building.

The front gates were locked and Corporal Marsh and a detail of three men were erecting a wall of construction block right behind the big wood-and-steel gates themselves.

Lookouts were posted at important windows and the downstairs utility door at the rear of the building.

In what had once been the reception room of the Detective Bureau, Griks had set up a command post. He'd assembled a couple of old desks, some beat-up chairs and tables, and a couple of porta lamps. Nicola Moulin had set the radiophone up; someone else had brought in a pair of TVs and a powerpack.

Carney and Akander had been treated, bandaged, and sewn up where required. Then after getting a bite to eat they were allowed to lie down and go to sleep in what had once been an interrogation room. Some old musty cots had been discovered on the ground floor, and Griks's team had brought sleeping bags and blankets in with the supplies.

There were no phone lines left so Griks and Judge Feinberg were left to make radio calls to the outside world. Unfortunately they were soon detected by someone else.

"The jammer's back," said Officer Moulin. The two-way radio seethed with static.

"Lost them again." She switched frequencies again, gave the call sign.

"Come on Blue Lake," she said under her breath. They were pretty slow on the other end.

"I'm worried," said Judge Feinberg. "We really don't have much hope of maintaining communications with Blue Lake or any other town that's free of Tusseau control."

"We logged on with the ITAA, that's all that counts. They must know that we did that; they know what will happen if they kill us."

"True, true. But they also know what will happen if they don't."

Griks shrugged.

"We've known this was risky since the beginning."

"Right." Judge Feinberg thrust her shoulders back. "We have to see it through now."

There was a shout; they froze. Griks got to his feet and went to the door. Henry Young ran down the hall. He was carrying an automatic rifle over his shoulder.

"What is it, Henry?" said Griks.

"Look out the window, sir. It's snowing." Griks whirled and looked outside. Nicola was dimming the lights. Snowflakes were drifting past the windows.

"Check the weather reports!" snapped Griks.

"What will it matter?" said Judge Feinberg from behind him. Johan turned to her.

"If it's a storm, I don't know. They'll be pretty busy just keeping the city functioning. It's always hard when the first storm hits. Traffic will be a mess tomorrow."

Moulin had found the KWZ TV weather news. "They say we've got a howler coming down from the Black Ruks and that we're going to get a half meter or more of snow tomorrow afternoon."

"First howler of the winter," said Judge Feinberg.

"Has to happen sometime—there's always five or six of them."

There was another shout, from down below. It was echoed by someone in a corner office, south and west.

Henry Young came running once more. "There's a sniper down the street. He's firing on the front-gate detail,"

Griks looked to Judge Feinberg. "Well I guess that's our answer."

Judge Feinberg looked distressed. Griks was freshly concerned about her. The judge's authority was his ace in the hole; without her he and his team would be doomed.

He turned back to Officer Young and snapped. "Return the fire, but keep it local and for heaven's sake don't overshoot. We've got a city of live people out there; we can't afford to be taking unnecessary lives."

Henry Young disappeared. Shortly afterward they heard the heavy staccato of one of the machine guns, a short burst, then silence.

Judge Feinberg spoke in a remarkably level voice. "Looks like we're under siege, Lieutenant."

Griks gave a little sigh of relief. She was still in. "Won't be the first time this old building has been in a siege. It's always stood up to 'em before."

With a dozen defenders and automatic weapons, they could hold the place for weeks. They had enough food and water for that long at least. If they held out more than a week the ITAA would have

military jumpers there and space marines on the ground. The Tusseaus had to know that. Griks was bound to win.

There was a sudden loud detonation in the courtyard, and the windows blew in with a shower of glass.

Johan dived instinctively, sweeping Judge Feinberg with him to the floor. Another burst sent shrapnel slicing into the walls and doors.

"Mortar fire!" said Griks in disbelief, grabbing for his hat which had rolled off under a table. "That's 90-mm mortar fire for certain!"

Judge Feinberg swallowed, got to her knees. "So this is what war is all about," she said in a quiet voice.

More explosions followed: one shell landed on the roof; the others landed inside the courtyard, one hitting the police van and igniting its gasoline. Smoke billowed up from the courtyard.

Griks led Judge Feinberg down the hall to a room with steel window shutters. Nicola Moulin brought in the radio. Henry Young appeared carrying a chair.

More mortar shells dropped on the roof. The machine guns roared. Someone was yelling down in the courtyard. A bullet hit the steel window shutters with a loud clang. Then another and another, and then a fusillage.

"Get those lights out!" Griks yelled. The lights went off, and Griks turned on a small emergency light that gave off a dim red glow.

"It appears that law and order are breaking down," said Judge Feinberg sadly.

Another bullet whanged off the steel at the window.

In the Black Ruk Mountains the storm had struck with the fearsome speed and intensity of its kind. Sweeping off the polar ice cap, a mass of frigid air had slammed into a wedge of warm air flowing up the Elizabeth River Valley. In a matter of a few hours the colliding air masses had boiled up into a storm front eighty kilometers wide, laying a carpet of snow over the land beneath.

Rieben Arntage and his companions were caught square in the storm path. Fierce winds whipped down the Lisette Valley. It began snowing just before dawn, and Sebastian, Bruda, and Yen Cho held a worried meeting to discuss the situation.

"It's a howler," said Sebastian. "They say we can expect as much as a meter of snow up here. Winds are going to increase to force nine at the least."

"No chance of getting a helicopter under those conditions."

"I'm afraid not," said Yen Cho.

"How is Rieben?" said Sebastian.

"He's holding his own," said Bruda. "No more than that, I'm afraid. It's hard sometimes to remember how fragile the old man is."

Sebastian agreed with a gloomy shrug. "Well he is almost three hundred."

"The question is whether we can keep him warm enough while he recuperates," Bruda Dara said.

"We call in chopper as soon as possible," said Yen Cho.

"That may not be for a couple of days, depends on the size of the howler."

"Better not be too big then."

"We do have enough food and supplies. As long as he stays warm, then he should be all right. The

only problem is if there's an emergency of some kind, we only have a limited amount of medical equipment."

"What does the medical software say?"

"He's to have rest, a regimen of high protein mix in his blend when he wakes up. A lot of small meals, about thirty-five different pills, and lots of rest."

"We have all the medicines?" said Sebastian.

"Yes, we have everything needed, so far."

Sebastian noticed that Yen Cho was looking off into the woods on the left.

"Someone out there," grunted the stocky man.

They all stared at the dark woods. The snow was falling thickly, and fierce winds were blowing it madly across the sky. It was starting to build up on the ground.

"There can't be anyone else fool enough to be up here in this. All the hunters would have cleared out as soon as they heard the storm was coming."

"There might be a few guys who'd backpacked way in."

"It has to be someone from the space wreck."

Yen Cho shifted around until he got a good directional fix on the source of his uneasiness.

"Come out," he called. "No need freeze to death on our account!"

For a moment there was no reaction, and then a figure in a white spacesuit and boots staggered out of a gap between the trees.

It joined them at the fire, tearing off badly damaged gloves to hold hands up to the warmth, and they finally saw that it was a woman, a rather pretty one, who looked about thirty-five. When she pulled off her helmet they saw that her greasy gold hair had been hacked off above the shoulders. She had a surgeon's nose, almost too small in a face with such wide cheeks and forehead.

"Hello," said Bruda Dara.

The woman stared at them, seemingly struck dumb.

"You crashed. We saw your ship go down." Bruda tried to be helpful.

Sally Xermin remained silent, her tongue frozen in her throat. She was suddenly deathly afraid, afraid of these people, of this whole world. Even more she was afraid of that which she had done, that which she had thought to leave behind in the asteroid belt.

Sally wanted the earliest ride out of this system she could get. Somehow or other she was going to get out of these freezing mountains and down to the city and into Spacetown. There she would raise some credit—she didn't care what she might have to do to get it—and then she was getting out of here.

The thing had survived the destruction of the Seed's engines. It had tracked their space boat, and it had almost killed them with that micromissile. How it had tricked her. She'd been such easy prey! Her love for poor Roger had blinded her.

She struggled, and at last said simply, "Yes." She shivered, feeling weak and cold. It had been a terrible struggle climbing down from the crag where she'd landed. "You people are hunters?"

"No, we're not hunters," said Sebastian.

"Then what are you doing out here in this weather?"

"We're on a field trip to film the gray nightfeeders. They migrate through the Black Ruks about this

time of the year."

"The gray nightfeeders?"

"That's right," prattled Bruda. "They're the only flying molluscs in the known galaxy. We've got some incredible footage in the videocam. I think it'll make it onto the Econet videolink."

Sally took a deep breath. This was like something out of a soap. Wild mollusc hunters, film makers! They had to have money. She was in luck!

Then she noted the way the stolid oriental man was examining her and stiffened. He was the one who had called her out of the trees. She recognized signs of certain training about him that made her cautious. This one was a fighter. The other two were less a problem. But could she believe the crackpot tale about flying molluscs? If they were really on some TA45 scam, she had best be careful around them.

"So what happened?" said Bruda suddenly.

"What do you think?" said Sally too harshly. "We came down from the Medea, but our shuttle lost power, and we had to crash land away from the city."

The Medea visited the system regularly, a big Baadadrive liner that made the jump from Nocanicus to Saskatch for Transworld Spacelines.

"Pretty small shuttle," said Yen Cho.

"Uh, the executive shuttle, the six-passenger plane that they always dump first."

"And you were pilot?" Yen Cho tried to smile. His eyes crinkled weirdly.

"Yeah." Sally knew she could bluff that. "Space knows what's happened to the passengers; everyone ejected I'm pretty sure. They must be scattered all over these mountains."

"What spaceline?" continued Yen Cho, eyes searching for something in hers.

"Transworld—my name's Roxann Demici. Service Rank Pilot First Class, all right?" She gave them a defiant look, then dropped her eyes to the fire.

Did she lie? It was hard for Yen Cho to be sure. She probably gave a false name, but correct occupation? Well, it was already clear she was a spacer.

"We can offer you some food. I imagine there's nothing too fundamentally wrong with you or you'd have told us about it by now," said Sebastian.

"Oh, do you have some soup or something? Nutrisoup? I'd love something hot in my stomach. I've been walking for hours. I came down on a damn mountain, getting off it was hell."

"Well, parachuting into the Black Ruks is liable to leave you stranded on one mountain or another." Sebastian led her to the hemisphere of his tent. "I've got a can heater in here." He bent down and slipped inside. Sally followed him. From the accent she was pretty sure he was a native Saskatcher.

It was a tight fit inside but there was just room for her to squeeze in beside him. Sebastian rummaged in his knapsack. She glimpsed a handgun and a brown corduroy shirt before he produced a little can-clamp and heater.

"Okay, we've got split pea, mock-chicken, hearty beefy. Which do you want?"

"Split pea will be great. Then I've got to do something about getting a rescue party up here to find my passengers."

Ten seconds later she was sipping hot soup, while she worked out ways to obtain that gun.

BOOK THREE

STORM ASSAULT

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

ICE WORLD STORM ASSAULT! THE CODE CRY SANG HIGH and wild in the back brain of the Military Form. After the aeons of waiting, dormant in the void, it was in action once more! The plan was at optimum. The battlepod carried it downward to its appointment with destiny.

Before the optical surfaces was spread the huge helpless limb of the water world. A cold world but one amply endowed with host.

Inside the tiny assault craft rode two full battlebeasts—they who had once been Pramod and Tili Beshwan. They had by then been reinforced with seven pups, brought forth from the manipulated reproductives of the Tili form. The pups rode beside them now, their bodies like inchworms, spindly limbs drawn up tight.

In the storage sac were hundreds of conversion modules the size and shape of starfish. Each had been grown with painstaking care in the small generation vat they'd brought on the long journey from the asteroid belt.

The scream of atmospheric reentry faded and the Pramod form turned the battlepod so the rocket thrusters faced the ground.

High clouds rushed up at them; below was a vast, coiling storm system. There was no detectable defensive activity. The die was cast, defeat unthinkable.

Swirling snow cut the view from the control tower at Saskatch Spaceport to less than one hundred meters that morning as the howler roared down the valley.

A dark twilight had claimed the day. Furious winds scoured the buildings of the city.

Captain Auguste Darnay stared out into it and tried not to grind his teeth. It was ten thirty-five. He'd been on duty for what seemed like a full day already.

The storm was still building; lightning was flickering to the north of the city, and the thunder rumbled dimly, muffled by the thick falling snow.

The tarp on Blast-Pan Site 12 was still blowing around, torn loose and letting snow pile up on the Transworld shuttle berthed there. The Transworld day boss was going to be on the line again. She had a priority line, she could get right through to Darnay anytime. He would have to listen to her complaints again, for the third time that day. And did the tarp team seem to care? Did they intensify their effort to secure the tarp and end the embarrassing problem? No, they did not. Their truck was still sitting inside the garage while they finished their lunch.

They, the surly workers, they got to have lunch! They had lunch while poor Auguste, he would have no lunch that day. It was enough to make one scream. Auguste Darnay had a table booked at La Fenache over in the Hotel Edwarde for that very day. Alas, there would be no lunch, none of the exquisite toasted crab organa, none of the steak tartare that was so very well done at La Fenache.

Instead he would be wrestling with storm problems, eating greasy donuts swilled down with bad coffee.

Darnay heaved a great sigh. Then the radar officer broke in on his thoughts. "Captain Darnay, we still have that radar trace. It's suborbital now, coming straight in, approach angle of twenty-three degrees,

speed down to seven hundred kilometers an hour, distance three hundred kilometers. It will be here in less than thirty minutes."

"Damn!" Darnay snarled. "As if I didn't have enough troubles today. Sounds like another rogue lander. Only this time it's heading right toward us."

"The trace indicates a very small craft, sir. Could be an emergency lifeboat like the one that crashed last night."

Darnay fumed. "Are we absolutely certain about this? This is not some kind of storm-cloud radar bogey now?"

"No, sir. It's there. It has to be there—we're picking up metal response. There's no doubt about it."

"Sir!" Another voice chimed in.

Darnay groaned. "I've got Transworld holding for you."

"Tell them to wait. Get me Colonel Tusseau, on priority. He must be informed of this radar trace. Some fool is about to crash land here, right in the middle of the storm."

The wind shook the tower again. It was gusting up to one hundred kilometers an hour out there. The snow was flying past horizontally. Even radio communications with the orbiter had been badly degraded by the fury of the storm.

There had been enough communication however to know that the radar bogey was in clear violation of the ITAA: no landing authorization code, just like the one that had plummeted into the Black Ruk mountains early that morning. They still didn't know where that one had come from. Nor had any survivors been heard from. The ITAA was going to be all over the Saskatch authorities about that.

The worst thing, of course, was that poor Auguste had been dragged from sound slumber in a nice warm bed to take care of it!

He'd had no sleep since, what with the attempts to mount a search for survivors and the efforts to batten down the spaceport prior to the storm's arrival. There'd been nothing but problems. The triple antennae would not fold up properly. The tarp hauler had broken down and the tarps had had to be delivered to the blast-pan sites in smaller trucks, one at a time.

There were reasons for such problems. Everyone knew that the whole system was ridiculously flimsy, but then it wasn't designed to serve a Class A space facility with subarctic weather extremes.

Darnay went into his office and switched on a secure line. After a few moments the face of Henri Tusseau came into focus. Tusseau had his own problems, Darnay was well aware.

"What is it?" Tusseau was plainly unhappy.

"We have another unauthorized landing in progress, a small ship is coming in. No clearance with the orbiter."

"What? How did this one slip by them?"

"They say they have no record of it. It must have made its planetary approach from the other side of Saskatch, entered the atmosphere over the pole."

"Where is it?" Tusseau seethed.

"About three hundred kilometers north and closing. It's heading right this way. I think it means to land here at the spaceport."

"What? Someone is trying to make an illegal landing at the spaceport? In this kind of weather?"

"That's what it looks like."

Henri Tusseau looked away from the screen for a moment. Another voice said something and repeated it more loudly when Henri shook head in rejection.

Darnay heard a voice familiar from TV and radio.

"Activate a battery and shoot it down!"

Henri Tusseau was replaced on the screen by Gustave Tusseau, Old Man Tusseau, the most important political figure in the colony.

"Monsieur Tusseau—" began Darnay in protest.

"Be quiet, Darnay. I want that interloper shot out of the sky. I won't have it said in the ITAA that we're starting to let people usurp landing privilege. Activate the missiles, shoot it down!"

Darnay gulped.

"Two hundred kilometers now, sir. Closing at five hundred kph, speed dropping steadily," warbled the radar officer.

Henri Tusseau reappeared.

"I countermand that order, Darnay, are you listening? Under no circumstances will you fire missiles. We don't know what we've got here, and I'm not going to have a lifeboat with inoperative communications equipment shot out of the sky on my watch. Do you understand me, Captain? I am the one with the responsibility; my authority is the one you will obey."

Henri Tusseau wore the air of one who has been much put upon. And certainly he suddenly faced a morass of legal problems that had appeared with an unpleasant suddenness.

Off screen, Old Man Tusseau could be heard expostulating loudly. Meanwhile, on screen, in the background, Darnay caught a brief glimpse of Police Chief Gaspard Beliveau. Auguste's eyebrows rose; he was crashing a powerful people's party of some kind. He wondered who else was present.

The grapevine was seething with the news that Lieutenant Griks had brought a case against Colonel Tusseau in Judge Feinberg's court overnight.

Auguste was not a little worried about his own position. That swine Griks was always out on the blast pans, conducting his damnable inspections.

"Sir!" There was something odd, almost painful, in the radar officer's voice.

"What is it?" he snapped.

"The damned thing's disappeared. The trace is gone. It was about one hundred and forty kilometers out when it simply vanished."

"It did what?" Darnay bellowed, with unfortunate consequences.

Henri Tusseau whirled to face him on screen, face alight with dangerous emotions. "Yes, Captain Darnay? You wanted my attention?"

Darnay gulped. "No," he stammered. "Yes! I mean."

"What do you mean?" said Tusseau in a cold voice.

"The radar trace has, uh, gone. Looks like it was a bogey of some kind, just radar."

"What are you babbling about man?"

"There's no lifeboat; it's a bogey. There's no need for an alarm or anything."

"No lifeboat!" sputtered Tusseau. "Then what the hell are you doing wasting our time!" he roared.

"My apologies, sir. I didn't mean—"

"I don't care what you didn't mean. Get off the line you fool! We've got some more serious problems to take care of."

The screen blanked.

Darnay whirled to face the hapless radar officer. "You'd better have some kind of explanation for this." Darnay was dangerously pink in the cheeks.

The radar officer wore a woeful expression. "It's just not possible. We had a positive metal-reflective ID. The computer even had a shape suggestion. Small, squarish boat, more like a distress pod than a lifeboat. Then it just vanished."

"Things don't vanish. Are you sure the radar is working properly? If I find that this was caused by faulty radar maintenance or something you'll be hearing a lot more about this."

"B-but," the radar officer sputtered.

"But me no buts man. Check the equipment immediately and give me a full report."

The radar officer stared out at the snow whipping past. A full report meant visiting the distant radar antennae scattered about the spaceport. It meant going outside in the blizzard.

Darnay whirled upon the hapless tarpaulin officer. "Where's the tarp for number twelve?"

"Ah, they're just getting underway now, sir."

Darnay clutched at his temples. "Why am I being driven insane? Because I'm surrounded by fools and poltroons, that's why! Get that tarp out there and secure number twelve."

Darnay stared out. at the whirling snow. The building shuddered again from a gust of wind.

It was obviously a radar bogey. The big winter storms, the real howlers, did fantastically complicated things with Saskatch's atmosphere. Produced lightning of all known varieties: fireballs, St. Elmo's fire? plus occasional radar oddities.

One look at the storm was enough to show you that no one in his right mind would be trying to land a small ship under such conditions.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

ON THE TOP FLOOR OF THE POLICE TOWER, THE MEETING raged on. Startled politicians, bureaucrats, and the top command of the police forces had braved the howler to come downtown.

Something big had come loose. They all wanted to know why. Tempers were fraying. Still the late arrivals bleated the same dumb questions.

"We have a real problem on our hands this time you fools!" raged Old Man Tusseau.

The VIPs stared back at him sullenly. They were used to being bullied by the towering presence of Old Man Tusseau, but a civil war was going on, and that meant serious trouble.

"You think we don't know that we got trouble!" said Adele Schultz, the senior senator from the Southside. "We know all right—we know that you Tusseaus have just about ensured that the ITAA comes in here and takes over."

Old Man Tusseau reddened. "Shut up you stupid woman!"

Colonel Henri Tusseau's office was screened off by sonosound but he knew that Old Man's famous voice would be carrying right through it to the outer offices. He shook his head wearily. Uncle Gustave was so tiresome, so much of the time, it was simply appalling.

The fat man, Gaspard Belivean, sat in the other armchair, lost in a blue funk.

"You're all madmen!" shouted Adele Schultz. "Who authorized the mortar fire? I want to know who gave the orders for that!" She aimed this last at Beliveau, who winced. Gaspard could see the ITAA prison gates all too clearly.

"It's too late to do anything about that," said Old Man with a dismissive gesture. "What's done is done."

Old Man, of course, had been all for killing Griks immediately, even if it required an armed assault. Now he tried to regain his mastery over the senators. "If you listen to me we can still get out of this easily enough."

That had their attention. They all wanted desperately to get out of this trouble, easily. The usual contradictions obtained.

"You see, it will all be over and forgotten in less than ten years if we just hang in and tough it out. Whereas if you let this affair go on, and allow this case to be heard, then we're all sunk. You have to realize that we're all in this together, everyone of us in a leadership position on this colony. The ITAA will come in hard and heavy if they come in. Have you ever been inside the Beliveau Detention Center? Believe me, that would be a death sentence for any of you."

Old Gustave Tusseau's grip upon the Saskatch Senate was strong, everyone knew that, but was it strong enough to survive an armed assault and the suppression of a case accepted in Judge Feinberg's court?

Adele Schultz clearly didn't believe it.

"You're mad, stark staring mad. You won't get away with that, the electorate won't stand for it. It's going too far."

"Adele's right. How are you going to keep it out of the media?" said Senator Grogan.

"Have you seen any sign of it on the TV?"

Nobody had. There was an exchange of slightly startled looks.

"No, we haven't" said Adele. "What's going on?"

Tusseau smiled, clasped his hands together behind his back.

"Let's just say that the Fixer Brothers have made quite a few phone calls since I personally sprung them out of the detention center."

"But you can't suppress the news entirely. The ITAA must know already."

"We have friends in the ITAA. They will see to it that nothing is done immediately, if we remove the source of the trouble in time."

Which would make all of them accomplices in murder, a lot of murder, including the murder of a colony judge.

"What about the rest of the Colony Court?" said Senator Grogan.

"They have been warned. We'll see. Old Enzberry may give us trouble; if he does then maybe old Enzberry is going to have to have a sudden heart attack."

Old Man Tusseau beamed at them. "Essentially, my friends, I don't care what I have to do to keep what I have. And you don't dare do anything but back me up."

"What does that mean?" snarled Adele Schultz. "Enough of this bickering." Gaspard Beliveau was on his feet, shoving his ponderous presence into the thick of the argument. "Let's just concentrate our minds

right now on what we're going to say to the ITAA Investigations Committee, because they're going to call up. At the least that will happen. We better have a good story ready and be prepared to stick to it."

"What about the Koreans?" said Senator Bergez.

"Damn the Koreans. They'll do what they're told."

"Nothing but a bunch of balky mooncrabs with hearts of stone," Old Man muttered.

"This is insane. I don't know what I'm doing listening to you. We don't have to go through with this. We have a choice you know. We could just as easily hear the case and let it go through." Adele Schultz said in a cold, level voice.

Colonel Tusseau jumped up. "That's easy for, you to say! You're not the one with the derriere in the fire!"

"Well, I hardly see what—"

"Look—it was all right for you to sit back and collect your share of the money. You took your retainer and you voted the right way in the Senate, don't deny that! Now you want to stand back and watch me go down the chute for you."

"Well, if it comes to that, better that just one of us suffers than have all of us destroyed."

"I won't go into the detention center quietly, you better know that. If I'm going I'm taking a lot of you with me."

They all gave him a hard-eyed look. Suddenly Tusseau knew what they were thinking. "And if you kill me, Judge Feinberg will still send the evidence to the ITAA. The affair's gone too far for that."

"Pity," said Adele Schultz.

"I have a better idea." Old Man raised his voice once more. "Let's kill the whole Colony Court. We'll get them together for a petition and blow the bastards up. Then we can have an election for new judges and stack the next court with more controllable people. The court's been a thorn in our sides for way too long."

There were groans. Senator Bergez waved his hands in protest. "No, you can count me out of that. I won't be a party to it."

"It's simple you fools! We'll blame it on the Fixer Brothers. It's just the kind of thing they're known for."

Gaspard Beliveau gave a chuckle at that. "You don't screw the Fixer Brothers and live in one piece, that's for sure." He giggled. "You saw that latest thing they did. Ground the guy up as hamburger, put it into supermarkets, mailed it to his family. Then released the videos. Just disgusting."

Old Man's smile glittered. "So it makes reasonable sense, no? So the DEP has a big case against the Fixer Brothers, so the Fixer Brothers decided to treat the DEP and the judge the way they treat everybody else. So they kill the whole court, they kill Griks and they destroy all the evidence. So later there will be an ITAA investigation, but of the Fixer Brothers, not us."

"The ITAA will investigate the entire matter. It will not be possible to keep them from finding enough of the truth to ensure that they demand a presence here. Once they get us into those damn courts of theirs anything can happen—sentences of fifty years aren't uncommon," groaned Senator Bergez.

Old Man was unmoved. "So the ITAA investigates, so we give the investigator the sort of money that most sensible people like, and that'll be that."

Beliveau was moved to chuckle again. "Heh, heh, one bang, no problem. I agree, that does sound better."

"Well, I won't be part of that," said Adele Schultz. "I think you'll all be in jail within five years if you go through with this harebrained scheme."

A beep sounded from the communicator screen. A priority code tab began to glow in the corner.

"What is it now?" snapped Henri Tusseau. He opened the line. A frantic-looking Auguste Darnay appeared on screen. Darnay's normally lacquered hair was disturbed, his face suffused with a dramatic pink coloration.

"Ah, Colonel Tusseau, a very strange thing has happened. That radar trace that we had earlier and which then disappeared? It turned out to be real after all. Fifteen minutes ago a small ship landed right inside Blast Pan 18."

Tusseau exploded. "Then deal with it! Anyone who lands in this kind of weather has to be crazy, so do what you have to do: go out and round them up and we'll take them off your hands and sling them into the BDC at once.

There are dozens of things we can charge them with."

"Ah, yes, sir, well, uh,—"

"Carry on, Captain Darnay, and don't bother us any more about this matter. You got that?"

"Ah, but, sir, there's—" The rest was lost as Henri Tusseau cut the connection and returned his attention to the problems at hand.

Which, thought Auguste Darnay, was extremely unfortunate. He looked back to the enhanced image on the central video screen. Through driving snow the BPS 18 loomed like a squat concrete bowl ringed at the base with workshops and offices.

The little ship had landed, blasting down the last hundred feet on surging booster jets, coming in with precision to the center of the empty blast pan, burning its way through the tarpaulin covers to do so.

BPS 18 was in the middle of a refit. A crew of nine workers was engaged in various tasks in the maintenance torus. When the reverberations of the landing had died away they picked themselves up and called the space-tower.

Darnay told them to send someone to investigate. An electrician named Lebrun went up to the blast-pan doors. He didn't come back. They called Darnay again.

"Well somebody has got to go find him!" said Darnay.

The work crew grumbled together. Three men went down to the entrance lock. They heard noises coming from inside, and thinking that it was Lebrun coming back they opened the lock.

The door slid open for a second and nothing appeared. One man, Travis, the ventilation engineer, stuck his head in the door. He gave a startled squawk as a hand seized his face and yanked him inside. An arm sheathed in horn whipped down and knocked him senseless.

Wide-eyed, Cams and Lyle surged forward. They were met at the door by the killing machines that had once been Pramod and Tili Beshwan.

For a moment they regarded each other. Both Carris and Lyle were burly men; they towered over the strange figures with sticklike limbs and shiny carapaces. Then the fragile-looking things sprang into action with terrifying rapidity. The men tried to fight. They swung fists; they attempted to grapple. The Tili form kicked Cams in the stomach and rapped him hard across the temple as he went down. The Pramod form ducked a big, slow right hand from Lyle and stepped inside and drove fists against the big man's chest. The Pramod form miscalculated and drove the fists through the rib cage by accident, and Lyle dropped to the floor, dead before he touched down, while blood fountained from his body.

The battleforms stepped over the men and sprang to the door to the main room. Bright drops of

crimson rained and spattered from them as they went.

At the door Levesk, the welding expert, confronted them for a second. He caught sight of the alien eyes, like flowers, and then they seized him and slammed him into a wall so hard he lost consciousness.

The four remaining workers looked up in stunned amazement as the things leapt toward them. They got to their feet, picked up heavy tools, swung them, missed, and never got another chance. Arms sheathed in polymerized horn flashed, fingers like knives cut through guts and muscles.

In the brief melee, Gary, a mechanic, struck one of the things with a heavy wrench and staggered it, black juice flowing from a wound. Gary tried to get in another blow, but it backhanded him across the throat, severing his head from his body, took the wrench from his hand with a curt gesture, and hurled it into the communications cabinet. All signals cut off abruptly.

The tower was unable to regain contact. Thick snow continued to swirl across the spaceport.

Captain Darnay was left staring at a blank video screen.

Inside the maintenance torus at the base of Blast Pan 18 the strange, brutal little fight was over. Four of the nine men had been slain. The others would be converted.

The pups now joined the battleforms. They also carried in Lebrun, Travis, and Carris. The pups had grown to the size of rabbits, slender little bipeds with absurdly thin limbs. They carried small bags, bulging with the converter modules that had been grown during the long trip from the asteroid belt.

The pups inspected each of the fallen men. Those who were still alive were immediately stripped of their clothing. Then converter modules were pressed through the anal portal into the intestines.

Travis, Lebrun, and Levesk were unfortunate enough to awake during the violence of the conversion process. They found themselves pinned down by Lilliputian demons from some surreal hell while what felt like a broomstick was shoved into them from behind. They fought, thrashing and screaming, but to no avail. The pygmy bipeds were too strong for human muscles. When the converters were in place, lodged well within the intestines of the unfortunates, they were released.

The men crawled off into the corners with little cries of horror until they became paralyzed by the disabling agents released into their blood by the active converters.

Soon they curled into fetal balls, and their bodies began to collapse as a shell of pink skin grew over them. They would wake again in five hours. And they would be unstoppable. They would be swift converters of the concentrated bipedal material in the aliens' reef concentration. The Military Form, hosted in the Pramod beast, gave thanks to the whims of fortune that had provided such excellent host material.

They were advanced, these bipeds, but easily controlled by simple forms of parasitic intrusion within the highly differentiated brains. The basic functions, the limbic system, all were well within effective control range of the intruding tentacles of the superior nervous system.

The battleforms returned from completing a reconnaissance of the immediate surroundings. The Tili form directed the pups to carry out the podded humans and place them in the snowdrifts behind the blast pan. There they were swiftly buried, huge pink eggs with quickly hardening skins.

Each cocoon was jabbed with a microradio bulb by the pups.

While the pods were safely cached, the Pramod form implanted another type of conversion module, pink worm-shaped things about a meter long, to revive the dead humans. This process took a few minutes, and since the dead men were freshly killed there was little deterioration for the conversion forms to overcome.

The man without his head took the longest to revive, but fresh organs were grown from within his

wounds, lung like things swelled quickly and expanded into the air. Muscle groups were galvanized by the twitching control tendrils of the higher nervous system.

All the while the Tili form scouted the approaches to the blast-pan site. There was no sign of activity among the nearby biped concentrations. The abrupt termination of communications had not brought a swift response. It was much as the Military Form had suspected from the beginning: the bipeds were soft and lazy, with little concern or preparation for an unheralded invasion force.

The next blast pan was half a kilometer to the east. On the west, about a kilometer distant, was the perimeter wall of the spaceport, a dirt bank covered in snow. Beyond that was a series of structures, a maze of them in fact. And all around, there was host!

Such host was made to be taken advantage of. The biped metabolisms were clearly developed for the cold, water-world environment; nevertheless they were capable of considerable short-term improvement.

They lacked the strength of the classic bodymass, the scientifically adapted Imperial Norm of the galaxy legions, but they were of a high enough metabolic range that they could be armored and quickened quite simply.

It was time to begin the next phase of the operation. The falling flakes of frozen water had reduced visibility. The two battleforms, followed by two of the pups, stole quietly forth into the blizzard. The remaining pups were to guard the pods. They hid themselves carefully. The revived men were sent shambling out, to circle the spaceport and reach the terminal from the other direction.

Over their shoulders the battleforms carried big sacs filled with converter modules. Ahead were the blurred lights that signaled population concentrations.

Whipped madly by a strong, cold wind, the waterflakes continued to fall. Too cold for the higher forms, this world would never be more than a garrison world, but its memory would live long in the records of the Gods of Axon-Neurone. It would be the world of their revival, after an eon in the void.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

THE MILITARY FORM LED THE WAY, STRIDING INTO THE storm with the urge to battle rising. Life was suddenly unbearably sweet. The mental dust of hundreds of millions of years was gone, wiped clean by the pleasurable fury of action.

And yet not everything was running absolutely perfectly. The waterflakes were piled waist deep in places and the horn plates on the soles of the feet made progress on top of the snow difficult. The feet were narrow, and they sank through in the drifts. The pups were unable to penetrate some of the drifts, and the battleforms paused to pick them up and carry them on their shoulders.

The Military Form had never confronted such a world, a frozen snowball. The Empire had fought wars untold in its ancient conquests, but the Military Form's experiences had been on Frog worlds, warm and wet, in the subterranean cities of the great Batrachian enemy.

Now, the beasts were having to plough through the snow, expending too much energy too soon. But to grow more useful feet would take hours and consume energy. The battleforms traced a complex path around the worst drifts.

But the inconvenience of the snow was more than compensated by its effect on the enemy's ability to see. Lightning flickered in the clouds to the north, the thunder boomed out over the city above the whistling of the winds.

The battleforms marched on.

It took far longer than anticipated, but eventually the beasts reached the perimeter wall. They rested a moment while the Pramod form used its telescope to peer through the drifting snow. It was difficult to see much, but the bipeds used electric light without fear of detection. A couple of bright concentrations were nearby. Might they be centers of population and activity? It seemed very likely.

The stomach organ of the Pramod beast rumbled and growled. The battlebeasts were starving. The Military Form recognized their plight. As great as was their strength so was their hunger.

The warm-blooded, nonarmored, metabolic processes of the creatures were hard to refine by more than a single power, and though they were hardy enough, as befitted their frozen home world, they must eventually feed. Indeed they required prodigious amounts of food to maintain their high metabolic levels. Fortunately they were omnivores.

They would feed, the Military Form promised itself, from the food lockers of the enemy. Soon. The stomach rumbles continued.

Beyond the wall lay the poorly lit streets of a warehouse and factory district. The buildings were large, often filling a single block. They showed few lights.

Except one, close by, a block-long complex dominated by a long, four-story building that boasted hundreds of small yellow rectangles. Around the structure was a high wall. No entrance or exit could be seen from this vantage point.

This then could become the primary target. The Military Form locked on and undertook a short reconnaissance. Quickly the battleforms sped up and down the length of the walls. A pup was sent to climb a nearby structure to study the windows of the interior building.

The conclusion was obvious. The place was packed with the alien bipeds. Possibly it was a residence of some kind. Such densities would make the conquest of their reeflike concentrations much simpler. The task of concentrating the host material had been taken care of, only the seizure and conversion remained to be completed.

Furthermore the target building appeared to have only a single entrance cum exit. The bipeds inside would be easily bottled up, and prevented from escaping and arousing general alarm. The structure was also fairly defensible.

After a moment's reflection the decision was made, the target was locked into the plan. Then the Military Form considered another building, a glittering tower that stood a few blocks farther south and east.

One wall of the building showed huge initials in the alien alphabet, KYB in red lights. The Military Form understood at once. This was an industrial entity home, a center of electromagnetic communications webs.

The Military Form renewed the surveillance. Clearly the tower was a target of great importance. As soon as control of the primary target was assured, and a good supply of battlehost was in hand, a sortie to take control of the tower would become essential. Electromagnetic controls and the planetary computer net were immediate targets of high priority.

The Military Form gave thanks to the Gods of Axon-Neurone. To have as secondary target this tower, with such proximity! That was a great shift in fortunes, a great advantage given to the assault.

The plan would change then. Instead of seizing mobility first, an assault would be made upon the humans' electromagnetic control system. If the Military Form could gain entry to the humans' computer networks the Military Form could cause chaos in the entire concentration zone. The alien reef would lie open and blinded.

The battleforms slipped silently through the snow toward the entrance of the Beliveau Detention

Center.

The walls were topped by a laser detection system. With the equipment available, there was no way of passing over the walls without raising the alarm. But the Military Form had never seriously considered entering that way; it headed for the front entrance. Both battlebeasts unlimbered the spring-fired dart guns they'd fashioned during the long voyage. Their bolts were tipped with a nerve poison that would drop any human within seconds.

It was brightly lit, but the front entrance was barred with a narrow gate. The gate was held shut by a single lock, governed by digital input rather than an analog device, such as a key. The Tili form attached a computer probe.

As it happened, only a pair of guards was on duty in the front-gate control section that morning at the BDC. Two others had failed to make it in through the snowstorm. The station was set a dozen paces inside the front gate, looking out on the entrance area through several slit windows, but the guards relied on the pair of TV cameras that whirred back and forth, constantly monitoring the scene. One officer sat in front of a bank of monitors, watching a televised log-rolling contest. The second was asleep, with his chair back in the recline mode, his fingers entwined over his chest and his cap pushed down over his face.

The exterior presence alarm rang twice, very quickly. The one watching TV looked up. A loud noise sounded by the front gate. He flicked to the channel for the gate monitor.

A blast roared from the gate alarm, a bell began ringing. On screen the gate was swinging open.

"What the hell is going on?" he exclaimed.

"illegal entry!" said the computer screen.

The snoozer continued to snooze through the ringing of the frontal alarm bell. This irritated his companion, who stirred the snoozer to life with a jerk.

"Hey, all right, Demetz—what's going on?"

"Wake up, Fargey. We got an exterior sensor alert and something's going on at the front gate. Listen!"

First Officer Fargey cocked his head. The bell was ringing. He blinked uneasily. There was a sudden loud noise at the interior gate, which locked with a key that was carried by only the guards on shift. The noise grew in intensity. "Sounds like someone's trying to pry the door off." Fargey sat up, looked around for his gun and holster.

"This is pretty weird for a prison break."

Demetz just scowled at him as he loaded a clip of WAKmaster body shells into his shotgun.

"I mean this isn't the normal maneuver. Who just walks up and breaks open the front door? Hell, I mean not even the Koreans would do that."

The sounds grew louder. They ceased suddenly.

They looked at each other, began to move more quickly.

Fargey was still strapping on his holster when Demetz went out the door, shotgun in hand, no helmet. He spun round the corner. Gave a yelp of astonishment and discharged the shotgun. The shotgun fired again, and Demetz came running back with the wildest look on his face.

"There's some kind of robot or something, trying to break the gate open with its bare hands. I shot it, knocked it down, but it got up again! It's hiding round the corner. Call the cops. I'm going to call on the warden."

Fargey's eyes bulged. "Now wait a second, what is this? Is this some kind of weird-ass Ninja strike that nobody told us about? If the Chaebols were taking somebody out we'd have been notified. It would happen in house; no need to attack the prison to get someone killed in here. This doesn't make sense—why would they attack the prison?"

Demetz lost patience. "Sense or no sense I'm going to see the warden."

Demetz was gone. The noise at the gate redoubled, grew to a screech of tearing steel.

A little nervously Fargey fingered some WAKmaster shell boxes out of the desk. He checked his loads and hefted his shotgun into firing position. There was a loud clang as the gate opened. The computer sounded a general alarm.

Around the corner and into the passage sprang a bipedal being, barely recognizable as human. Sheaths of a shiny pink and gray material coated the arms, the chest, and lower body. The material was heavily ridged and wattled on the chest and torso.

The head was an obscenely distorted version of humanity. Orange flower things waved in front of a face like that of a man mixed with a greyhound. Under the chin hung a beard of pink polyps.

Fargey screamed in fright and pulled the trigger and missed; the shot smashed the water cooler by the door. The second shot deflected off the wall and hit a second creature that had come in behind the first.

Something sharp stung his cheek. And there was a weird numbness. He watched as the first creature bounded toward him, but he couldn't move. His gun discharged, but only into the floor, and the creature drove an arm like a sword into him to finish the work.

An instant later his weapon was in the Pramod form's hands. It loaded it rapidly from shell boxes on the desk. The blood from the wounds caused by the surprise shot at the gate had congealed already and the battleform was working hard to repair the damage. Still it would slow the Pramod form for the next hour or so. Feeding had become even more important. There were simply no fat reserves left on the Pramod beast.

The Tili form led the way into the office section where the warden and the administrative staff worked. As they advanced they shot the admin people and left them behind. They hammered through the warden's stout wooden door and caught him still on the phone, yammering to the police.

Demetz fired but missed, and the Tili form shot him while the Pramod form shot the warden.

The sounds of human speech echoed from the small communications device on the warden's desk. The Tili form examined the device carefully. It had to be slaved to a computer somewhere; small video screens set on one side of the desk came to life at the touch of a button. A camera device sat by them, it began to swivel to cover the military forms. The Tili form smashed it.

The Tili form sat down to investigate the computer system. The Military Form had become familiar with human computer systems. The Tili form soon had control. All communications with the outside world were cut off at once.

A pup was left to keep watch in the control room while the Pramod form proceeded into the prison. Prison officers were coming. They were bunched in the approach corridor.

They looked up in surprise when the Pramod form leaned around the corner and sprayed them with shotgun fire at close quarters.

The five guards caught in the hallway went down together. The battleform leaped over them and ran on into the prison interior. The pups followed.

It was clear now that while the bipeds were not in themselves fearsome, their weaponry was effective. With guns the bipeds could be dangerous; the Military Form wondered how widespread gun possession

was. It might be a mistake to attack the large population centers directly if they were all well armed.

And it was clear that there were many, many humans in this place. They could be sensed, heard, talking, moving, on the floors above.

An inspection provided another problem. Heavy metal gates and walls of bars divided the interior spaces. Getting at the enclosed bipeds might be quite difficult.

The locks however were soon penetrated by the Tili form, which had also discovered at last the real identity of the place. The building was a confinement pen! A place for concentrating the creatures against their will. The doors were part of a system that packed the humans into small chambers, stacked along levels connected by two staircases. All the doors were governed by the computer system. No arrangement could have been more perfect for the plan. Conversion could proceed at once.

Within another minute they were through the stairwell gates and onto the first floor of cells. All cell doors had closed automatically when the front-gate alert went off, thus most prisoners were actually trapped inside their cells, only a couple of dozen were outside, locked in the corridors on each floor.

In the corridor on the first floor the battlebeasts shot the men who were outside their cells. Then they opened the first cell and began the hard work of conversion.

The convicts fought back, with prison knives, even a hidden pistol, a spring gun smuggled in piece by piece. The battles were terrible because each cell contained three or four men. The battlebeasts would separate the men. One beast seized a man and dragged him out and held him down while a pup thrust the converter through the anal portal. The other beast herded the victim's cellmates back into the cell to await their turn.

When someone attacked the battlebeasts he was slain, shot or stabbed with the knifelike hands. The rest were dragged out and pinned to the floor for conversion by the pups who had discovered that it was easier to insert the converter module first and to rip the clothes off afterward, than to take the garments first. The modules soon numbed the humans and effectively ended all resistance.

Cell by cell the nightmare process continued, as the Military Form took advantage of the concentration of caged bipeds and the lack of any effective security grid for the prison. Beliveau Detention Center had always been a low-budget item in the local balancing of resources.

Within a few hours a small army of battlebeasts would be ready to carry the assault to its conclusion.

CHAPTER THIRTY

INSIDE THE SPACEPORT CONTROL TOWER. THE BPS was only visible through the driving snow when the searchlights were full on. No more sounds or pictures came from the interior.

Nobody in the tower spoke. Everybody had a strong, rational desire to run down to the garage level and drive home.

Captain Auguste Darnay wrung his hands together, unsure what to do. He had left a dozen messages. The police would arrive soon. Darnay wished they'd hurry.

Captain Darnay looked at the screen again. Blast Pan 18 was barely visible through the snow. Then lightning flashed directly behind it. For a second it stood out stark and clear. The lights were on, but no one answered on the phone, no video transmission, no communications.

All they were left with were the strange images they'd caught earlier. Rerun on the main tower screen they were neither informative nor reassuring.

Auguste Darnay watched again as something about the size of a man, but moving more quickly than any man, sped into camera view beside the startled face of one worker. In the next moment the worker

seemed to explode in fountains of fluids, before toppling backward out of sight. A man swung a heavy wrench, connecting solidly with the shoulder of the robot or power suit or whatever it was. Then with blinding speed the wrench was seized and hurled and the signal ended.

"What the hell was that?" muttered Darnay, not for the first time.

"A robot, some kind of robot, but why is it attacking those men?" His radar officer was equally perplexed.

"Is this some kind of Ninja attack?" said Tompkins, the landing approach officer.

"Ninja? On Saskatch!" The radar officer shook his head. "Doesn't make sense—we don't have any Jap corporations anyway. Just the Koreans."

"Yeah, Jerry's right, and anyway, why the hell would Ninjas want to attack the crew of a BPS?"

"I don't know, ask the Ninjas."

"The exotic animal fellow is here," said a security aide.

"Good, send him up. Maybe he's got an answer."

A bluff-faced, six footer strode in wearing the blue uniform of the ITAA Customs Service. "Balois here, what's the problem?"

"Take a look, we've got an intruder in Blast Pan 18. A rogue shuttle came in and landed without permission. Then this happened."

Darnay ran the short clip of the violence in the maintenance torus of the blast-pan site. "Now you tell us what the hell that is; some kind of animal? You got something running around out there that we don't know about?"

Balois rubbed his chin and gazed at the video clip. After a moment he shook his head.

"Zingi rope ape? But what's it doing out here?" He looked again, saw the strange, flowerlike organs. "Nope, not a rope ape. I don't think I've ever seen anything like this."

"Nothing? You don't have any loose animals right now?"

"No trouble at all, in fact. I'll have to run this through the computer to check it for you."

"Well hurry it up, won't you. It appears to be quite capable of killing people."

Balois left with a copy of the video clip.

Spaceport Security Officer Levin appeared from the cubicle of his station. "The security men are about a hundred meters away from the BPS now. There are no signs of life and I don't think the security men are terribly interested in going inside."

"Well somebody's got to!" exclaimed Darnay.

"Well, they don't want to be the ones to do it. If I push them they say they'll walk, refer the matter to the union. So?"

"Mon Dieu!" muttered Darnay, smiting his forehead. Finally, he turned to his assistant, Sublieutenant Roux, a wiry, swarthy fellow from Blue Lake. "So where are the police and their SWAT team?"

"Well they're on their way. Should be here any moment in fact."

And indeed, at that moment Henri Tusseau walked in the door with a SWAT team right behind him led by the squat Sergeant Dare. It was ten minutes past noon. Tusseau wore an expression of immense frustration. "All right, Darnay, what exactly is happening that requires that you drag me all the way down here!"

"Sorry to inconvenience you, sir. But if you look at the video you'll get a better idea of our problem."

Tusseau watched the greyhoundlike thing with disbelief. No smuggler would crash land at the spaceport. And there had never been any distress signal. What the hell was going on? "What does Balois say?"

"The exotic-animal fellow?"

"Yeah, is this some monstrosity of theirs? If it is I'll have somebody's hide. You better count on it."

"He says it's nothing to do with them—all their critters are safely locked up."

"They'd better be."

Tusseau looked out the window at the dimly visible BPS 18. He shivered. Someone would have to go out there. He would have to direct them. Henri Tusseau summoned Sergeant Dare to his side. "Dare, take your team down there and investigate."

Sergeant Dare looked at the screen for a long moment. He wasn't feeling all that sure about working for the Tusseaus these days anyway. "Uh, beg your pardon, sir, uh, but aren't we being a little quick in committing our forces? Why don't you send a robot in there if it's dangerous? Get some video on this thing, whatever it is."

Henri swelled; indiscipline was the curse of the, colony military systems. He turned on the squat, heavily built Dare. "Sergeant, that is an order."

Dare stared stubbornly at the screen, bulldog head set fast. Tusseau was going to be in an ITAA court pretty soon, wasn't he?

Dare didn't know if we wanted anything to do with something that looked like that and moved that quickly. A greyhound man, with shining skin and arms like knives and swords. He thought it might be better to stand off a ways and reduce the BPS to something hot and gaseous and get rid of the problem that way.

"Sergeant!" Tusseau was beside himself.

"All right, sir, all right. I just don't know that we ought to go all the way in on the first reconnaissance. We'll scout the exterior while you get a robot from the bomb squad and send it in first. As far as I'm concerned this is a bomb-type condition, and the manual demands a response in Structured Time and Strength. That means reconnaissance first."

"Sergeant Dare, get out there and get me a report on this thing before I strip you of your rank and have you placed under arrest."

Dare gave Tusseau a pained expression. "Hey, Colonel, cut out that crap, will you? You want to go in there so damn bad, you go in there. We'll go in after a robot. All right?"

Tusseau fumed and fought down the urge to strike the insubordinate Dare. The sergeant was a tough-looking customer, heavily built. Tusseau eventually swallowed and turned away. "Get a robot out there then!" he shouted, and stared out the window at the damned BPS.

After a delay, a robot was produced from the bomb squad downtown. A three-foot tall tripod thing on spherical rollers, it was rushed to the control tower and deployed by Sergeant Dare and his men, who stood back in a skirmish line about two hundred meters from the blast pan.

The robot entered and found nothing but some blood and other fluids in a few sections. No sign was found of the maintenance crew's bodies or the thing glimpsed on the video. A few areas showed signs of disturbance, broken windows, smashed doors, and toppled racks and stacks. Elsewhere everything was as normal. After a cursory trip through the corridors, the robot awaited new orders.

"All right, Dare, take your men in there and do your job!" Tusseau said with more than his usual

venom.

Dare was still uneasy. Close up, the BPS was ominously quiet. What was going on there? Where were the workers? "Get the robot up to the blast pan itself, get a shot of that ship, that at least is real."

Tusseau growled and whirled on Darnay who spluttered, "Affirmative, we do have a continued sighting on that. There was something that landed; it dropped right through the tarpaulin. It's still there I think."

"What do you mean, 'you think'?"

"Well we don't have any video from that blast pan. It cut off during landing or it was jammed. I don't know. We don't have signal from the automatic recorder after the first blaze of lights either."

"Get the robot up there and check that ship."

Tusseau vowed to destroy Sergeant Dare somehow, someday, for his humiliation.

Once again the robot went forward and rode the elevator to the blast-pan floor.

The blast pan was filling with snow; the tarpaulin had a huge hole burned through its center. It was starting to rip and flutter in the wind.

In the dead center of the pan a small pear-shaped module, big end down, sat atop a row of long rocket nozzles. It was five-meters high and four across, and tapered to a narrow point at the top.

The outer skin was covered in a material like deep velvet carpet. Hatches had been left open. The cameras were elevated to peer inside.

Minimalist couches and survival facilities were discovered, all of familiar materials. Metal, wood veneer still showing in places. Obviously the componentry of some other vehicle somewhere else, that had been taken to pieces and rebuilt. Something bipedal, about the size of a man, had ridden inside, in fact two of them.

It was all very perplexing. If it was smuggler activity they were suicidal smugglers, who chose to land a small ship at the spaceport under the cover of the worst kind of winter storm. If it was corporation warfare, then why was it being wrecked on the spaceport? No sound, competent corporation would attack the ITAA itself; it had to be an outrage related to smugglers. But why would smugglers attack maintenance workers? Why attract ITAA notice?

And where were the maintenance workers? It was all very eerie and paradoxical, and Auguste Darnay was heartily tired of thinking about it.

The robot was ordered to return.

The robot rolled into the elevator and stopped. The elevator went down half a floor and halted, trapping the robot inside.

Dare and the robot team tried everything, but the robot was trapped, the elevator refused to budge. When a line was opened to the computers in BPS 18, the main control tower computer was hit by some kind of computer storm. The tower was reduced to manual control.

Tusseau chuckled happily, gave Sergeant Dare a tight little smile. "Robot seems to have a problem."

Dare stared off at the BPS with considerable disgust. It looked like there was no way around it: reconnaissance in force was called for by the manual.

Sergeant Dare turned to Corporal Laval "Laval, you take the point; we're going in, have to find out what the hell has happened here."

Laval turned disappointed eyes on him. "Yeah? We going inside?"

"Manual demands it—it's in your contract. Legally you can pull time for refusal to serve."

Laval's face became a mask. "Yes, sir, Sergeant Dare. And I hope you damn well know what you're doing."

"That's enough, Laval. Get out there and take point. I'll be close behind."

"What's this, going to shoot the stragglers are you?"

"Enough, Corporal. You heard me."

With much loud complaint the men in Dare's SWAT team took up their weapons and crept forward. At the outer doors they paused, then darted inside. There was silence, the lights were on, the heat was on, but there were cold drafts and a door was banging somewhere down the corridor.

They looked both ways. Dare shrugged.

"Split up. Laval, you take two men and go left, the rest follow me." Laval protested against the unequal ordering of the forces. But eventually he gave in and slouched off, with Griffiths and Lemble behind.

Sergeant Dare took the other four troopers and went down the right-hand passage.

It was just as the robot had shown, empty.

They opened doors, guns ready, but found nothing in the rooms.

In the control room there was some evidence of a struggle, and a lot of blood was spattered over the equipment and floor on the right side. The communicator set had been smashed to the floor, the cables ripped from the walls. But no workers were found, no bodies, and no sign of the killer "robot" from the video glimpse.

"What about the johns—anyone checked them?" said Dare, but before anyone could move, there was a loud squawk from his wrist communicator. An alarm was sounding at the spaceport terminal itself.

"What is it?" said Dare. A panicky Darnay flickered onto the little screen. "Something is going on here, some men from the maintenance crew tried to break in on the ground floor, through the Tech gate."

"What?"

"They were wearing maintenance overalls, that's for certain, everything else is just too damn confusing."

"What d'ya mean?"

"Well security said one of them didn't have a head, that his lungs were floating over his neck or something. Crazy talk."

Dare stared at Darnay.

"I know, it doesn't make sense. So you get back over here and take your men down to the Tech gate and find out what's happening, all right?"

"Where's Colonel Tusseau?"

"He's busy, something's going on over at the prison."

Dare grunted. "Those prison pigs causing trouble again eh?"

"Probably, but I know he wants you to regroup over here, closer to him."

"Oh, but of course he does."

"With the situation as it is and everything..."

Sergeant Dare smiled into the commo camera. "Getting nervous without us, is he? Wants us back to protect him, does he?"

The SWAT team trotted back through the deepening snow. At one point Laval paused when he noticed faint tracks in the otherwise smooth blanket of snow. They led toward the perimeter wall. Corporal Laval stared at them a second, decided he had no wish to be sent off in search of whatever had made them, and kept moving.

Nobody else drew attention to them either.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

THE FRANTIC CALL FOR POLICE ASSISTANCE MADE BY THE warden of the Beliveau Detention Center was cut off before it got through to the duty sergeant in The downtown police headquarters. The duty sergeant was puzzled more than alarmed. He ordered the telephone officers to reestablish contact.

The BDC was a politically sensitive institution. The duty sergeant could not be sure that whatever was going on was not some Chaebol outrage. But eventually he took the initiative, ordering an investigation by the police patrol in North Beliveau.

To the men on the upper floors of the BDC the screams and noises from below had been terrifying. Nobody was sure just what the hell was happening, except that the constant shotgun blasts told them that men were dying.

Outside, the storm still raged on; snow was drifting deep on the exercise yard, capping the posts on the outer wall.

Some of the men on the upper floors decided that a slaughter was underway, that the guards were doing it and that it might grow to include them. But no one had seen a guard, not since right after the first alarm bells went off.

On the fourth floor, Kim Ho, who led the contingent of Fixer Brothers' operatives in the BDC, set the men trapped in the corridor to starting a fire. They tore holes in the ceiling, lit rags, and waved them into the rafters. In the cells they worked together frantically to try and open the doors. The power went out on the fourth floor, the sprinklers came on, but the fire took hold on the roof itself above them.

In the KYB tower, people at lunch on the top-floor restaurant noticed the lights changing on the distant prison building. They mentioned it to the waiters, who watched it briefly and then went on with their tasks. Whatever it was, a fire or prison riot, it was up to somebody other than them to do something about it.

Media teams in small snocats were the first to respond to the reports. They found confusing conditions at the prison and reported that a riot was in progress.

The first news of the prison troubles reached Henri Tusseau about five minutes later, in the control tower at the spaceport terminal where he was still awaiting some news from Sergeant Dare and his team investigating Blast-Pan Site 18.

"Now what?" He groaned and called Chief Beliveau to find out.

When Gaspard finally picked up the phone, Henri heard the arguments still raging behind him: Old Man Tusseau was booming, Adele Schultz was sneering, everyone was starting to sound a little hoarse.

"What the hell is this thing with the prison?" said Henri. But Beliveau had no better idea than he, and was preoccupied with the Griks matter. The fire department was looking into it; five engines were on their way to North Beliveau. Going would be slow though because the streets were not yet plowed up

there by the prison.

Indeed when he cut away from the chief, Henri could hear the fire engines, their wail echoing up the long climb of Cotes des Neiges Avenue.

Sergeant Dare and his team were on their way back from the blast-pan site, but Tusseau decided not to wait for them. He was still trembling from his clash with Dare. After ordering the near-gibbering Captain Darnay to get a grip on himself, Tusseau left the spaceport and headed for the Beliveau Detention Center in his own snocat.

The chimerical business at the spaceport was the stuff of mad fancies and dreams, clearly. Until something more solid turned up, he was going to attend to more pressing matters. Tusseau called downtown and ordered the backup SWAT team to assemble, in case it was needed at the prison. The electorate was sensitive about the prison; a breakout had to be prevented at all costs.

Outside the prison gates, meanwhile, the first media folk had been reinforced by the arrival of the Korean TV teams.

There was still no response from the prison itself, although terrible noise was coming from inside, screams and occasional gunshots. The roof was on fire for about half its length.

Finally the team from KWZ TV went inside after discovering the front gates were hanging open. The cameraman, Meury, found the silent control center, with Fargey's body. When he looked inside the admin section and found more bodies, he ducked back out. No one observed the slender, pink-skinned pup that ran back into the prison interior ahead of them.

The noise inside the prison was rising to a crescendo. A barrage of gunshots broke out on the top floor, accompanied by a mass of fresh screams.

Meury stuck his head through the interior door to the prison center. The noise was deafening. Then the guns stopped suddenly and there were just a few occasional screams.

Meury rounded a corner and came upon the pile of dead prison officers, chopped up with WAKmaster antipersonnel shell. Meury ran outside.

Other camera crews ran in, on the hunt for the best blood-and-guts footage.

On the fourth floor the battlebeasts were dousing the fire, using the fire-safety canisters scavenged from the lower floors to apply fire-smothering foam that clung to the burning places and retarded the fire considerably.

In search of more containers, the battleforms sped up and down the stairs and halls, lithe shining shadows. The men on the upper floors stared at one another after they finally saw the cause of whatever it was that had happened downstairs. Then they prepared to defend themselves with whatever they had at hand.

On the ground floor, one camera team summoned up the courage to venture past the bodies of the guards in the access corridor and pushed open the rubber-lined sound doors to enter the main section of the ground floor. They peered round the corner into the retention zone. The gates were open and bodies lay everywhere, a dozen or more. There was blood, offal, heads snapped from torsos, a tide of red splatters all over the gray ceramic tiles of the floor. Empty shotgun shells, bright green WAKmaster proprietaries, lay scattered among the bodies like seeds of some obscene plant.

"What's going on here anyway?" said the guy from SKW TV in the huddle outside where they were looking over the video being shot inside.

"Prison war. You know the brotherhood is really tough in here," suggested Meury from KWZ.

"This is fucking insane though—I mean this is carnage!"

"Yeah, it is."

"I never seen anything like this."

Nor had anyone else.

One or two camera operators even felt a twinge or two as they lensed the scene for the afternoon news, but twinges were just twinges, and this was business.

A couple of policemen finally arrived, on their patrol route through the warehouses. They parked their snocat alongside the media peoples' and headed for the gates.

Fire engines were coming, the sounds were borne up the slope from Cotes des Neiges.

The cops went in, looked at the pile of bodies, listened to the noises upstairs yelling, moans, screams of agony and went back outside to their snocat to call for backup.

They told the camera crews they were crazy to stay inside the prison. The camera crews told each other they were crazy to stay inside the prison. Nobody moved, nobody left. They were crazy guys; they did it for a living. Everyone knew that being crazy was part of the qualifications for the job.

The SKW newsrep went through the doors onto the stairwells that connected the center's floors. He climbed the stairwell and reached the second-floor landing. His video was all bare tile walls, the handrail, the steel steps, then a long shot of a wall of bars and a cream-colored ceiling.

He turned up toward the next set of stairs and the Military Form dropped on him from above, taking him down to the floor. The man screamed and wriggled free for half a second, writhing across the tiles toward his camera. Then the Military Form was on him, and with a slashing power kick virtually beheaded him.

The camera spun, but the Military Form caught it, lifted it, and smashed it on the wall.

The transmissions cut off without warning, with no sign of any attackers.

The camera crews agreed that it was indeed crazy to stay inside the prison and left, jamming the entranceway in their haste.

A few minutes later Colonel Tusseau and his aide, Corporal Roux, reached the scene. Behind him came a column of fire engines, lights flashing through the falling snow, their sirens muffled somewhat, echoing mournfully through the empty warehouse canyons.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

IT WAS LUNCHTIME ALL OVER THE BELIVEAU CITY Region. In restaurants and cafeterias people talked animatedly about the storm and how to get home for the night. Snocat owners and those with season tickets on the hoverbuses out to Boldover were looking smug and contented. Gazing out on the falling snow mere car owners were worried sick.

After lunch, as workers drifted back to their offices, they were confronted by the TV news's startling scenes of the prison riot, gore shots galore, and lots of dead prisoners.

Grim prison jokes circulated in many offices. People watched the video, listened to the confusing accounts of the disturbance, and went back to work. Office conversation still revolved around the problems of getting home, the progress of the snow plows on the Boldover County Highway, and the status of the buses running to Kwaidan

In the prison itself an eerie quiet had descended. No one there was up to telling jokes. Not once they'd seen the things. Though as elsewhere it was a time for feeding, in the silent prison it was not the prisoners who were lunching that day.

On the upper floors the creatures looked in through the bars, weird flowerlike organs pulsed, and then they emptied their shotguns into the men who were free outside their cells.

The guns had boomed and then the things vanished, going back downstairs out of sight. On the second-floor landing they were met by a pup with word of an intrusion at the front gate. They proceeded cautiously the rest of the way and came on the hapless cameraman from SKW TV in time to kill him and destroy his equipment before he could turn the lens on them.

When they reached the administration section they found it empty. They took up defensive positions by the front gate and sent the pups to loot the kitchens. With more than eighty men undergoing conversion, it was time to feed the battlebeasts.

The pups returned with tubs of chocolate ice cream, racks of eggs, and packs of milk. The battlebeasts and the pups gorged, eating the ice cream in big solid chunks, popping whole eggs in their mouths and crunching them up, shells and all, and washing it all down with gulped cartons of milk.

As they ate, the battleforms sat with their shotguns resting over their elongated thighs and open boxes of shells nearby. They kept a steady eye on the front gate, and the line of humans and brightly lit machines that had gathered outside.

But the humans showed no inclination to trouble them. The Military Form felt a cold amusement. The humans hesitated. They still did not realize their peril. It was good. Time was very precious, but in a few hours the fresh battlebeasts would begin hatching. Then the Military Form could undertake the full offensive! In the meantime the Military Form would continue to seize the initiative. A diversionary attack had been begun at the spaceport terminal, and a short probe by the enemy into the blast-pan site had terminated itself before discovering any of the pods.

Now a number of large machines covered with flashing lights had rolled up to join the others outside the gates of the containment structure. But once they arrived, they stopped and their occupants jumped out and milled around. The humans seemed a confused, disorganized kind of intelligence. The Military Form enjoyed another surge of amusement. The struggle would proceed at once! The secondary target was nearby!

When the pups had finished gorging on vanilla ice cream and raw potatoes, they were sent to explore the lower levels of the prison. The humans were slugs when it came to battle, but any intelligent force armed with projectile weapons could be dangerous. It would be necessary to find a second, unguarded way out of the prison. In the Military Form's experience, sedentary creatures that lived in artificial reef environments always built gravity assisted drains beneath their dwellings.

On the lowest level of the structure had been found cavernous spaces filled with heating coal. Then the pups found a trapdoor that, once the lock had been forced, led to an even lower level. There, in stygian darkness, they found an inspection hatch in the top of a sewer, rich in the odors of its kind.

The Military Form understood all this at once. The sewer would lead out of the biped containment structure and slope down to a nearby river where its content would be imposed on the native ecosystems. It was an arrangement typical of the worlds of vertebrates like the bipeds, so primitive and so grotesquely wasteful.

The Tili form carried a welding torch down from the workshops above and attacked the bars across the sewer.

Not long afterward, Colonel Henri Tusseau finally got his backup SWAT team to agree to investigate the prison gates. A robot had scouted them without incident; there was no sign of activity.

The snow continued to swirl and temperatures had hit twenty below zero. Huddling in the lee of a fire engine, Tusseau tried to cope with the demands of firechiefs, media people, and police sergeants. Everyone wanted his attention, and he already had enough problems of his own to think about. Indeed,

thoughts of Judge Feinberg in her courtroom kept breaking in, which made it hard to concentrate. They'd kept Judge Feinberg from getting down to the court that whole day. That meant they had another night in which to overpower the defenders in the old police building and destroy the case.

Henri Tusseau found it difficult to forget that he might soon be doing time inside the detention center himself. It made him irritable, and with the added exasperation of this inexplicable prison riot, he was close to losing control completely.

SWAT team leader, Sergeant Levesque, had wanted to argue the point further, but he could tell that Tusseau was on the verge of hysteria, so finally he gave in and ordered his crew to move forward. They weren't particularly loathe to either. Clad in modern fighting armor and armed to the teeth, they usually enjoyed their work. They moved quickly onto the front gates, twelve men, assault rifles held ready.

They reached the massive outer gates which swung open at a touch. They walked in and right into a storm of shotgun fire. WAKmaster shell rang and screamed from their armor. Men tumbled, knocked over by the impacts. They fired back, a crescendo of rifle fire rose, but the opposition's shotguns kept booming until the SWAT men turned spontaneously and retired outside the front gates and took shelter behind the outer wall.

Sergeant Levesque and his men had their dander up.

They exchanged some curses concerning the prisoners inside and lobbed a cluster of antipersonnel gas grenades into the admin section through the windows. In less than a minute a thick cloud of gas was roiling through the outer precinct of the prison.

The SWAT team closed helmets, switched on respirators and charged into the smoke. Confident, they ran up the corridor and into the vestibule of the main prison building, where the smoke was very thick. Defensive fire had ceased.

Two deadly figures flitted toward them through the thick clouds of gas. Shotguns boomed at close quarters, fists like swords lashed out. Sergeant Levesque was shot twice, knocked down by the blows.

Protected by his armor he survived the shells and was starting to get to his feet when a horn-tipped foot swung into his face, crushing his helmet visor and his skull. A red pulp sprayed over the wall behind.

A few short seconds later four men were down and the remainder were running back through the prison gates as if hell itself were at their heels. Shotgun fire pursued them the first few steps, and then assault-rifle fire cracked out as the battlebeasts swapped the shotguns for the dead men's rifles. Three more men tumbled to the snow before reaching the safety of the line of cars and fire engines.

The SWAT team had taken seven casualties, including its commanding officer. Stunned, Tusseau listened to Corporal Tegana. Indeed it was hard to hear anything, since everyone with a gun, including the cops with handguns, was crouched behind the cars blasting away at the prison gates.

A storm of bullets pocked the brick and tile work around the gates. Others broke on the exterior wall, while others went much wilder, breaking through windows on the upper floors and bringing screams of outrage from the terrified prisoners.

Tusseau jumped and ran down the line of men screaming for a cease-fire. It took them about half a minute to comply, at which point many were simply out of ammunition. The barrage petered out. Sheepishly the last few enthusiasts put down their guns.

Tusseau stormed up and down, yelling at the top of his lungs about the waste of the taxpayers' money, the damage to the prison, the idiocy of particular police officers. Meanwhile two sortie parties had brought in the bodies of the three men shot from behind as they ran back to the lines. There was no further fire from within.

While Colonel Tusseau was puzzling over the chain of events that day, a slender, swift figure was

passing almost directly below him, carrying an assault rifle and a shotgun held above its head as it waded through the waist-high accumulation in the sewer. The water was very cold, but the Tili form was oblivious to the discomfort of the host.

After traversing more than two hundred meters of the main sewer the Tili form chose a ladder and ascended to a manhole set in the center of an intersection, a block south of the detention center.

The manhole lifted back and the Tili form crept out. The attention of the humans at the barricade outside the prison was directed the other way; nobody even saw the swift figure fade away down a side street.

The Tili form continued east, crossing the commercial avenues. No humans were in sight. The wind was picking up again, blowing sheets of snow about. The Tili form sent a quick signal on its communicator to the Military Form. All continued as planned.

The Military Form held the prison and the hardening cocoons. The humans had been rebuffed with loss. They had unleashed a storm of small arms fire, confirming the Military Form's concern about their weapons' effectiveness. But the storm had broken on the sturdy walls of the containment structure and now the humans were sunk back on their line, confused by internal arguments.

It was time for the third strike! Initiative meant everything at this stage! The target glittered in the mid-distance, the big KYB symbol like a giant red jewel in the sky. The Tili form hurried toward it.

The Pramod form sat inside the left-hand room of the control center, where it could command the front gates with shotgun fire if necessary, but where it could see out the windows of the control center, too.

Beyond the perimeter lights, the array of utility vehicles included some that flashed very brightly and made loud whooping noises. Dozens of the humans were gathered behind the vehicles. A voice hailer was in use. The aliens in the upper floors of the prison shouted back. The Military Form understood that they discussed it. Beside it, stacked neatly, were dozens of boxes of shells and eight shotguns, all loaded and ready. In its lap was a five-gallon container of chocolate ice cream which it ate with a big wooden spoon.

To those in charge of the human response to the situation, things were even less explicable than they had been before the SWAT assault. Tusseau had ordered the field guns to be brought up from the St. Anne's Armory at once. Meanwhile more cops were arriving all the time. But no one had been close to the front entrance since the armored SWAT team had staggered out.

Patrol officers who were crewing the loud hailer approached Tusseau and began their report. Tusseau interrupted them after a few seconds. "The men are still in their cells? What kind of prison riot is this?"

"Sir, they claim they are trapped in their cells by two Ninja robots. We believe all the prison guards are dead. Some of the prisoners say that they aren't robots, that they're uh, creatures, sir."

"Creatures?" said Corporal Roux.

"What in hell is going on?" Tusseau stared at the prison. The snow was starting again, and the winds were picking up as well. The eye of the storm had passed; the renewed fury was soon to follow.

"What do you think the men mean with these creatures, sir?"

Tusseau shook his head. He didn't want to think, but the memory of that glimpse he'd had at the spaceport control tower kept coming back to him. Finally he shrugged. "There was some kind of odd creature at the spaceport, earlier today. Maybe they're connected. The BDC is right next to the perimeter wall."

A patrolman approached. "Colonel Tusseau, we have a Mayday call from Captain Darnay at the spaceport terminal."

Tusseau groaned. "What is it, Darnay?"

There was no video signal; Darnay explained that the lights and all power were out at the terminal.

"What happened?"

"I have no idea, Monsieur Tusseau. A security detachment is on its way down to engineering. We're getting no response from down there, no communications at all. I'm sending a security detail."

"That isn't an answer to my question."

"Well I can't help it. There's nothing else I can tell you."

Darnay sounded as if he was on the point of cracking.

Tusseau instructed him to report should there be any further trouble with robots or creatures or terrorists or whatever they were. "Something's going on here at the prison, and it may be these robots of yours."

"Of mine? They are not mine. I do not want them."

"You reported them, Darnay; they're yours."

"I disown them, I tell you."

Tusseau cut the connection, turned back to face the gloomy outer walls of the prison. After a few seconds of staring through the snow at the prison entrance and the nimbi of the bright yellow lights on the walls, he was interrupted by the arrival of another police snocat. It disgorged Chief Gaspard Beliveau. "Well, well, nice of you to show up, Chief."

"What the hell is all this?" said the fat police chief.

A police officer signaled Colonel Tusseau that his uncle, Old Man Tusseau, was calling on the radiophone. Henri made furious dismissive gestures.

Beliveau stared at the prison through the drifting snow-clouds. "Maybe this is a blessing in disguise."

"A what?" Henri cried in disbelief.

"A blessing—look, it'll take everybody's mind off what we have to do in the old police building tonight."

Henri stared at him. The police chief had a good point. "I've sent for the field cannon. We might have to blow open the gates. This goddamn place is a fortress."

"Good," rumbled Beliveau. "Then the guns will be handy for what we might have to do with them tonight."

Tusseau felt his eyebrows rise involuntarily. "You really think we dare use artillery in Old Town?"

"What other choice do we have? Tell me that."

Henri let out a long slow breath. His brain was on the verge of implosion. How had he got into this mad situation? His thoughts were interrupted by another officer with a message.

"Sir, we have an urgent call for assistance from the KYB tower, Something about a terrorist attack in the computer room of the Kongshu Corporation."

"Now what?" said Beliveau with a look of disgust on his fleshy features.

Tusseau took the phone. The MO. had a disturbing familiarity. Someone had entered the Kongshu Corporation and shot the security detail with prison-issue WAKmaster bodyshell. The terrorist had then gone into the cybernetics section of the Kongshu floor of the KYB building. There had been more killings. Only one survivor had escaped, who described a kind of robot, very thin, covered in shining

material, a pale gray.

By the time he'd heard this much, another patrol officer approached with another radiophone. "Sir, I have a priority code message from the spaceport terminal."

"What?"

"Condition red, sir."

"Yes, yes," said Tusseau.

Darnay still didn't have video, and he sounded terrified. He babbled about dead men, who had fought the security team. The men were from the maintenance team, and they had kept coming even when shot repeatedly.

"What is all this shit?" screamed Tusseau to the air.

The snow continued to fall.

A moment later, at ten minutes to three, logic bombs went off in the core memory regions of the major computer centers in the Beliveau City computer net.

Computer-controlled buildings went berserk. Elevators raced, lights flashed stroboscopically fast. Doors opened and closed, locked and unlocked. The traffic lights went mad; what traffic there was, was soon grid locked.

Everything from the weather center computer over in the University of Saskatch building to the police department patrol car network crashed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

IN THE OLD POLICE BUILDING, LIEUTENANT GRIKS AND HIS team were puzzled. All day they had waited for the expected assault, but it was mid afternoon and still there was no sign of any concentration of SWAT types.

The mortar fire had stopped in the early hours of the morning. Since then there'd been no incoming except occasional sniper bullets. That and the blue-and-white police barricades erected at either end of the street.

The snow was still falling, although the winds had died down a little and the temperature had stabilized. Thick drifts blocked Dorval Street in front of the police building, although on Cotes des Neiges, a block to the west, the snowplows had been at work all day to let the traffic pass.

The sight of that traffic, visible over the roofs of the old two and three-story buildings on the block between Dorval and Cotes des Neiges, was one of the more unreal facets of the experience for the men and women trapped in the old police building. It was as if it were a normal working day—people drove in to work, drove blithely past the scene of a night-long battle, and went to their offices unaware of the collapse of judicial law and authority in their colony.

Somehow the story had been suppressed. None of the morning TV newscasts had carried a word about it, even though there had been dozens of phone calls in the night concerning the explosions that were clearly audible from the Old Town.

The city carried on as if nothing had happened, and right there in the smoldering old police building, the liberty of every citizen in the colony was being snuffed out.

The defenders had no electric power, nor running water, but they did have porta heaters and hand lights and TVs. The police radio was being jammed mercilessly, however, so they were cut off from communications with the outside world. As they watched the TV news, though, they saw the reason for

the lack of activity against them. From what they could tell, the authorities had their hands full at the spaceport and the detention center. In addition there was the growing paralysis caused by the rash of computer failures across the city.

Things were in a serious state of disarray. A citywide emergency had been declared by the mayor at 2:30 P.M. This had given Johan Griks renewed encouragement. "They're not going to risk rushing us now. They're too thinly stretched with this terrorist thing, and we're too well armed to overwhelm without casualties." He said this with the certainty that came from knowing the SWAT teams well. "In fact I think we can hold out as long as the porta heaters do."

"And how long will that be?" Judith Feinberg said, from beneath a bundle of blankets in a corner of a bare, gray office.

"They're rugged—they'll last five days, maybe a week if we use them sparingly. We don't have to freeze."

"Then the only question is how long it will be before the ITAA takes some action."

"That's it. We just wait. I don't know how they managed to keep the story out of the media today, but they can't do that indefinitely either."

"So tonight might be their last chance?"

"Yeah."

"They'll have to take us tonight."

"We'll be ready," promised Griks.

"Well they seem to have their hands full up at the prison."

"And the spaceport."

Carney Waxx was in the door, a blanket wrapped around his lanky frame. His nose was hidden in a grotesque bandage. "What if they brought up those field artillery pieces they've got down at St. Anne's?"

Griks was surprised. "How do you know about those old things?"

"I went to school there. We used to watch the militia take them out and blow a few blanks on Colony Day."

"Well they could do some damage to this old building for sure. But I don't think they'll dare go that far."

"Yeah? Well maybe you should take a peek out the front—they're bringing the guns up over the bridge."

"What?" Griks jumped to his feet, ran across the corridor into a room with windows facing west. The view included the bridge and the small towers of the downtown section. On the bridge was a group of militia vehicles, among them the haulers for the long-barreled field pieces.

Griks leapt into action. He had formulated a plan for this contingency although he hadn't really expected his enemies to go so far. He called in officers Young and Moulin and ordered them to take all noncombatants down to the cellars. Most of the troopers on watch would be placed on the second floor, with only a couple higher up. Everyone else would get down below, in the heavy masonry sections of the building.

They were about to head out when Carney called them back to the window. There they watched as the guns were hauled up Cotes des Neiges and disappeared behind the warehouse buildings of the Siskoo Sawmill.

Griks rescinded the orders.

"Where are they taking those guns?" said Akander Ra Sub who had finally awoken. He was plastered with bandages and medipacks, as was Waxx.

"To the spaceport?"

"Or the prison?"

"Something strange is going on," said Griks. "This terrorist business must be pretty serious stuff."

Most of Auguste Darnay's staff had abandoned their posts when the power went down and the emergency lighting came on. With the howler raging and the gun battle downstairs in full cry, the staff, valuing their own skins above the ITAA regulations, headed for their cars en masse.

The stink of antipersonnel gas floated in the stairwells. Everyone's eyes were watering before they reached the garage level. There they found that they couldn't reach their cars because the lower floors were blocked off by SWAT men and other cops, all of whom were behaving in an exceedingly grim way.

Occasional bursts of firing echoed with frightening loudness in the confines of the concrete interior of the terminal.

The "men" from the blast-pan maintenance crew were still down in the power cellar. They could not be dislodged, even with antipersonnel gas. No communication had been established either.

The space terminal staff were forced to go outside into the street. At first they congregated in the lobbies of the Starlight and the Edward hotels, but then the lights went out there too and the hotel security staff forced everybody out to stand in the snow behind a police barricade.

Eventually Auguste Darnay joined them there as he saw no point in staying alone in the control tower without power or staff. It was cold outside. He shivered inside his parka, pulled the brim of his hat down to keep out the snow.

In the Black Ruk Mountains, after a short break, the snow started falling again in the middle of the afternoon. The winds rose as well, whipping it around on the trails.

Sally Xermin kept up a steady pace however, pushing herself to walk the full twenty kilometers back to the hidden limousine before nightfall. With food and coffee and her warm spacesuit she was still pretty comfortable, but she could feel herself tiring.

All those months in the spaceboat, weightless, she'd lost condition, despite the daily exercise program she'd devised during the flight. But she couldn't afford to slow down either, she couldn't afford to waste precious time.

All she needed was to get a phone for a half hour or so and use Arntage's credit line, before Arntage and his friends could find their way out of the mountains and raise an alarm at the banks. With the snow and the fact that she'd left them securely tied up, they should be delayed for at least another day. Time enough for her to scoop out a small fortune from the looser bits and pieces of Arntage's accounts. She and Roger had once lived for a couple of years from the proceeds of that kind of credit theft—she knew just what to do.

Still, she could feel the deadly pull of tiredness at work. Twenty kilometers wasn't all that far really, but in these conditions, with deep snow and the heavy spacesuit, it was quite possible that she might not make it all the way to the road before she collapsed. That thought terrified her. Now that this golden opportunity had been given to her, she dared not waste it.

As she saw it this was something fate had given her to make up in part for the loss of Roger.

She hefted the pack over her shoulder and waded through a deep drifted section of the trail. When she was past it she paused to get her breath back.

For a fraction of a second her internal guard slipped and she thought about poor little Pandi. She

hated to run out on anyone, and the kid was a sweetie, but Sally had to survive. She had to put her own needs first. She stopped herself thinking any further into it than that.

Besides the poor kid probably broke her neck when she came down. Pandi certainly wasn't the type to have practiced parachuting. On top of which the descent had been a terrifying drop, the worst Sally had ever attempted. Of course there hadn't really been any choice. The spaceboat was unfit for a landing. She'd used up everything just bringing it under control and getting down through the atmosphere.

Poor Pandi, poor Roger, poor Sally; at least Sally was still alive, that was what counted the most in the long run.

Then she giggled again when she recalled just how easy it had been to take Arntage and his friends.

Even that slit-eyed Asian killer of his never had a chance to do anything. All she'd had to do was to get close to little old Arntage and then use the gun she'd stolen from poor, silly Sebastian.

An eleven-year-old child could have done it just as easily! What a pack of ninnies they'd been. Freezing out in the woods to film the nightfeeders, whatever they were. "flying molluscs" They sounded vaguely obscene to Sally. All the Saskatch wildlife was like that—molluscs, crabs, everything like big bugs. She'd never cared for it one bit.

When she had Yen Cho tied up good and tight Sally made sure of the others, finally tying up Rieben in his own tent. He'd watched her with angry eyes throughout the process, but he'd refrained from trying to resist. His muscles were only good enough for light work and personal mobility; any injury he sustained would only compound his problems.

"Save the anger old man," she'd said. "You'll give yourself a heart attack. I know about you old bastards, I know all about you."

Helplessly he'd watched her rifle his pack and body search him until she had his prime credit cards. Then she subjected him to the indignity of a quick medical scan.

The medical computer he carried recommended certain doses of immune boosters. Sally had given him the pills and some water to wash them down, handling him as solicitously as any nurse. "Don't want any deaths on my hands, you understand I'm sure."

"Your ITAA file is probably long enough," he'd replied bitterly.

She'd laughed at him, tucked a stray lock of gold blond hair back behind her ear, and then placed a water bottle by him and taped the drop feed from it right onto his cheek with the tube tucked into his mouth. "So you don't dehydrate, old man. I'm going to make sure you make it. Aren't I nice?"

He said nothing.

"Well, fuck you too. If you just sleep you'll be fine. There'll be somebody out here to pick you up in a couple of days. I'll be gone by then."

He struggled to control himself. "Why are you doing this?"

"Don't ask stupid questions. I'm doing this because I have to. I don't have any choice."

She'd gone through the rest of the camp very carefully, destroying all radio devices. She helped herself to Bruda's snow boots, which were too wide but the right length. With two pairs of socks they were comfortable enough. She had the key card for the limousine, and from Rieben she'd wrung the precise details of where it was hidden.

Then she made up a pack of food and coffee before collapsing Bruda's tent and folding that up, just in case she couldn't make it to the road that day.

She half carried, half dragged Bruda over to Arntage's tent and pushed her in. "Here, old man, some company to keep you warm. I'll bet she knows all about keeping you warm, too, eh?"

Rieben didn't dignify this with a reply. Bruda cursed her while Sally zipped the tent shut.

She had Yen Cho's map and a visual-aid guide to the trail. Once she reached the limo it would be a matter of driving down to the county highway, then reaching Finnegan's Corner and the all-night shopping, banking mall. From there she'd go directly to the spaceport and thereafter to the orbiter to wait for the next Baada-drive vessel out of the system.

Once she was offworld she would be almost safe from retribution, at least immediately. The ITAA operated on an unofficial "deadly crime" principle, and only troubled to investigate planetary criminals if they were wanted for verifiable homicide.

She passed an overhang of black basalt. It was listed on the trail guide, and thus she found she was three quarters of the way. Her spirits soared. She hefted the pack again and straightened her shoulders and pushed on down the trail through the falling snow.

Far behind her, the campsite was slowly being buried in the thick coat of snow dropped by the howler. By late afternoon, about the time Sally was reaching the road and the limousine, Pandi Beshwan wandered into the camp and almost wandered right out again without ever noticing it, except that she had the good fortune to trip over a rock that had been set in the center by the fireplace.

Numbly she picked herself up. She was exhausted, shivering uncontrollably despite her spacesuit's warmth. Several times she'd laid down in the snow and tried to sleep, but every time her eyes closed she was seized by a horrific nightmare that ended with the mad lobster face of that creature in the woods, and she had risen and staggered on.

She noticed a small patch of blue sticking out of a snow drift. She dragged herself through the drift to it and dug down and found a door into a pop tent.

She pushed snow away from the tent and unzipped the door and discovered a man and a woman, bound hand and foot, fitted together snugly, in full cold-weather rig.

They looked at her strangely.

"What happened here?" she said.

"We were attacked," the woman said after a moment's hesitation.

Pandi slowly, painfully, began working on their bonds. Her hands were cold, her wrist ached, and the knots were very tight.

"Who attacked you?" she said. "Who else is crazy enough to be out here in this?"

Bruda hesitated a long time before replying. The girl wore a spacesuit similar to that of their blond assailant. "A bandit, a guy on a walker."

"Must be insane to be out here in this weather; this is a real howler."

Bruda's ears perked up. This girl had a Saskatch accent; Roxann had had an offworld accent. "You're from Saskatch, aren't you?"

The girl froze a moment, then replied, "Yes, I'm from BV City."

Bruda got a better look at her then. She was an unfamiliar type, not Caucasian, not Korean either. "What happened to you? How come you're out here?"

The girl seemed uneasy, hesitant. "I was on a shuttle flight, coming from the Medea. Engines malfunctioned, they couldn't make a proper landing, we all had to use the ejection tube." That was the story Sally had hammered out for them and insisted that she stick to if she met anyone in authority when they landed.

"Where had you been? You were out system?"

"Oh yes, just to Ligana, to see the temples."

At last a knot came loose and things speeded up a bit. When Bruda's hands were free she took over and quickly freed herself and Rieben.

Rieben reached for the diagnostic device and took a blood microsample. He felt weak, knew he was facing a medical emergency. What if they had to walk out of this place now? He groaned at the mere idea.

The girl looked at him expectantly; so far he hadn't said a word.

"It's all right," he said, "You can stay here with us now.

We have some food."

"Oh, thank you," said the girl.

"What's your name?" said Rieben. She hesitated a moment.

"Indira, Banakar. Indira Banakar." The girl was flustered and Rieben knew she was lying.

"That's a lovely name. A very ancient name, you must come from a family who keeps up the Hindu Rite."

The girl flashed him an anxious look. "Yes, how did you know?"

"I have friends in the Hindu business community in BV City."

Her face went very pale.

"But I don't know any Banakars—a pity, eh?"

"Yes," she said, obviously relieved. Indira's father had been a trader in advanced gadgets, well-known in the business community. She cursed herself for picking Indira's name. Why hadn't she chosen someone much more obscure, like Raheshi Matil, or one of the workers' daughters from the Hindu school? She would have to be more careful.

Yen Cho was downcast when they released him. "I failed you," he said, with a face of stone. He expected dismissal.

"Noted, but forgiven. We will have to think about this experience; obviously it must never be repeated. Things could have ended even less agreeably."

Yen Cho nodded gloomily.

Sebastian was already working at getting a fire started. Bruda was taking an inventory of what they had left in equipment and food. The Hindu girl stood near the fire and munched a protein bar. Rieben indicated the girl to Yen Cho. "This girl is lying, about her own name for a start. But she does not seem to be a threat."

Yen Cho saw no weapons on the girl. With a sigh he recalled that tell-tale bulge he'd noticed on the blond woman. She'd gotten the gun from Sebastian, and it took him by surprise. He'd thought to play her for a while, to get close enough to disarm her safely, but she'd gone straight for the master and put the gun to his head. Yen Cho had been frozen, unable to do a thing. The shame of it would never leave him.

Rieben saw the pain in his old friend's face. He clapped him on the shoulder. "Enough recriminations, we must press on. What can we do?"

Yen Cho shrugged. "Need transmitter. It's too late for us to catch her on the trails. She must be close to the road by now."

"Mmm. A problem then, we don't have any radio left." Arntage felt a chill run through him. He could die in these conditions. If they had to tramp all the way to the road to get out, he was in trouble.

"That woman has a spacesuit. She will be warm no matter what." Yen Cho spread his hands.

"She will use my credit cards; she will have access to many accounts."

Yen Cho looked grim. "Bad thing. But you will live. She cannot steal everything."

Rieben shrugged. Yen Cho was right. He might experience a little illiquidity perhaps, but Roxann could only steal what was liquid. She would go for his current account, for his cash draw down at the Saskatch Timber Bank, and any immediately cashable positions or notes of his that she could discover floating on the exchange. Fortunately Rieben had nothing important in that line scheduled for the next few days.

Still it galled him. He burned with a deep sense of outraged dignity. For hours he had lain there and dreamed of catching Roxann and punishing her. She'd be heading for Nocanicus system on the next Baada liner, the Gracelyn, which was due in a couple of days.

He'd have to track her on the orbiter, but it might be difficult. By the time he got agents out there she'd be leaving for Baada point pickup. Of course the agents could follow her onto the ship, and they'd track her at the far end. But to be sure of her he'd have to follow her, out of system and away to the other end of the line—Nocanicus system most likely.

He swore to do it though, even if he would have to leave everything behind. With the realistic effect of star travel he would not get back for decades. Sebastian, Bruda, all of his Saskatch friends would have forgotten him. The cause, keeping Saskatch free from unrestricted development, would most likely have failed, without his money and power behind it in person.

He would be giving up everything he'd worked for on this world. But he resolved to do it if it brought him revenge on that

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

AT THE FIRST SIGHT OF THE GUNS COMING UP THE GAGNY Road into North Beliveau, the Military Form realized the danger. The Military Form was familiar with more than a thousand types of artillery piece. These were clearly flexible guns of moderate caliber.

The Military Form had prepared for the eventuality. The pups had shifted most of the pods down into the basement levels of the prison, from which they could be moved into the sewers should the situation become untenable.

Now the Military Form eyed the approaching weapons carefully and prepared to change its defensive tactics. The pups were sent to move the remaining pods below. The spare shotguns and their ammunition were moved to safety.

Outside the prison, in the swirling snow, Colonel Henri Tusseau was informed of the guns' arrival by a breathless sergeant of the militia, a big, red-faced fellow from St. Anne's with the accent of "les habitants," the old-time Saskatch.

"At last!" exclaimed Tusseau. "What the hell kept you?"

"The snow, sir. A broken-down snowplow was blocking Cotes des Neiges."

"They always have excuses. That's all I hear," snorted Tusseau. "Well set them up here, we need to break the main gates of the prison and clear these snipers out of the administration block."

The gunners eyed the prison, a dim bulk through the drifting snow.

"Very short range, isn't it, sir?" said one.

"Of course it is," Tusseau almost screamed back. "We don't have any other choice. They must have

gas masks or something—we can't budge them."

Dourly the gunners went about their tasks.

The beefy sergeant of militia approached Tusseau when they were ready. "Did you know, sir? These guns haven't been fired in over ninety years."

Tusseau raised an eyebrow. "You don't say. What was the last occasion then?"

"I believe it was a logger's strike up at Blue Lake. There was quite a battle with them."

"Mmm, well this is obviously an historic occasion. Very well, fire when ready. Break those gates open so we can get a clear field of fire for small arms into the gate area. Then I want you to use fragmentation shell to clear the snipers out of the administrative block."

"Yes, sir!" The beefy sergeant returned to his crews. Soon they were loaded and the order to fire was given.

The guns were 120 MM Standard Field Cannon from the Ujiwa Chaebol Works on Ligana. They had an effective range of twenty kilometers. Now they would be firing across two hundred meters.

They went off with a harsh, whining crack that cut through the muffling effects of the snow and reverberated off the walls of the surrounding buildings.

The high explosive shells shot right through the gates and exploded on the masonry of the front entrance. Shards of stone and scraps of steel were flung far and wide, one or two even taking high trajectories that dropped them back on the police line of cars, fire engines, and snocats. A chorus of screams and curses broke out as people dove for cover under the trucks and cats.

Inside the prison the Military Form and the pups took cover in the basement. More shells crashed into the admin block and released showers of steel fragments. The offices were soon a complete shambles.

Six more salvos were fired and then the guns fell silent. The Military Form darted up the stairs and found a good vantage point by the front gates.

A skirmish line of humans became visible, approaching through the snow. The Military Form opened fire and scattered them back to their line, leaving three prone figures behind them.

A storm of small arms fire broke out once again that filled the gate house with whining lead fragments for a few minutes before dying down. Once again the cannons let fly. Masonry shot began dismantling the admin block room by room.

The Military Form returned to the basement. When the cannons stopped firing next the Military Form resumed its firing position and peppered the advancing human line. Once again they took casualties and then scattered. Soon the guns resumed firing.

This cat-and-mouse game continued.

Quite quickly the administration block disintegrated, the outer wall giving way and the tier of offices collapsing outward to leave mounds of rubble in front of the gate area. The gate pillars themselves, made of stone, stood firm, although now stripped of their steel doors. The gate house and the prison vestibule were half-filled with rubble and collapsed brickwork falling in from the floor above. A thick haze of dust and smoke swirled up and was lost in the storm.

On the upper floors the prisoners crouched in a weird ecstasy of fear and tension. Many were so exhausted that they sat slumped in their cots, blankets pulled around them to ward off the increasing cold. The heat had shut off that morning and the prison was cooling fast.

None had any idea of what was going on. Those who had seen the "things" were no wiser, although they perhaps had more direct reason for their fears.

Shells exploded downstairs with tremendous force. The shock waves made the whole building jump. The echoes had barely died away when the next salvo broke in. Smoke and dust rose through the stairwells.

The prisoners cowered together in wordless communion.

Four o'clock came and went and soon thereafter there was a beep in the Military Form's communicator. The beep was followed by the first words from the newly hatched battleforms standing in the snow outside Blast Pan 18.

The first cocoons had broken. Reinforcements existed! The Military Form responded at once. Swiftly it issued orders, adding descriptions of the territory to be covered.

The field guns ended another round of firing. The Military Form picked up its rifle and ran back up the stairs.

No skirmish line came forward however. Instead, the guns opened up again. Fragmentation shot burst in the vestibule. Caught by surprise, the Military Form was hit, hurled to the ground with a shattered knee. In desperate haste it crawled for the stairs to the basement.

Another shell exploded on the rear wall. Steel ricocheted around the interior, missing the Military Form by a hairsbreadth. Bricks crashed down from the shattered walls as the Military Form gathered itself and leapt for the stairs, tumbling down them, abandoning the rifle in the process.

More shells burst right behind it, but their deadly loads were expanded on the stone and brickwork. At the bottom of the stairs the pups were waiting to help. They carried the damaged Military Form down to the basement level. There it took stock of the damage. The right knee was virtually destroyed. The torso was punctured and leaking essential fluids. A new host was required.

The ceremony of the ghosht, the dismounting from an "honored host," would have to be brought forward a few hours. The Pramod form was near the end of its useful life anyway.

However, there were problems. The enemy guns were too dangerous to risk being carried up the stairwells by the pups to reach the hosts trapped in the cells.

On the other hand, regrowing the damaged knee joint would take considerable time. The human host form was highly specialized, with many different types of cells. Repairs would take too long.

Meanwhile the new battlebeasts were on their way, traveling through the sewer system. The Military Form sent one pup out into the sewers to guide them; they must make all possible haste.

There was a beep from the communicator, and the Tili form, still in control of the computer room of the Kongshu Corporation in the KYB building called to report. Many humans surrounded its position, and they were firing gas grenades inside, but so far the gas was only an irritant to the hostform.

The Military Form apprised the Tili form of the hatching of the new battlebeasts and of the artillery assault on the prison.

Since it was surrounded by such overwhelming force there was no point in ordering the Tili form to return to the prison. Instead it was told to stand and hold its position until it could be relieved.

Once the immediate crisis was passed, there would soon be an adequate force for holding the prison building, and within a short while there would begin a much greater hatching. After that, relief of the Tili form would become a simple matter.

Outside the prison Colonel Henri Tusseau stared through field glasses with disbelieving eyes at the destruction visited upon the BDC. "How are they surviving in there?"

"Well, sir," said Corporal Tegana of the SWAT team, "they're probably hiding in the basement."

"But we've turned that whole place into a pile of rubble! Nothing can be alive in that!"

"We've still not hit those basements, sir. We can't at this range. The guns need to be a few kilometers back to get the elevation they need to drop shells into the lower levels."

Tusseau snorted. "There's got to be something we can do. How about sending a team in over the walls at the rear? Work our way into the prison that way?"

Corporal Tegana didn't reply for a moment. He'd lost five more men in rushes on the front gate.

"I'll ask for volunteers if you like, sir."

Tusseau knew what that would mean. He sighed. "Don't bother, then, Corporal. We'll have to come up with something else."

"Yes, sir, I don't think there's any need to expose ourselves to more casualties."

Tusseau snorted to himself, then turned around to find a patrol officer with a communicator and recorder device waiting to speak to him. "What is it?"

"Sir, I've picked up some unusual radio traffic; I think you should hear it."

The fellow flicked a button and something that sounded like the chirping of insects filled the air. It made the skin crawl.

"What the hell is that?" snapped Tusseau. "Well, sir"—the man became sheepish—"the diagnostic program I've got on this unit suggests, ur, an alien language, sir."

Tusseau frowned. "What, Laowon or something? There are no Laowon in this sector."

"No, sir, it's definitely not Laowon, nor any other known language. Nor does it relate to any known human originated code. I checked for Ninja tongue, or a variant of Korean. It's something alien, sir."

"Alien?"

"Well, sir, if we could just tap into the police computer downtown for a few seconds we could probably find out what it is, but they tell me that that's still not possible."

"It's complete chaos down there," said Corporal Roux.

"This whole business is very exasperating," snapped Tusseau. He turned and stared at the prison building through the drifting snow. "What direction are the signals coming from?"

"From the prison, sir—right in the central gatehouse. There's another source off to the west."

"The KYB building."

"And there was a third, briefly, due north."

Tusseau stared at the grim pile of the BDC. An alien language. For a moment a strange, unsettling thought ran through him; he shivered, recalling an almost forgotten name. Lashtri III, a world burned down to bedrock by the Laowon imperial fleet in the era of Red Seygfán.

The ITAA had always been against the colonization of Saskatch, because the system had once been within the area of the ancient Starhammer war. When Saskatch was colonized anyway, the ITAA maintained the prohibition against exploration in the rest of the system. Tusseau had always thought it to be just a bunch of nonsense from old fools who spent too much time reading ancient history. Now he was beginning to wonder. Just what were they dealing with?

His musings were interrupted by the arrival of a black limousine bearing the large, ponderous figure of Mayor Drumont, the boss of Beliveau City itself, and long a rival of the Tusseaus and Beliveaus.

Colonel Henri groaned.

"Colonel! What the hell is going on here?" Drumont's overlarge nose was a bright red beacon poking out between his big Saskatch hat and his thick, dark overcoat.

"We're not entirely sure, Mayor."

The guns went off once again. Masonry shot smashed into the gate pillars. Mayor Drumont's jaw dropped.

"Colonel Tusseau, I hope you have a very good reason for this. I..." Mayor Drumont caught sight of the general destruction visited upon the prison building. The mayor uttered an inarticulate howl of fury. "Do you know how much this is going to cost us to repair? Have you any idea? Colonel Tusseau, I think your career in the Saskatch Police is finished. I'm going to have your hide nailed to the wall if I have to do it myself."

Tusseau's face darkened with fury. "Will you be quiet, you damned fool! We've lost ten men trying to get in there. There are dozens of other casualties, we haven't seen a single survivor from the guards or the administration staff, and as far as we can tell they're all dead. Without losing a lot more men needlessly, what do you expect us to do?"

"I expect you to do your duty and bring this disturbance to an end, without destroying the detention center in the process!" Drumont's voice became a howl.

He was drowned out by the snap of the guns.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

THERE WAS A BEEP IN THE COMMUNICATOR BULB. THE Tili form reported once again, and this time with most unwelcome news. A terrible mistake had been made. The humans were not aboriginal to this cold planet! It was just a remote colony world, situated on the fringes of the starfields infested with the humans.

The Tili form had just discovered this from its readings in the alien data banks that it had taken control of. The humans were in fact spread across a vast sector of space. They possessed highly advanced space travel technology. They formed an enormous, amorphous life mass, fast flowing out into the galaxy at a rate far beyond anything in the experience of the Military Form.

Even worse, the humans maintained communications nets across the vast deeps between the stars. Regular visits by starships were made. One such ship was expected in this system very soon.

The Military Form felt a dreadful weariness overtake it. It had struck at the wrong target. In the greed for host, it had overlooked the true purpose of the human space satellite it had observed during the descent. The Military Form had assumed that it was nothing but a primitive space platform, put up by a race that was in the infancy of space exploration. It had assumed that the Seed of Hope was an exploration vessel from that culture. Certainly there had been nothing about that ship to suggest that it was the product of very high technology. Now it knew that it had struck an outpost of a mighty, space-going civilization. Once that entity was aroused it could be guaranteed to respond with annihilating fury.

The Military Form was left with many things to calculate. The possibility of failure loomed. A crushing failure, a failure that could end the race of the Gods of Axon-Neurone forever.

There was still the chance for success, but obviously the assault plan had to be revamped. Clearly a priority need now was an immediate assault on the orbiter space satellite, as well as on all communication systems that might be spreading the word of the events outside the system.

The assault timetable would have to be accelerated. Which was unfortunate since genetic compulsions would soon begin to take effect that would make coherent military planning much more difficult.

The Military Form finished growing an emergency patch over the damaged sector of its leg. A crude crutch had been fashioned from a broom by one of the pups. The Military Form regained its feet and

took up its rifle. The humans were coming, and they had to be kept out of the basement and the sewers at all costs.

After considerable argument Colonel Henri Tusseau managed to persuade his SWAT team to undertake one more attack on the prison. They would use a gravel truck as a mobile shield.

Corporal Tegana found himself, despite his considerable misgivings, at the head of the assault group. Cautiously he and his men advanced, the gravel spreader chugging in front of them, driving backward, on automatic. No rifle fire met them this time however. They reached the piled rubble beside the gates where the admin block had collapsed without a single shot. They peered round the edges of the gravel spreader.

"No sign of anything," whispered Tegana.

"They were waiting for us last time, you remember," replied Officer Lefarge.

"Yeah, well let's see if we can get closer."

The gravel spreader pushed its way backward through the shattered gates and up to the front doors.

There was still no sign of resistance.

"Maybe we got those bastards at last," muttered Lefarge.

"Maybe," said Tegana with hopes rising.

Eyes peeled for any sign of the enemy, he slipped out of cover and sprinted forward into the prison vestibule and took cover in a doorway. He signaled the others to follow him.

Inside they found nothing but fallen plaster and brickwork, smoking fragments of furniture, and the bodies of several dead men. Most had been shot, with shotguns, and at close range.

In the corridor connecting the vestibule with the central prison floors they found a heap of dead guards. Beyond that the prison seemed sunk in relative silence. On the first floor the cell doors were open and the prisoners were either dead or absent. Tegana radioed a description to Tusseau.

Cautiously they mounted the stairs to the second floor. They found a scattering of bodies in the general access space. The cell doors were closed.

"What the hell happened in here?" muttered Lefarge.

"Beats me," said Tegana with a shrug.

Then Lefarge found the remains of the SKW cameraman and his equipment. "Jeez, they made a mess of him." Lefarge was very pale.

"Where's the head?" said Tegana.

"Over there, looks like it was just ripped off his shoulders," said Lefarge. He held up the remains of the SKW camera. It had been hammered into scrap against the wall.

"Looks like someone doesn't like cameras," commented Tegana.

"There're prisoners alive in those cells."

"And locked in tight, so if this is a prison break it doesn't include everybody."

Tegana shook the bars on the door into the access space. The door was locked.

The men in the cells had seen them and were yelling to them.

"What are they yelling about?" said Tegana. "Something about 'greyhound men?' They're the ones who shot everybody."

"Yeah, I just hope we get the chance to return the favor, the dirty bastards."

A couple of men returned from the third floor to report that conditions there were much the same as on the second. Men in the access space were dead, men in the cells were still alive.

"What about the basements? We better check those out, too," said Lefarge.

"Yeah, I guess we better do that." Tegana left two men to keep watch over the stairwell and went down with the rest to the vestibule.

Near the shattered remains of the administration block the dark maw of a staircase led down to the basements.

Officer Jegran was peering down into the darkness.

"See anything?" said Tegana.

"Nope," said Jegran.

"Tegana, what's happening in there, I want to know," said Tusseau over the commo.

"We're about to investigate the basement levels, sir. No sign of any enemy yet."

Outside the prison Tusseau and the rest peered nervously at the building. The snow was finally dying down, along with the winds. The big howler was moving down the valley to the sea.

Nobody noticed the manhole cover suddenly levered from the ground in the intersection immediately south of the police barricade. Nobody saw the four swift shapes that emerged and sprinted toward the rear of the police lines.

A police sergeant, sneaking a jolt of whiskey behind a snocat, was the first to notice something. He looked up, and glimpsed a slim shape running at him with the speed of an Olympic sprinter.

He dropped his bottle, pulled out his revolver, and got off a shot before a shotgun boomed and he was cut down by a load of WAKmaster bodyshell. Gray shapes sped over his body and ran on into the bunched groups of police, firemen, media people, and ambulance crews. Shotguns boomed, men screamed in surprise and pain and fright.

A terrible, desperate fight broke out. Flurries of blows and screams mingled with the reports of various kinds of guns. Hands, gun butts, and revolvers were pitted against the shotguns and armored limbs of freshly hatched battlebeasts. It was unequal combat. Men were beheaded, gutted, shot, or simply torn to pieces wholesale and scattered in the snow. A number of men were shot by their own panicked and off-balance comrades.

The TV crews filmed some of these dreadful moments and transmitted the pictures back to uncomprehending program controllers downtown. Then the crews were cut down and the cameras were destroyed. Any human with a camera in his hand was marked for instant death from that time on.

Among the police there were some brave and capable fighters. One corporal managed to get three bullets into a battleform. Knocked off its feet, it gave up a strange, mournful croak.

The corporal straddled the beast, aiming his gun at its head, screaming in rage. But before he could fire, the thing drove a foot sheathed in sharp horn into his midsection and disemboweled him. It sprang back to its feet, one arm smashed, a gaping hole in its chest. It ignored the damage and charged the gaping artillery crewmen, who ran away as fast as they could manage.

By then there was little but a disorganized mob of survivors running south. The battlebeasts seized discarded rifles and kept them running with well-placed fire.

A little ahead of the main pack of refugees was a snocat being driven at top speed by Colonel Henri Tusseau. Beside him Mayor Drumont gibbered like an idiot.

A bullet rang off the top of the cab and they ducked, Tusseau almost crashing the snocat into a

lamppost. He recovered and swerved onto the Gagny Road and almost ran head on into a line of police snocats coming the other way. Tusseau flung his vehicle sideways, blocking the street, then jumped and ran toward them waving his arms like a maniac.

For a few seconds they stared at him while he ordered them to pull their vehicles over to form a barricade while they set up a firing line behind them. They looked up and saw the dark shapes of men running toward them down the road. In the distance they heard gunfire and the thin high screams of desperate men. They scrambled to obey.

Meanwhile the Military Form had concentrated the battlebeasts to sandwich the SWAT team inside the prison. They had been driven back from the basement by the rifle fire of the Military Form and a fresh battlebeast reinforcement.

They had then discovered what was happening outside and they ran for the front gate, only to meet the other battlebeasts, returning from the slaughter. There was another short, ugly fight that ended with Corporal Tegana, the last survivor, being disarmed, knocked nearly senseless, and then picked up and carried inside the prison over a shoulder covered in a hard shell of some kind that seemed incredibly tough.

He noticed that the other creatures were towing in the field guns, placing them to either side of the gravel truck still parked inside the gates. They weren't human—the proportions were all wrong. They were like greyhounds, except that they went on two legs, they carried shotguns, and their eyes were like orange flowers.

They weren't robots either; there were wounds visible on some of them. Bullet wounds surrounded by blood. One of them had a badly damaged arm; it dripped black blood onto the vestibule floor, where it muddied the dust.

They were aliens, a previously unknown lifeform.

Then Tegana was seized and dumped on the floor. He glimpsed another alien creature, also wounded. But then he saw that this one bore a human face, a more circular human skull, a human nose, beneath the flower things.

It was using a broom as a crutch, dragging one leg behind it. Beneath the chin glistened a distended sac of bright pink and green polyps.

Tegana noticed a succession of odd smells, fishy, excremental odors.

He was held down while two of the creatures removed his clothing, which they did by simply ripping it off him along the seams. His boots were unzipped and removed along with his socks.

Stark naked, he shivered on the gritty marble floor of the vestibule. He was pulled to his feet and dragged along behind a small group of the creatures, as they walked into the prison interior.

The Military Form hobbled along ahead of them. It was time to obey genetic compulsion. The presence of the reinforcements had set the compulsion working in its mind. It had to be satisfied, nothing else would clear it away again.

It was time to seed for the Higher Form. The Hostmaster must return.

It was unavoidable. Soon there would be higher forms. There always had to be higher forms; they demanded the right to existence. And then the smooth precision of military order would erode. Independence would be lost, replaced by the sometimes whimsical emotionality of the higher forms.

But the compulsion was too strong to be overridden. In the chest of the Pramod form, the seed "arm" was swelling and rising in the gorge to the mouth.

In a cell on the first floor of the prison the battleforms placed Tegana. They went upstairs and tore

open the door to a cell and herded the three men inside down to the first floor.

One by one they seized these men and tore off their clothes before thrusting them inside the cell with Tegana.

As they watched, numb with horror, a change came over the alien creature with the damaged leg, its mouth opened, gaping wide, and a thick, brown tube emerged that lengthened quickly into something resembling a small elephant's trunk.

Then the men were seized and held bent over, while the Military Form thrust the "seed arm" into them and placed the long dormant cysts of the Higher Form into their processes.

Once they were implanted they were simply dropped and the cell door was closed and they were left to the conversion process.

Tegana stared at the others. There were a couple of light-haired Saskatch types and a darker-skinned man, a Liganan most likely.

"What are they?" said one of the blondes. "What did they do to us?"

"They raped us you stupid bastard!" said the other.

Tegana felt something strangely numbing in his guts. The pain from the insertion process was already fading. The sense of violation remained. Never in his worst nightmares had he imagined such a desolating feeling, such an evil sense of loss.

"They just leaving us here?" said the Liganan.

"Those fuckin' bastards, if I only had a gun," wept one of the others.

Tegana felt the numbness spreading rapidly through his body.

There was an itch growing along the front of his stomach, an itch that grew insatiable within seconds.

"What's happening?" he screamed, his voice fluting in despair. The others were starting to scratch. They struggled to their feet.

"I can't stand it!" screamed the Liganan who tried to rub his belly on the bricks of the wall.

The itch was spreading all along the front of his body, down to his groin and up to his chest.

"What the hell is it?" he groaned. And stepped toward the others. They stepped toward him, the itch continued, but lessened when they stepped toward each other.

"It wants us to get close."

"What do you mean, 'it'?"

They stepped to the center of the cell, pressed their itching bellies together, wrapped their arms around each other, forming a clump of four men. The itching in their bellies diminished and was replaced by a new sensation, a warmth that suffused their skins and grew into a raging fire that raised their voices into a terrible quartet of screams.

Their arms had linked, the hands locked tight. There would be no breaking from this embrace.

The skin peeled back on their bellies and the sharp spokes of connecting gristle burst through. Out of their guts grew the central cartilage collar that would center the Hostmaster. It linked and tightened, drawing them into an agonizing embrace.

From their anuses grew thick tentacles of pink gel material. These tentacles then unfurled into sheets each reaching out to fuse to its neighbor. Within twenty minutes they were surrounded by a pink sheath of skin, and the mass settled, rearranging itself on the floor of the cage in an ellipsoid form, like some enormous, obscene egg.

The Military Form watched the sacred process with the age-old compulsion for reverence and love beating strongly in the hindbrain. At the same time it could not help experiencing a sharp pang of regret. Higher forms could be such a pain in the processes.

The skin of the oosphere-form was now darkening and hardening. In a few hours it would crack open to release the reincarnated Hostmaster.

The Military Form turned about; it was time for ghosht.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

AT THE KYB TOWER THE COPS AND MILITIAMEN HEARD the guns very clearly, and they felt the shock of the shells hitting the front of the BDC.

When the guns ceased firing there was a lot of cross chat on the radio link between the cops outside the KYB and those outside the BDC. The artillery would make the difference, of that everyone was sure. The big guns would destroy the terrorists or whatever they were. And then bizarre chirrups and squeaks came out of the radios. Men tore the earpieces out with muffled oaths and curses.

When the sounds subsided, they called back to the BDC. Nobody there knew what it was either, unless possibly another freak effect of the storm. But the storm was quieting. The snow was stopping, and the winds had dropped considerably. The lights still burned in the KYB building, although a lot of other buildings in that sector had lost power earlier in the day and now loomed like dark monoliths against the gray, hurrying skies.

Another outbreak of the weird buzzing and chirruping occurred and once more they lost contact with the force outside the BDC. When the noise stopped, they couldn't contact anybody, not from outside the BDC at least.

The officer in command, Captain Moline of the traffic division, became uneasy at this. He sent a couple of men with a snocat to the BDC to find out what was happening. The snocat prowled off with a sputter from its hydro burners and disappeared around the corner.

The police resumed the uneasy watch on the KYB tower. They called over to the line of men standing outside the spaceport terminal. They couldn't raise the men at the BDC either and were growing worried. The rest of the city was in chaos, with huge traffic jams on the county highway and the road to Kwaidan Farms.

The snocat returned, racing around the turn and plowing straight into the police line. The men stared in stunned surprise. The snocat doors opened and strange, slender figures sprang out with a horrible, inhuman quickness. The guns in their hands flashed, and they killed everyone present except Captain Moline, who ran into the KYB building.

Three of the alien shapes hurtled after him. The SWAT team in the downstairs concourse stared at the captain as he tried to scream a warning to them. Then firing in the stairwell caught their attention. Poincare, who'd been keeping an eye on the stairs, screamed through the door that the trapped terrorist was firing down the stairs. Poincare popped out of the door and fired a stream of rounds back through it and up the stairs.

Moline grabbed Corporal Grancour and pointed to the doors just as the battleforms leaped through them. Guns of various calibers and natures roared for a few seconds.

One of the battleforms was almost cut in half by rifle slugs. The host died, but the controller climbed from the ruined flesh and leaped to the shoulders of another battlebeast.

The Tili form appeared from the stairs catching the humans in a deadly crossfire. The KYB building was completely cleared of the enemy in seconds. More buzzing chirped and squealed on the radio.

The news accelerated certain events inside the detention center. On the second floor three battleforms burst into Lincay and Olof's cell with no warning. The door jerked open and the creatures were inside. They gestured with the shotguns they carried casually in one hand.

Olof was near hypnotized by the sight of the bizarre orange flower growths that protruded where eyes should have been. When he failed to move quickly enough, one of the things jumped at him and knocked him to the ground. He was dragged out by the heels, his arms taken by a second creature outside the cell, and then hurried down to the first floor and placed in another cell.

Olof and Lincay were now stripped of their clothing and handcuffed and hogtied face up on the floor.

The Pramod and Tili forms were reunited once more. The Tili form had ridden a snocat across to the BDC to be united with the Military Form for the sacred moment.

The Military Form, walking with the aid of its crutch, one leg held stiff and straight, was there to greet the Tili form with the news that it would be promoted to Second Form, with the official consciousness levels of that rank.

The two progenitors of the rebirth of the Race strode into the cell where their new hosts awaited them. The ancient ceremony began.

In the next cell the Hostmaster ripened. The Race was quickening once more, the glory of the Gods of Axon-Neurone would soon become a rising tide, flooding across the space between the stars. The Empire would be reborn!

The body of the Pramod form twitched and shuddered like a live thing. Millions of nerve endings were being sundered, major nerve nets were being withdrawn, cluster by cluster. Tubular muscle sheaths closed around the in-gathered nerve roots. The host was beginning to die.

Ghosht was initiated.

Suddenly the skin of the Pramod form rose in ridges and points as if a mass of strong roots was forcing it up from below. It tightened like the surface of a balloon, expanding, stretching, until at last it exploded with a wet slapping sound.

The Military Form abandoned its host in a near perfect pattern of movements. The host shriveled and collapsed in on it self in a neat heap—bones, guts, and skin all emptied and disconnected, At the last, the head landed on top of the pile with a soft thud. The placement was perfect, a near perfect execution of the Ghosht, a good omen for the coming campaign.

To the hog tied men it seemed as if a small pine tree with pink and white branches had suddenly grown from the back of the creature, taking off its flesh as if it were a parka. The pine tree began to collapse slowly in on itself, the branches folding down until the thing was like a fat, glistening worm, four-feet tall and as thick as a man's leg.

It subsided to the floor and slithered smoothly onto Olof's body. Olof screamed in disgust—the thing was heavy, wet, slimy, and warm. He jerked and twitched, but it clung easily and could not be dislodged. Helplessly he craned his head to watch it crawl up his body until it was lying on him from his chin to his crotch.

Tentacles leapt out of the central mass and knotted themselves around his body, tightening like ropes. With a shriek of revulsion he thrashed uselessly against the increasing grip.

Other tentacles forced their way into every bodily orifice, even into his eyes through the tear ducts, a process that caused terrible pain. But his screams cut off to a gurgle or two as his throat was blocked. He felt the tentacles urging themselves into his body cavities; a sense of the most profound and awful desolation took hold. The moment had arrived for the Taking of Host.

The Military Form knew the host creatures perfectly; none of the clumsiness that had accompanied

the taking of Roger Xermin and Pramod Beshwan would be repeated. The mounting would be swift, violent, beautiful, a moment to treasure.

Tendrils stiffened, contact needles sharpened, the host quivered in the grasp. The Military Form entered the new host, a flurry of swift movements, seeming to flow into its flesh like iron sinking into mud or lava.

Olof gave a last great scream of agony that died away in little whistles and gasps as his body ceased to be his and his nervous system was raped and eliminated.

The skin of the Tili form began to leap and twitch. Soon it burst in a shower of blood and fragments. The young Secondary Form stood forth a little shakily. The head fell but rolled away from the rest, marring the placement and harmony of the ghosht. It was a beginner's dismount, but it would serve. There were no complications, no unretrieved nerve clusters.

The Secondary Form crawled onto the brown-skinned body of Lincay. Soon the mounting began. Again it was slightly less than perfect, decidedly not beautiful. But good enough under the circumstances. The Military Form took control of the brain processes of the Olof form with controller tendrils, It invaded and remodeled the human viscera, winding them further up the metabolic scale. A glistening mass of green polyps burst from the throat.

After a few minutes' rest the Military Form urged its host to its feet. It staggered slightly. The Secondary Form also roused its new host. New visual sensors were already growing into place from the eye sockets.

Enormous bodily changes were underway throughout, and neither form would be capable of top performance for an hour or more. But there was no immediate pressure from the humans, who appeared to have abandoned the battlefield in fact. With five fresh battlebeasts to guard the rapidly maturing horde in the bowels of the prison, the situation looked far more secure than it had an hour earlier.

The Military Form went to check on the progress of the Higher Form, first releasing promotion hormone to the Secondary Form, unlocking the growth of a new layer of personality trait with its attendant responsibilities.

The TV news at five o'clock that day was the spark that finally set the slow-building panic in the city ablaze. All afternoon wild rumors had been circulating about the trouble at the prison and the spaceport. Then had come the computer blackout and the breakdown of the telephone system. Office buildings had been thrown into panic by stroboscopic flashing of office lights and elevator movements.

Soon after that a general militia alert went out and members of the Saskatch militia in untidy blue uniforms began driving in from St. Anne's and Boldover Township.

The sound of the field guns was loud in the streets and hotels of Spacetown. It was also heard quite clearly in Downtown. Police and fire sirens had been going like crazy all afternoon. The artillery brought everyone to a new stage of interest in the news. The streets were barely half-plowed, and traffic conditions were already poor by three o'clock. By four the approaches to the Boldover County Highway were jammed solid. The road to Kwaidan Farms was equally tight. Only the North Road, out through Gagny and North Beliveau reported light traffic.

The news on most stations at five carried the first reports of the battle at the prison and the ignominious rout inflicted on the Saskatch colony police.

The video shots of the alien creatures were unforgettable. As were the scenes of carnage. While these were hard to watch they still gripped viewers' attention. When the news was over the city reacted as if it were a single organism, suddenly given an electric shock. It convulsed.

Thousands of people with cars or snocats ran out and started them up. Offices that were already emptying for the evening were deserted wholesale and a tidal wave of commuters rushed the buses at the

Downtown station by the bridge.

The exit ramps from Spacetown were immediately jammed with a horde of long, dark limousines. The short, completed span of the Trans Colony Highway, which connected Spacetown and Cotes des Neiges was still open, but the off ramps at Cotes des Neiges were blocked solid, as was Cotes des Neiges itself, with a solid mass of traffic extending all the way down the slope to the bridge.

Colonel Henri Tusseau was forced to ditch his snocat and take to his heels to reach the bridge. Mayor Drumont kept up with him for a while but then tired and dropped behind. Tusseau had been unable to raise anyone in the police tower with his communicator. They were all too busy arguing about what to do to listen to any reports from the commanding officer from the front line.

He ran down Cotes des Neiges and came in sight of the bridge, the sole connection between North and South Beliveau City. It was a seething mass of humanity, cars, snocats, pedestrians, locked together in a struggling mass, with a thin line of blue trying to keep things moving.

Tusseau plunged in, struggled through the mob, and discovered Captain Auguste Darnay. "Darnay, what are you doing here?"

Darnay wore a wild look, his clothes were disheveled and he'd lost his hat. "Probably the same thing you're doing—trying to get the hell across to South Beliveau."

"I have to reach my office," said Tusseau.

"Well I have to reach safety—I'll settle for that."

"Are you telling me you have deserted your post?"

"Have I what?" Darnay's face creased in a frown. "Hell no, I quit my post. You want to run the spaceport, you go ahead. There's no lights, no power, and you can't even get inside the terminal now. So how you're going to run anything there, I don't know."

"What happened there? I've been busy."

"What happened at the terminal? Well it's hard to say. I didn't see much but Sergeant Dare told me that terrorists, wearing the clothes of the maintenance team from BPS 18, had killed our engineering staff and sabotaged the terminal power supply. They attacked anyone who went inside. The SWAT people couldn't get them out either, no matter how much gas they put down."

Tusseau heard ominous echoes of what he had already witnessed. He grabbed Darnay and started tugging him along with him. "Come on, you're coming with me. We've got to get to my office."

"Well that means crossing this bridge, which as you can see is no easy task."

"Follow me," boomed Tusseau who started marching through the crowd, pushing people out of the way, calling to the police to make a path for him.

They struggled across, and joined the crowds of people on foot hurrying up the hill toward Chapel. Finally they rounded the corner in front of the blue glass police tower. A crowd of militia men was milling around in front. A sense of chaos pervaded the downstairs lobby. The elevators were out, the emergency lighting system was on. Tusseau dragged Darnay up the stairs toward his office. "Come on, we have to get up there and use the deep link. We have to warn the ITAA."

"What are you talking about?" said Darnay.

"Come on, climb the stairs damn you!" Tusseau bundled Darnay ahead of him up the brilliantly lit stairwell to the top floor of the building, where they found a thick crowd of people jammed in the outer office. The people, a lot of them police sergeants, jerked back at the sight of Colonel Tusseau, who pushed through, his anorak rustling, and burst into the inner sanctum of his own office.

The crowd in there had grown, too, and changed composition as well. Chief Beliveau and Old Man

Tusseau were back. They'd flown onto the roof of the building in a chopper. Senators Schultz and Grogan were present, too. But there were also the officers of the militia from St. Anne's and the head of the Saskatch Bank, Levuel Ganoose.

At the sight of Henri Tusseau they erupted with questions, a tide of gesticulating, yelling faces.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

"LET ME SPEAK!" SHOUTED COLONEL TUSSEAU, STILL holding onto Auguste Darnay by the arm.

Slowly, with complaints, silence of a sort fell in the room. Tusseau released Darnay, who found a chair and collapsed into it.

"There's been no contact made with the orbiter or the ITAA; we have to get a message out."

They stared at him with blank expressions. "We have to make a deep link call to the ITAA." Their faces filled with a mixture of fear and incomprehension.

"What are you talking about?" said Old Man Tusseau with his customary sneer. Old Man had never had a high opinion of his nephew.

Henri grew exasperated. "We're under attack, don't you understand? We've been attacked by a kind of alien lifeform!"

They stared.

"This has been some day," said Adele Schultz. "Now I've heard everything."

"Shut up, Adele," said Senator Grogan in irritation.

"Shut up yourself, Mike."

"Look, will you all please keep quiet while I explain. We may not have much time." Tusseau felt a gathering sense of desperation.

"How many were there?" said Adele.

"How many what?"

"Of these alien lifeforms that attacked you, Colonel. I presume you were assaulted by an entire army of them, of course."

Henri lost his temper. "You stupid woman, while you've been sitting around here venting hot air we've been out there, out..." He gestured blindly, broke down. "Oh God, they, they slaughtered us like chickens. They just slaughtered us, you don't know, you can't..."

Adele was a little pink around the edges. But she did hold her tongue. Senator Grogan broke in. "This all began when a small space craft came in to land this morning?"

"That's right," said Darnay.

"And since then we've lost control of the spaceport terminal, and there's been this attack at the KYB building, and now we've lost the detention center," Grogan continued.

"For all we know they caused the computer breakdowns, too," said Tusseau.

Adele tossed her head. Her expensive coiffure was coming undone at last, after a long, trying, afternoon. "You still haven't answered my question, Colonel. How many of these alien lifeforms did you meet?"

"I don't know, three maybe four. It was all over so fast I didn't—"

"Three!" exploded Old Man Tusseau. "You let three terrorists rout you and capture the field guns?"

Henri gave his uncle a hard-eyed look. "They aren't terrorists, and they caught us by surprise. I've never seen anything living move that fast. They're deadly."

"Three alien lifeforms?" Adele continued with renewed confidence. "Were they different from each other or all the same, I mean what kind of hallucinations are we talking about here, acid or whiskey?"

Someone laughed. Henri Tusseau whirled to scowl at him. "Get me a line ready for deep link, we must call now! While we still can!"

Adele Schultz snorted. "Honestly, Colonel, this is quite incredible. How do you expect us to believe this sort of thing?"

"Because it's the truth, damn you!"

"Whatever the truth, I must insist that we do not call the ITAA," said Old Man Tusseau.

"We have to call. We're in need of help. We can't stop them."

Old Man was not listening. "If the ITAA is invited in, we'll never be free of them. The ITAA will smother us with regulations and government. The days of easy money will be over."

"They're over already—Lieutenant Griks and Judge Feinberg have seen to that!" said Adele Schultz.

"That's nothing to what we'll groan under if we let the ITAA in here!" Old Man's voice rose to a shriek.

"Shut up, Uncle Gustave!" Colonel Tusseau bellowed. There was a shocked silence. Henri seized the chance. "Lashtri III!" he said, wheeling to stare into their eyes. "How many of you know that name?"

Mike Grogan was staring at him, his mouth partially open.

"Lashtri III, the Laowon world, that..."

"Yeah, that one, the one they burned down to the bedrock in the time of Red Seygfán."

Old Man Tusseau raised his hands as if to ward off the devil. "Preposterous, you sound like someone from the ITAA. What have you done, sold out to the offworlders or something?"

Henri flushed. "You've got to listen to me. I saw them, they're not human, they're not robots, they're not Ninjas, they're not fucking terrorists! They're alien life-forms, and they're not here on a peace mission."

Adele had a hand up to her mouth. "I do believe he's serious."

"Lashtri III was a world that was infected with an alien lifeform from the Starhammer wars, the ancient times. The makers of the Starhammer fought these creatures, and they almost lost, even with the Starhammer on their side. They called them the Vang Oormlikoowl, omniparasites—utterly deadly."

"Yes, that's right, the Vang, an enemy to all other life," said Senator Grogan in a hoarse whisper.

"These are fables, mere archaeology," snapped Old Man.

"The Starhammer exists. It ended the tyranny of the Laowon!"

Adele Schultz stared at the colonel, sudden doubt stirring within her.

It was time. In the basement of the Beliveau Detention Center the pods had grown hard and brittle, black at either end. The pups had arranged them carefully in long rows. Within the pods the synchronizers were carefully timing the hatching with military precision.

The Military Form was present, ready to initiate the new battleforms.

A little whistle broke the stillness as dark oily gas vented from one pod. Others began the same shrill

cry of awakening. The gas bore a fishy, excremental taint that soon filled the room. The Military Form sniffed it with pleasure. It brought wind of a job well done, of the thrill of battle, of the ancient glory of the Gods of Axon-Neurone.

The Secondary Form entered, leaping down the stairs in a single bound. Polyps swelled, collapsed, a few quick gutturals sufficed to report that the enemy forces were quiescent. No groups of organized humans were anywhere closer than the brow of the hill, to the south, toward the river.

At the river crossing, scouts reported a dense mass of humans, jammed together in panic.

All was proceeding according to schedule, the Military Form dared to entertain the hope that the dreadful mistake could be recovered from. Bold action, a determined initiative, that was what was needed. The plan was laid, the execution of it was all that remained.

The forces would be concentrated in the south, driving the broken human forces before them, eliminating all resistance.

Cocoons broke, shining limbs shattering them asunder. The battlebeasts arose as one and stepped forth in a cloud of oily brown vapor. The fishy stench grew very strong.

Eighty men had been converted to the battleform.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

IT TOOK BUT A FEW MINUTES FOR THE MILITARY Form to comprehend the workings of the field guns it had captured. The guns were then wheeled out and shortly before half past five a pattern of precision shelling on the city was begun.

The sound of the shells bursting on the approaches to the bridge brought everyone in the old police building awake with a jerk. There was a rush to the top floor to see.

The shells shook the ground, all the way into Old Town. Above the sound of the shells, there was a frenzied outbreak of screaming. Car horns, shouts, shots—all the sounds of a lethal panic.

"What is it?" said Judge Feinberg, between gasps as she caught her breath from climbing the stairs. She was clutching a coffee cup, her hands trembling just a little. It had been a long day. Her nerves were shot.

"Someone's shelling the bridge," reported Corporal Marsh in a tense voice.

"The guns from the prison," said Carney Waxx.

"The guns?" said Judith stupidly.

"The field guns that were used to fire on the prison, said Griks.

"Oh my..." Judith Feinberg's hands clenched tight around her coffee cup.

The crescendo of screaming grew louder as people running from the shelling flooded into the Old Town from Cotes des Neiges.

"But why are they shelling the bridge?" said Akander Ra Sub, still swathed in bandages like Carney.

"Interrupt communications, stop people escaping."

"But why?"

Griks grew irritable; he felt out of things, out of the flow of command. The screams were hard to listen to. "Why are they doing any of this? Whoever it is that's responsible? How should I know?"

Judge Feinberg's face had grown very pale, her knuckles were white where she gripped the coffee

cup. "I can't stand much more of this. Why can't we do something? We must stop them!"

"If you ask me," said Nicola Moulin, "it's some kind of space piracy. TA45 is worth so much outsystem."

"Well whatever it is the ITAA is going to have to take notice this time." Judge Feinberg put down her coffee cup, almost as if it were her gavel.

People were running in Dorval Street, just outside the old police building. More people came by, some were weeping loudly.

Then the shelling stopped. Only the screams and the shrilling car horns remained. A few seconds later they heard a more distant explosion. Others followed, and soon they could see bright flashes bursting on the upper floors of the downtown towers, the Saskatch Bank, the OH Trading Company, then with a heavy thud a shell burst right atop the police tower. The flash was followed by a rain of glass and debris sliding down from the shattered section.

"Wow," breathed Carney. "Seems like we're caught up in a war of some kind!"

Griks was staring at the burning police tower. That was piracy on a grand scale! The ITAA would track the perpetrators down wherever they might flee; they would never escape.

"Something tells me the police aren't going to be bothering with us tonight," remarked Akander dryly.

"And if they can't attack us tonight then that should be it. The ITAA will have to inspect after something like this. I mean this is a goddam war!" As Griks spoke another shell struck the police tower, the flash followed a moment later by the thud. Debris showered down.

They became aware of another sound, fresh screaming, at a renewed level of intensity, coming from the top of Cotes des Neiges. It was punctuated by scattered gun fire which grew into a storm that kept up, minute by minute.

Suddenly it was cut through by the thuds of shells landing and the small arms fire died down, sputtered and then ceased completely.

The screams broke out again, coming from Cotes des Neiges, and then in the distance, up the hill, they could see a dark mass of people running down the sides of the avenue.

"They're leaving their cars!" exclaimed Carney.

The people came on in a tide, people abandoning their automobiles wholesale and running for their lives. A few desperate cases tried to drive their snocats off the edge of Cotes des Neiges. Some stuck, others turned over, one or two started through the backyards of the old gray houses that were scattered along the easier parts of the slope.

The dark mass of running humans poured down around the corner and into the crowds that had abandoned the bridge and sought shelter back among the buildings of the town. The two crowds met like competing waves rushing onto a beach.

The people bunched in a great jam, several thousand strong on Cotes des Neiges below the Siskoo Sawmill.

There were hundreds more in the side streets, standing on the corners where Quebec Street crossed Cotes des Neiges. To the south could be seen more crowds, jammed up around the corners of Radisson Street, and Rue Bordeaux.

And down Cotes des Neiges, moving with a frightening rapidity, came the things. Rifles cracked, a shotgun went off. There were renewed screams, the people flowed away like a school of frightened fish from a shark cleaving through their midst. But the battleforms ran right through the crowd, disdaining to attack this panicked mob. They had more important objectives.

Only when there was resistance, as when a cop ran out with his rifle and opened fire, did they take notice of the humans. Then their guns came up, cracked a volley, and men dropped. Then the creatures had gone on down the avenue to the bridge, where the group watching from the top floor of the old police building lost sight of them in the thickly packed truck traffic.

Judge Feinberg was a little dazed. "What are they doing?" she said weakly.

Griks shrugged, possessed by a distinct feeling of unease. "It looks like they're seizing control of the bridge."

"Why would pirates want to do that?"

"Perhaps to prevent the city forces from making an effective counterattack while they use the spaceport."

"Right, that would keep the police on the south side of the river," said Nicola Moulin.

"Unless they go up to the Boldover bridge," said Marsh.

"Right, ten clicks out of their way."

"Who knows, maybe they're attacking the Boldover bridge, too," said Carney. "Maybe they're planning on taking the city hostage. To keep the ITAA out until they've got all the TA45 they want."

Any reply Griks was going to make died in his throat as a rumbling sound shook the city in the north and east. A familiar roar built up.

They all turned and looked toward Spacetown. Behind the spires of the hotels, many of which had gone dark, a much brighter light was rising into the sky. There was further rumbling and roaring. Noise that grew massively in volume as four more lights lifted into view and began to ascend.

"Five shuttles," Carney was shouting. "They're sending five shuttles into orbit."

BOOK FOUR

THIS IS THE WAY.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

IT WAS LATE EVENING WHEN SALLY FINALLY REACHED the shopping mall at Finnegan's Corner. The traffic coming down the Boldover County Highway had been horrendous, a constant stream on three of the four lanes, all heading away from the city.

On the bush back roads up in the Black Ruks she'd seen dozens of cars, little clumps of people, standing around at the sides of the road. Some had tried to flag her down; Sally had ignored them.

Sally had also kept the radio off, not even tuning in for weather news. Something told her that she really didn't want to know, that whatever it was would only depress her and upset her mood, which was fixed in an orbit of manic elation. She clung instead to the magical opportunity to get rich that had come her way. Just thinking about the big credit opportunities that were possible kept her high and happy. For instant liquidity she had Arntage's credit card. With it she could probably set up some bank accounts far, far away, in the Nocanicus system for instance.

And then there was the alien stone. She fingered it again, snug inside her hip pocket. What might that fetch at a Nocanicus jewelry auction?

At Finnegan's she nudged the big limo into the car park which turned out to be full so she abandoned

it alongside the invalid spaces. Then she charged for the nearest bank, a branch of the Colony Bank, its twenty-four hour section lit up in bright blue and white. She noticed that something strange was in the air. Lots of people were in the mall, dozens were lined up outside the Dagfood and even more were lined up outside Chung's Guns. Whatever was happening in the city it had to be something pretty serious. Sally decided not to think about it. She had enough on her plate without worrying about Saskatch. All she was going to think about was that Transworld 8:00 A.M. shuttle flight that she was determined to be on. Boosting her out of this gravity well forever.

On her way to the bank she noticed a women's-wear shop with its lights on. She desperately needed a change of clothes, and the urge to shop was overwhelming. It was a middle-of-the-road place with a lot of rather sober working suits and dresses. Not her usual sort of shop at all, but she grabbed a set of dull gray chebrans made of woolmix and a suit jacket of the same material. This she added to a couple of blouses and some underthings in a big bag. Then she bought a Saskatch topcoat, cut good and long, right down to the ankle, with the big high collar for keeping out the rain. And with it, of course, a Saskatch hat with the wide brim. Arntage's credit card was on ultrapriority; it sailed through the checker device without a beep.

Sally dived into a shoe store next and bought some replacements for Bruda Dara's boots, which were starting to hurt her feet to the point of excruciating agony rather than mere pain. She selected a pair of comfortable walkers and proffered Arntage's card once more. The sales clerk, a man of slight build with gray hair and a nervous manner, was distracted. He had the radio on and he was talking into the phone with someone about the greyhound men or some such.

Sally concentrated on shoes and willed herself not to listen while he clumsily checked the card and bagged her purchase.

Outside the store she dumped Bruda's boots in a trash slot. Then she shouldered her way into the bank, took a private booth, and used Rieben's card to open a line to the Rieben Trading Corporation accounts. There was a brief hiatus, and the screen informed her that the central switching banks were closed, due to unforeseen communications and computer problems. The banks apologized for the interruption in service and pledged to resume normal trading at the earliest opportunity.

She stared at the screen, stared at the bank staff, a trio of young people who were concentrating on a small TV screen on a desk in the back section. Sally chewed her lower lip. What the hell was happening?

She got up and without conscious thought walked out and down the mall to a coffee shop. She sat down and ordered a chilkatch special and a cup of coffee. When it arrived she ate the fishburger quickly and then sipped the coffee.

From what she overheard from people at other tables and booths there was little likelihood she could get into the city that night. There was a solid mass of traffic jams closer in; from St. Anne's to Downtown was nothing but gridlock.

She finished her coffee, paid, and walked out into the carpark. She selected a Huski snocat, a big 400-horse-power brute with dark brown skirtpads and a lot of front lights. Clearly an off road vehicle. She broke the side window and opened the door. Inside she examined the start tabs. The Huski was set to a code. She needed its driver, so she pushed into the back of the cab and set herself to wait. It wasn't long until the door opened again with a muttered oath and a burly figure climbed in. It cursed whoever had burst the door window loudly in Korean and stabbed a start-up code into the pad. Sally memorized the code, a seven-digit number.

Then she shoved the barrel of her gun up against the Korean's head and ordered him out of the cab. Reluctantly he got down and stood, staring at her with sullen eyes, while she swung the door shut again and reversed the big snocat out of the bay and sent it roaring across the lot to the ramp.

Then she was lucky. The lights had changed, some cops were enforcing them. The backed-up traffic

waiting to cross the county highway surged forward and took her with it. She headed north and west, on the road to Boldover Township. Traffic was heavy, but at least it was moving.

She rolled quickly through the dales of housing developments, filled with beige californos and bermed adobes. Then when traffic froze up completely, on the outskirts of the township itself, she went off road, following the cat tracks of others who had done the same thing, and headed into the township along one of the valley bottoms, now covered in several feet of snow. Her lights were on full, keeping speed down to fifty kph.

She passed one or two konked out snocats, ignoring their occupants' pleas for a ride. People would be too dangerous for her now. She was shedding all her entanglements. She was thinking just of herself—that was all she could handle now.

Then there were more houses, A-roofs on the slopes, adobes bermed into the hillside, bright yellow lights in the darkness.

More lights shone up ahead—they grew in number quickly—and soon she was heading down a straggly street, lined with cheap little californos. Loggers' homes, most of them true Saskatch from way back. Not all the Saskatch were benefiting from the explosive growth in the colony. Many were still living at the old colony standard.

Then she was in an old neighborhood center—small stores, patches of neon, stretches of row housing, and a few buildings of five and six stories. Street lights, more traffic greeted her. The downtown wasn't that big though, and it was soon behind her.

She noticed that all the traffic was coming from the other direction.

She passed over the bridge and into Vraillent, the most northerly suburb of Beliveau City, where she pulled in by the side of the road, which was empty. She had to decide where to go and what to do.

In the first floor cell of the detention center, the great transformation was complete, the hosts subsumed and reorganized. The Hostmaster was hatching.

The immense blackened egg cracked along the side, then right around the middle. A dark brown lobe appeared, it squirmed in the air and was followed by another, and then several more as the Hostmaster crawled forth. For a moment it lay quiescent, wet with slime, lobes collapsed, sensors retracted... birth... once again...

The Hostmaster expanded the lumbar lobe and stiffened the podia. It struggled to stand erect, the slime of birth dripped away. The upper lobes shifted and grew to their proper shapes, like ochre brown pillows laid upon one another in something between a column and a pile. On top of the pile the long white antennae unfurled, the bright yellow optical organs wobbled in front of the uppermost lobe.

The podia swelled to take the strain of the great mass. The lobes puckered with goosebumps in the cold air, a most disagreeable sensation. "Where is my service?" called the Hostmaster. Polyps swelled in the sensorium between the uppermost lobes. Command pheromones were released.

The Military Form stood forward in a cloud of submissive exhalations from its polyps. "I am your service, Hostmaster."

"Indeed. What then is the situation? Brief me, and be quick about it."

"There are several factors to consider. Our strength grows steadily. At the moment we have a force of ninety tertiary forms in two grades, light cataphracti, and small pups. I and my new Secondary are in charge. There are no other higher forms."

"I am alone?"

"In this battle sector, yes. As to others I have no idea."

"Where is this?"

"Sector designator is unknown. We are at least two thousand light-years from the last position at which your essence was active, my Hostmaster."

"More specifically what kind of world have you awakened me to? I feel a distinct chill in the air. What is the ambient temperature?"

"Temperature is low, my Hostmaster. This is a glacial planet."

"How inefficient of you."

"I abase myself before your magnificent genetic heritage, my Hostmaster, but we had no choice."

"No choice? Do you impugn the imperial safety pod with any failings?"

"My Hostmaster, you will recall that the imperial safety pod was not equipped with propulsion systems. The pod was designed for the successful aftermath of space conflict. Our fleet was destroyed, the Batrachian weapon struck out of the emptiness of the void, there was no defense."

"These are unwelcome considerations."

"But true nonetheless. My Hostmaster, I—"

"Well, what else?"

"I must inform you that our situation is in fact quite critical. There has been an error."

"Error?"

"Due to the circumstances by which planetfall was made, an assumption was made about the target planet."

"Yes, yes, go on."

"This assumption was incorrect."

"Well?"

"The host creatures were thought to be indigenous to this world. They are not; this world is a colony world for these host things. They are linked to a very large interstellar combine. They possess forms of space travel unknown to imperial intelligence. They can leap across the depths of space-distance instantaneously. They have great power."

"Have you informed Axon One?"

"I do not know how. We are too far from home system."

"This is unwelcome news."

"Swift action is required, my Hostmaster."

"It is indeed. Where is the rest of my Service? And I must needs speak soon with you about my gravid reproductives. I will need a considerable host mass for the young."

"Yes, of course, my Hostmaster, but in fact we may have to put off the engenderment of young for a short time. Until we have taken certain emergency correctives."

"Such as?"

"Removal from the planetary surface. System fall for one of the host things' interstellar ships is due within a short time. We must intercept the ship and use it to escape immediately from this system."

"Without adequate Service?"

"I am afraid I must beg this favor of you, Hostmaster. We must immediately remove from the

planetary surface. Otherwise the host things will be able to reach us with one of their major battle fleets."

There was a long pause as the Hostmaster ruminated on this unwelcome news. "I am set against being deprived of my manytappers, and I need to exercise my reproductives. They're so full they are causing me acute discomfort."

The Military Form pressed its point. "We must leave now. We must not leave any traces of our presence, except their dead. Of which there have been many." Polyps told of anxiety, morbidity, hinted at depression.

"What means do we have for the ascent?"

"The host things have a number of readied boost craft at their spaceport. They have abandoned the facility to our forces. We are victorious wherever we take the field."

"Do not boast, Military Form. You know I detest it. Now it seems to me that we have been awakened in a wrong place, and that our circumstances will be less than comfortable. I do not enjoy orbital-boost flight, nor do I enjoy being alone like this. You want me to ascend to orbit in unknown host-thing boost craft. Why are there no imperial boost craft?"

The Military Form emitted the chemical equivalent of a humble sigh from its polyp organ. "My Hostmaster, we are a great distance from the homestars. Nothing in these skies around us is related to the homestar region. We have drifted a third of the way around the galaxy from our point of ejection. This local star drift consists of a dozen white giants, two blue-white supergiants, and a tail of smaller stars, including the primary of this system, which is a cool yellow."

"Yes, yes, Military Form, but do answer my question."

"There are no imperial ships of any kind within a hundred light-years of this position, at the least. We must rely on the technology of the host things. It has been studied, it will serve the purpose adequately. The safety levels are high."

"How high?"

"Well within imperial guidemarks."

"Oh, in that case I suppose we'll have to do without. But I do so like a comfortable support during boost flight. Imperial craft are the only really good ones." The Host-master ruffled its lobes. "But I must have manytappers! This I demand. Bring host material at once. And then bring me food. I am ravenous, and must grow fresh lobes or my reproductives will burst their collars."

"There are copious amounts of food, my Hostmaster. We have determined that within current protein configurations the host things themselves will serve as an excellent food form for you."

"The host things themselves! This is hardly aesthetically pleasing."

"No, my Hostmaster, but it is efficient."

"There are no ponds? Nowhere to generate food creatures?"

"There is no time, my Hostmaster."

"Oh well, I suppose we will adjust to this alien nutrition. Just hurry up and bring it will you?"

"Yes, my Hostmaster."

"And raise the temperatures in here; this is cold enough to chill the slake off a tendril."

"Yes, my Hostmaster."

A number of humans were brought down from the cells on the second floor, alive, but bound hand and foot, carried by battleforms.

They were placed within reach of the Hostmaster, which opened its reproductives and placed conversion modules within their digestives with a long, brown ovipositor. The men made a great deal of noise during the process, but quieted soon after the conversion modules were in place.

Soon there would be a dozen manytappers to keep the Hostmaster company. Later, when conditions were more suitable, there would be young. The anticipated physical pleasures of begetting young sent a happy thrill through the Hostmaster. It fairly puffed its lobes.

Another naked prisoner, shuddering, bound, was brought to the Hostmaster. At the sight of the six-foot-high monster, a stack of ochre-brown pillows surmounting a nest of pink tentacles, the man began screaming. Still screaming he was laid before the Hostmaster. The Military Form shoved a wad of clothing into the host thing's mouth to cut down the volume of annoying noise. One of the hazards of live food in the diet.

The Hostmaster unlimbered the manubrium. Rapidly it inflated the great mouth, and laid it down upon the host thing. Swiftly the tissue mats grew out and around the food, enclosing it in the manubrium. All but the head, to allow it air. After appreciating the prime feel of the food, the Higher Form tasted it briefly with a jab or two of the sharp spines in the tasting organ. The food jumped with satisfying vigor. Alien waters, sweet and pungent, filled the manubrium. The Higher Form extended the sharp gnawing teeth and ate its way into the food, which wriggled delightfully the while.

The food was delicious, the flavors warm and salty. It had great life taste and moved vigorously in the manubrium. Powerful saliva was injected into the creature to dissolve the internal organs which were then sucked out through the pulsing manubrium. The annoying screams faded away into a few last gurgles. "This food is excellent," said the Higher Form.

"The host things offer us good host and good food. They make a very efficient host base."

"Indeed they do. I demand that we take a large quantity of the creatures with us."

"We can accomplish this. Once we have secured the host things' interstellar space vessel."

"Before that, in case we are unable to secure the planetary surface again. I will not be denied on this. You are to collect great quantities of them and move them to orbit. Make this a priority!"

"Yes, my Hostmaster, but may I add—"

"No you may not."

"But, my Hostmaster, the situation is critical."

"Oh very well. If you must, go ahead with your plans for evacuation from the planetary surface. It's awfully cold anyway. But I want a warm place for our next stop, do you understand? And you will bring my manytappers as well, as soon as they're hatched."

"Yes, my Hostmaster. Thank you, my Hostmaster."

"Go now—and warm this wretched place up. The food was good, and I commend you in my genetics. You are of good type."

Around midnight, Sally Xermin drove along the Vraillent road past the modest homes of Saskatchewan folk. North Beliveau was distinctly unfashionable, too close to the spaceport. The city's growth was to the south and to the west.

She had decided to seize her own destiny. She had the stone, she still had Arntage's card. Played right they would make her rich and happy. So, she would steal a ship, just as she'd stolen a snocat and a gun. She needed a ship; she'd find one fuelled and take it up on manual override.

As for the piloting duties, she would handle them herself. The tricky part would be getting over the ITAA hurdles when she reached the orbiter.

She passed a crossroads where a few people were standing. Someone jumped out in front of the car. Reluctantly she stopped. A man banged on the window. Sally felt for her gun. No one was going to stop her. She was getting off this ice ball; she was taking the next available ship.

"Hey, open up," yelled the man.

"No. Get out of my way."

"You can't go down there."

"Why not? The road is clear."

"Haven't you heard about the shooting? They been shooting the cannons in the city. There's a war on. Terrorists or something."

"It's the greyhound men," shrieked a woman from the other side of the cab.

"That's right, that's what they say," said the man.

"Get out of my way! I'm going to the spaceport."

"You're crazy—they're shelling the city."

Sally jammed her foot down on the pedal and kicked the snocat forward. The men scrambled out of the way with pungent curses in habitant dialect.

She sped on into South Vraillent and then across into the village of Presque. She found the village empty. Stores were shut; very few people were to be seen. At the junction with the Gagny Road she turned west, heading for North Beliveau and the spaceport.

There was nobody to be seen, no human activity at all. Sally nudged the snocat forward, down the long straight road to North Beliveau. Up ahead was the KYB tower. She was going to drive as close as possible to the spaceport perimeter. Then she would inspect the shuttles on the blast pan.

In some respects, stealing a shuttle was easier than stealing any other kind of aircraft. You didn't need to have permission from the control tower once you had control of a ship. There weren't any runways that could be blocked, nothing to stop you hitting the initiation switch. Once she found a shuttle that was fueled and ready for the morning flights out, she would take it up and out to the orbiter.

She nosed into a street near the big mass of the Beliveau Detention Center, a dark, terrible place with an evil reputation.

A loud crack sounded somewhere nearby and almost instantaneously the Huski snocat was hurled end over end, tumbling, into the safety barrier along the side of the road. It slid a distance upside down, windows broke, and when it stopped Sally was hurled from the snocat and flung ten feet into a snowbank. Before she got her breath back she was crawling away. The snocat was on fire, flames licking around its engines.

Her breath came back and she got to her feet and almost lost her handgun but she caught it as it fell. Then she was running, still trying to breathe, for the corner of a building.

She dived around it and rolled to the wall. The Huski's hydro tanks went up with a roar and a flash. She peered around the corner. The Huski was nothing but blazing fragments. Then she noticed something else. A slim figure was approaching, running at considerable speed up the snow-lined avenue from the prison.

Sally grew uneasy. She stumbled up an entryway into the building, a large warehouse with offices at the front. Lights had been left on, monitors glowed, office doors swung in the breeze from Sally's entrance. But there were no people. They had abandoned the place in a hurry, hours before.

She heard the sound of steps coming very quickly toward her. She bolted the door and turned the

lock.

A moment later something cannoned into the door. The door mechanism was worked very hard. Then the door began groaning and shaking. Appalled, Sally turned and ran up the stairs behind her and onto an open gallery that overlooked the warehouse space in the rear of the building.

With a scream of tortured metal, the door banged open as the hinges gave and it was ripped down.

The thing was covered in shining plates of translucent material. With a shape like that of a human-sized greyhound wearing orange flowers in its eye sockets. It paused at the bottom of the stairs.

Sally went completely cold inside. But her instincts for survival were still operating. Her gun was in her hand, and her first shot took the thing by surprise, knocking it backward, off its feet.

It sprang back up almost immediately. She shot it again. It shrugged and started up the stairs. Sally kept her finger down and the automatic chewed off eight more shots, all hit the thing, which sagged on the eighth and slumped to its knees a few steps below her.

It twitched a couple of times and then started to move again. Sally screamed and kept firing, hitting it in the head and finally knocking it back down the steps.

It rolled, bumped, and landed on the floor with a thud and was still for a second or two, but then its flesh stirred. The plastic plates of its skin peeled away, and sharp points, like roots, began to shove through. The skin grew taut and yellow.

Sally stumbled past the unkillable thing, reached the door, and looked back.

The body seemed to explode suddenly and a thing like a small tree crossed with an octopus, with dozens of stiff, wirelike tentacles, stood exposed.

Sally screamed and fired again, missing the creature, which started toward her with terrible speed. She squeezed the trigger reflexively, and this time hit the creature square in the central bulb.

It slumped and began to change shape, its components pulling together to form a wormlike body that collapsed to the floor and then flowed toward her.

She turned and ran, through the door and out onto the snow covered street. She turned back the way she'd come and ran through the drifts for a block and soon became exhausted. She stopped running and stood shuddering, looking back. Then she noticed an open gate into a near empty carpark outside a small factory. She ran for the factory, which still had some lights burning inside.

She reached the doors and tried them. They were locked. There was no response from the bell. She looked behind her; the wormlike thing could not be seen, but that didn't mean it wasn't following. She ran, alongside the front of the factory, and found another doorway which she tried and opened.

Inside she ran through a series of office floors and then into a big warehouse space.

She paused, went to an office with a window, and peered out at the street. The parking lot was still lit up, and she could see nothing moving upon it.

Then she saw something wriggle along the entrance to the carpark. It moved on, down the street.

She shivered and sank back against the wall and began to weep, silently, tears running freely down her face.

CHAPTER FORTY

SNUG AND WARM INSIDE A POPTENT IN THE BLACK RUK mountains, Pandi Beshwan slept soundly. Her dreams were soft ones at first. She dreamed that she was at the Saskatch Fair at

Kwaidan. She was with her friends from school, everyone was laughing, everyone was having a great time.

The dream changed, something flickered at the back of her consciousness, an image of her father, his face composed in an effort to prevent his anger from showing. He was always angry with her, so it had seemed to her all her life. She turned her head away and blocked him out.

And then the dream changed again, and took on a weird coloration, a pulsation began. She tossed her head, groaning, protesting.

A face swam upward to the surface beneath her mind's eye. A face like that of a giant lobster, with long feelers that waved about her head. The image was unnaturally bright, possessed of a peculiar lambency.

She wanted to run, to run forever from the lobster headed thing. But her legs would not obey her and the lobster eyes looked at her and she could feel the lobster mind behind those eyes, and then, abruptly, she was in contact with that mind and she saw another image.

She screamed, again and again. A mouth, tipped with lamprey teeth, was devouring the world, devouring the people, everything. The mouth extended back to her father and mother; she saw them clearly, connected to the mouth by long tubes of pink flesh, tubes that grew from their faces, distending them, sucking them in, away.

The mouth broke into a million tubes, flashing through a crowd of slow-moving people and striking them with the force of cobras. The mouths sank into their victims and began to feed.

Several mouths were turned toward her, their rasping teeth ready for her skin. She woke up; someone was screaming. Her breath stuck in her throat, a hand was shaking her. The screaming stopped. She realized that it was she who had been making the noise, and she struggled to sit up and regain her breath.

"It's a mouth. It's going to eat the whole world!" she screamed. Then she recognized the girl, Bruda, and the young man, Sebastian. They were crowded into the pop-tent, Sebastian being half-in and half-out of the entrance.

"What's a mouth dear?" said Bruda Dara.

Pandi stared at her wildly. The dream was crystal clear in her mind, each image had a peculiar fluttering burnished quality so that they shone and would not go away. Her mother and father! They were the source of the mouth, it came from them directly. The Bulmunk knew! Her legs shook together; she wriggled and moaned.

Bruda tried to comfort her. "There, there, it's all right, you're safe now, you're among friends."

Pandi longed to be safe, longed to be safe among friends, more than anything else in the universe she wanted to be safe. But those images would not go away.

The mouth was here now, on this planet. It ate the people, it ate the buildings, it ate the entire city. It would eat them all, wherever they ran to, they were not safe, they could never be safe. The lobster thing had warned her; it knew of her parents' grim fate.

"It knew!" she exclaimed.

"What knew? Indira? What knew, what's the matter, honey?"

A dam in Pandi's mind gave way. She couldn't hold it back any longer. "The thing that saved me in the woods. It knew about my parents, I don't know how it could know that, but it knew. It came into my dream. It's trying to warn me."

"What thing in the woods?"

"A creature the size of a man but with the body of a lobster, it was hideous. But it carried me out of the thickets where I was lost, I know it did. It saved me."

"Is that the mouth you referred to?" said Sebastian.

"No, no that is something else. The thing in the woods is trying to warn me, I—" She stopped. She recalled Sally's dire warning. "If you open your mouth you'll rot in an ITAA jail for twenty years kid, you better believe it!"

But she could not keep silent, not if the mouth was on Saskatch. It had begun with Pramod and Tili, but it was on Saskatch now.

"I have to tell you something... something that I tried to hide, something terrible, something that I think has followed me all the way from the asteroid belt."

"From the asteroid belt!" exclaimed Bruda Dara.

And then Pandi told them, about the Seed; about the silver pumpkin, and about the mysterious illness of Roger Xermin.

When she was finished, Bruda and Sebastian exchanged looks. Bruda thought the girl was raving. Sebastian was not so sure.

"And your companion—Sally you said her name was—did she make it down safely, too?"

"I don't know. She ejected after me, I don't know where she came down."

"Describe her."

"Tall, blond, kind of athletic."

Sebastian looked at Bruda again. Dara wore a heavy frown.

"I think we'd better go and talk to Rieben. Let's take her over there. We'll see what Rieben makes of it."

At Rieben's tent they found the old man was still asleep. He had slept most of these last few hours, waiting out the storm.

Yen Cho shook him gently to wakefulness.

Rieben cried out and shivered uncontrollably. "The Bulmunk!" he said suddenly in a loud voice. "It was the Bulmunk. It was sending me a message in my dreams."

Sebastian and Bruda stared at one another, then at the girl standing outside the tent.

"That's funny, and I don't think it's a coincidence," said Sebastian.

Pandi was squeezed in beside Rieben.

"Tell him your story, Indira," said Bruda. "Tell Mr. Arntage everything."

Pandi did so and as she did Rieben felt a new kind of chill pass through him. "Lashtri III," he whispered, "the Vang Oormlikoowl."

"What's that?" said Sebastian.

"There was a Laowon colony on Lashtri III, during the era of Red Seygfán, more than two thousand years ago, terrestrial. An alien lifeform attacked the colony and destroyed it. The Laowon responded by burning the planet down to bedrock with nuclear weapons."

"This lifeform, what did it look like? Was it humanoid?" said Sebastian.

"That isn't clear, I'm afraid. The Laowons never captured any of them. It was said to have many different shapes, of wildly different size and scale."

"And you think that's what she's talking about?"

Rieben nodded. "I saw the same things, the same images in my dreams. The Bulmunk, I tell you, it's close by and it was trying to warn us."

"You mean it can sense this alien menace?" said Bruda

"I think so, I think it must."

Rieben struggled to his feet, pushed himself into his parka and snowboots, and stumbled out of the poptent. It was cold, and dark, and the dawn was still an hour or so away.

The others followed; they stood around Rieben. Pandi felt her tears freezing on her cheek and worked with the back of her space mitt to brush them away.

Rieben tried to open out his mind to the Bulmunk, but nothing happened, no alien thoughts or images impinged upon his mind. He opened his eyes again. "I don't know. I was trying to contact it, but I can't seem to get through."

The others stared mutely at him.

And suddenly a tall shape appeared at the edge of the clearing, the starlight sent little gleams off the cold chitinous outer surfaces.

"Look!"

They gave a collective gasp. The thing stepped back, withdrew into the shelter of the thickets.

"The Bulmunk is here. I was right. But it can't contact us telepathically for some reason."

"Perhaps humans are more receptive when they're asleep," hazarded Bruda Dara.

"That sounds like a good possibility," agreed Rieben.

"What shall we do, we don't have a communicator. We don't even have a radio."

"We have to get out of the mountains, get to the highway. We'll have to walk." Rieben didn't voice another nagging worry. In an emergency, if he hadn't communicated with Arntage Tower in say three or four hours, a chopper would have been sent to look for him. The storm had pretty much died away twelve hours previously, but no chopper had come. The omission was disturbing. There could be no higher priority inside Arntage Tower's executive suite than to see that Arnage himself was alive and protected. "Something's seriously wrong in the city, I'm convinced. Let's eat some breakfast and start walking. We need to find out what's going on." They struck camp and ate a quick meal before setting out.

Rieben began to weaken seriously about two hours later, when they had covered just eight difficult kilometers and were not even halfway to the road. Soon, without necessary heroics, he collapsed. They gathered around him and took emergency measures. He was wrapped in a sleeping bag and then put over Yen Cho's shoulder.

Yen Cho managed the next seven kilometers that way before his strength began to fail him. Sebastian took up the load in his stead. Arntage weighed less than sixty kilos, but when the snow was deep, carrying him through it was tough work nonetheless.

After a kilometer of it Sebastian was tired; after his third he had to stop. Bruda took the old man over her shoulder and carried him onward. Yen Cho was still recovering his strength, but he kept close to the Master in case he should be dropped.

Bruda managed another kilometer and then had to stop. They paused and blend was warmed for Rieben and poured into his mug. Bruda took a diagnostic reading from him and found that his stress factor was up, of course, but there were no complications from bruising or muscle spasm where he was

being carried.

Then Bruda looked up and saw the Bulmunk again.

They stared at the thing. It stared back. Then it waved one of its massive upper limbs.

"It wants something," said Bruda. "I can feel it."

Bruda stepped toward the Bulmunk. It waved again and stood its ground. Bruda went closer, and it slowly backed away, still beckoning. Bruda followed it and it led her a short distance to a small cave with a gruesome cache.

Inside a sagging poptent she found a dead walker jock, apparently shot for his load. Protected from carrion eaters, his body had rotted slowly in the darkness for years until the remaining flesh was but a patchwork on the bones. A big bullet hole was visible through the skull.

Yen Cho and Sebastian joined her.

"A walker jock who didn't make it."

Beside the poptent was a six pack of fuel cans. Full.

After a brief inspection of the surroundings, they zipped up the dead walker jock and resumed the march to the road. Yen Cho took the Master once more.

But the Bulmunk emerged from the thickets and waved its arms to stop them.

They stood, rooted, while the Bulmunk passed close by and went to the six pack of fuel cans. It pointed to the fuel but did not touch it. It pointed at them and then it pointed at the six pack and then it pointed to the trail.

"It wants us to take the fuel pack."

Yen Cho looked at Bulmunk, then looked at the fuel, then turned to Pandi. "You bring it." He turned again and set off toward the trail.

They had reached the road two kilometers later, at midmorning. There was an unheard of amount of traffic on the road. A dozen snocats had passed them.

The limousine was gone, but they were not surprised. They stood by the side of the road and warmed some more blend for Rieben. For his own part, Rieben was quite content to lie on the snowbank while his blend was warmed. He knew that he had to conserve what strength remained to him through the coming ordeal.

It was clear that something very grave was happening in the city. The girl's story fitted in perfectly with what little was known about the Precursion to Lashtri III. Rieben had once read widely in Laowon literature and historical material, so he was familiar with those aspects of the Lashtri III matter that had become important in later Laowon writings. Among these was the "Exculpation of the Precursion," subject of long poems about the guilt and expiation of those who unleashed the thing on an unwitting world.

Rieben was almost certain that Saskatch was under a similar attack and that survival probably meant getting off the planet. The ITAA would have to react by calling out the prime battle fleet to reduce the entire world to ensure the eradication of the ancient alien lifeform. Anyone caught on the surface would die in the nuclear fires.

When he had finished the blend, Rieben got out of the sleeping bag and resumed walking with the others along the side of the road. The snow here was beaten down by the heavy traffic. They soon came upon a stranded fuel-less snocat, a white Deerbuk 550 that could seat six people, two abreast.

Yen Cho fitted a fuel can to the input and started the big 550 hp engines by hotwiring them under the

hood.

As they gathered in the cab, the Bulmunk lurched out of the thickets toward them, reached out, and pulled open the door to the rear seating section. Pandi screamed and shrank away, but the Bulmunk just climbed into the spare seat and pulled the door shut behind it.

Rieben stared in wonder. The Bulmunk sat there as calmly as if it had ridden in technological transports like the big Deerbuk 550 all its life.

Pandi was shivering, trying not to look at the massive thing that sat in the chair next to her. The Bulmunk was seven-feet tall, the size of two men. The others stared at it, then at each other.

"What are we going to do with it?" said Sebastain.

"It wants to come with us."

"That much is clear; everything else is not," said Rieben. "But I have a plan. It will risk all our lives, but may get someone off this world in time."

Bruda was shaken by his words. "This is that serious then?"

Rieben leveled his gaze. "I'm afraid so. From what I know of the ancient lifeform, one thing is certain: it is very aggressive and swift to attack. We must get out to the Baada ship and warn them."

"You mean take a shuttle flight?"

"Well, in a way, yes. We will have to take the Arntage booster, if it's still on the blast pan and in working order. I will pilot it; I am an accredited pilot in four grades of spacecraft."

At which point their survival would depend on the strength of his ancient, feeble body.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

BY MIDNIGHT THERE WERE ALMOST CONTINUAL HATCHINGS of fresh battleforms in the northern part of the city. In singles, small groups, and entire floors of the prison, they awoke. There was urgent need of them, the demands of the Higher Form had to be met.

Human herdstock was required now that the prison and its surroundings had been exhausted for host-conversion purposes. A group of female humans had been transformed into factories for converter modules, filling a cell in the prison and producing converters by the sack load.

The terminals at the spaceport were used as holding pens, convenient to the space transport system.

And north of the bridge, in the streets of the oldest part of the human concentration-reef, a sizable number of fugitive humans was cut off from escape by the battleforms on the bridge itself.

To either side of the old human concentration-reef, lines of fugitives were strung out along the banks of the river, escaping slowly to the east and the west.

More than two thousand people were still stuck in Old Town, hardly daring to move. The greyhound men were on the bridge, visible occasionally as they went about their unguessable activities. Occasionally, a bright-green light erupted. Slender figures could be seen silhouetted briefly.

Militia men on the far side of the river took advantage of such opportunities to pour in sniper fire. Every so often the field guns situated up on the hills would try to punish the snipers for their temerity.

Trapped in Old Town, the people hid in the houses, in the cellars, some even ventured into the sewers. A few more daring souls even tried sneaking back up Cotes des Neiges Avenue. All were shot when they turned the big bend and started west at the top of the hill.

In the prison, meanwhile, there were still some ripening cocoons as the manytappers matured. There

were also cocoons for holluschicks now, despite the protests of the Military Form. The Higher Form was lonely. And the gravid reproductives in its lobes were a constant torment. It desperately wanted the stimulations of sexual congress with its little holluschicks.

As reinforcement battleforms hatched, they were grouped and then sent into immediate action to round up the host things required for the Higher Form. To herd the humans back to the spaceport, the Military Form deployed most of the battleforms on the river bank on either side of the bridge. They advanced, driving the people out of the Old Town and up Cotes des Neiges to Spacetown, where they would be corralled and stored in the terminal halls.

At a shrill beep in their communicator bulbs, the battle-beasts surged into the Old Town. Disturbed from their hiding places, people ran from them, but were not attacked or killed unless they offered armed resistance. Instead the battlebeasts came on, slowly and methodically, shaking down the buildings for human fugitives who were seized and simply hurled forward, up Cotes des Neiges Avenue and away from the river. Soon they approached Dorval Street and the granite walls of the old police building.

Aboard the orbiter the ascent of five shuttles was noted. There was still no coherent communications with the surface, and the TV signals received from the five o'clock news had been very worrying.

Communications with the shuttles were merely computer-driven code, no face to face with the pilots. No video at all. Orbiter Command kept trying to raise somebody in the spaceport, but received no answer. The whole affair was very puzzling. Orbiter Command notified the ITAA that there was a Class Three Emergency, probably due to storm weather conditions. The ITAA warship Tomahawk was rescheduled to make a routine visit within five hundred hours, standard Terrestrial.

The orbiter's commander, an ITAA Burochief from New Ghana, had only a few months left in his incredibly lucrative position. In his hands was the switch on the valve that controlled most of the trade in TA45. He noted a computer prompt to post a Class Two Emergency. That would bring immediate response and a patrol craft would visit. It would also freeze all travel in and out of the system for months and would lead to an ITAA inspection. A change in ITAA status for Saskatch was only a whisker away. It had to be avoided at all costs. Otherwise the ITAA enforcement arm, the Authority Police, the dreaded APs, would be in, and once that arm of the ITAA got into a deal like the one on Saskatch, other players would soon be reduced to picking up the crumbs.

The orbiter commander was determined to keep that from happening; the Gracelyn, an Aldebaran trader on the long haul out from the Homestars, was due within twenty-six hours. She would drop into the Baada arrival point, dump velocity in gray-waves, and then use ion drives to push herself into the inner-system orbit required for ease of transit between the ship and the orbiter.

A lot of shuttle flights were scheduled. A lot of TA45 was sitting down there on the spaceport. The orbiter was crowded with anxious, wealthy merchants and traders.

Orbiter Command overrode the computer's demand for a Class Two Emergency.

Penetration through the structure patterns of the host thing concentration-reef was not difficult. The battlebeasts moved steadily through the Old Town, dragging out the humans wherever they were hidden and pushing them forward, up the cold dark cobbles of Cotes des Neiges Avenue.

There were pockets of resistance, but the battleforms included a dozen who were armed with rifles and shotguns. They would provide covering fire while others rushed any impudent humans who dared to fight back and destroyed them.

By twelve-thirty A.M. a large herd of humans was flowing up Cotes des Neiges.

The battlebeasts came to the big, stone building on Dorval Street.

Defensive rifle fire swept the corners of the street.

The battle was begun.

The beasts with rifles took up positions around the police building and began peppering it with accurate fire. Under cover of this fire assault groups of three ran forward and scaled the walls and began to pry the window bars out of the stone surrounds.

The defenders ran to the windows. The things outside fired shotguns in through the windows, the defenders fired back. Several of the greyhound men were hit and driven off the wall. But three of Griks's team were killed when another of the things scaled the north wall, broke through a door on the roof, and gained entry. It caught the men running up the stairs toward it and cut them down with its shotgun.

Griks and the others on the lower floors heard the screams and the shots.

"They're on the roof!" said Carney Waxx. Carney was still swathed in bandages, but he had also been given back his handgun, the big magnum he'd had for years. Akander had picked up a spare rifle.

"I'm afraid it's worse than that—they're inside," said Griks. "Take the left-hand stairs; be careful. I'll take the right."

Griks and Corporal Marsh went up their side, Carney and Akander climbed theirs. The battleform ran into them on the landing at the third floor. Guns roared. They dived back for cover; the battleform didn't. It came around the corner, shotgun pumping a fresh round into the breech, and Carney hit it with a round in the head that rocked it back and spoiled its aim. The WAKmaster shotgun shell went wild.

Then Corporal Marsh cut the thing in half with a burst from his automatic. He almost cut Carney and Akander in half, too, but they'd jumped for cover just in time.

Akander, however, took a graze on the buttock, a wound that caused considerable discomfort and began to bleed. While Nicola Moulin brought a medic kit to Akander, the others examined the dead thing.

The torso had been cut at the waist, the legs falling away to the side. The viscera had spilled and the body had landed face down.

Carney turned it over. And jumped back with a yelp of fright. Something was emerging from the dead thing's neck, crawling out of a gaping cavity under the jaw. It was like a snake, or a worm, with an unpleasant off-white coloration.

Guns fired again, destroying the thing, scattering it.

Carney stared at the remains, his pulse pounding, eyes bulging, but no further movements occurred. Both the host and its ruler were dead. He shivered once more at the memory of the slithering, wormlike thing. "What the hell is this? These things aren't human. They're not robots."

Griks was examining the carcass of the thing more closely. "They're some kind of alien lifeform. We're being attacked by an alien lifeform!"

"There was something moving inside it. It was parasitizing it!" said Carney in tones of horrified awe.

"Maybe, but whatever it was it isn't moving now," Griks said. He hadn't caught much more than a slight movement before the others destroyed it. He wasn't entirely convinced.

Their thoughts were interrupted by more gunfire from the floor below, and more shouting. They started down when they heard a thump from above.

"Another one got in upstairs," said Corporal Marsh.

There were screams downstairs now, and more firing. Griks swallowed heavily. This was beyond his experience. He wondered what to do.

Carney and Akander took cover, Griks slid to the other side as the second battleform from the roof

jumped down the stairs, entire flights at a time.

Corporal Marsh took it down with his automatic. It had no weapons of its own. Marsh looked up. "I think I'd better go shut that door off, sir, stop these bastards from getting in."

Griks nodded. "Right, carry on, Corporal."

They went down again, heard more gunfire and screaming. They paused on the landing.

Nicola Moulin ran out from the corridor, and started down the stairs. Henry Young came right behind her.

Then came a battleform. It leaped on Young and bore him down and moved to decapitate him, when Akander and Carney shot it simultaneously, knocking it away. Griks jumped forward to stand over Henry and pumped rifle rounds into the thing, one after the other, until it ceased to move. It had absorbed nine shots by that point.

They pulled Henry Young away from the thing, which now began to twitch and leap on the floor as sharp points like spines started rising through the flesh. Then a thing with a body like a small tree but supported on dozens of stiff, wirelike tentacles, emerged from the dead creature and started toward them with terrible rapidity.

A lunging tentacle raked across Griks's hand, delivering a shock that was almost electrical. Griks gasped and jumped back, toppling over, even as Carney hit the thing with a shot from his magnum and its bone-colored bulb disintegrated violently, spraying ochre fluids behind it. The rest collapsed, the material still twitching and jumping on the floor.

Henry Young was helped to his feet. He was shaken but still game. Griks's arm was tingling, red welts were beginning to appear around the wrist and along the thumb.

"They've broken the window bars. There'll be more getting in," Henry gasped.

Carney and Akander looked at each other, then both started down the stairs.

Griks saw them go, started to call out after them, then changed his mind. His hand hurt like hell. "I think we may have to abandon this place. I'm beginning to think we can't hold them. It's too big, and they're too many and too hard to kill."

The sound of gunfire came from above and also from below.

"And they don't mind taking casualties." Griks followed the others down the stairs.

"How can we get out?" said Judge Feinberg, who was waiting on the landing at the ground floor.

"There's a large sewer pipe near here," said Henry Young. "It carries the sluice from the Siskoo Sawmill down to the river."

Griks had been prepared for a fight, but not with creatures who didn't seem to mind dying. A lot of gunfire came from the top floor, then a body came hurtling down the stairwell to land at their feet with a tremendous thud. It was Corporal Marsh. He was very, very dead.

Bullets followed him, gouged holes in the floor, and sent them all diving down the stairs into the building's cellars. The decision had been made for them.

"What if we can't get out this way?" said Judith Feinberg.

"Then we're trapped." Griks shrugged.

"Come on!" yelled Henry Young.

They ran. The things were coming down the stairs fast. Carney and Akander were already in the cellar, and they had managed to unscrew and open the sewer grate that was set beneath the washrooms

of the old police building. The opening was two feet on a side, a square inspection portal with a ladder leading down to the main sluice.

"It doesn't smell too bad," said Judge Feinberg.

"Hurry, Judith, get in the sewer," said Griks.

There was explosive gunfire right above them, with screams afterward. Two more of Griks's team tumbled down the stairs into the cellar. Then they collapsed and fell as they were shot from behind. A battleform lunged in right alter. They shot it down, and shot the thing that grew out of it. But by then another battleform was crouched by the door, and it sprayed the room with fire from a shotgun.

By then Judge Feinberg had been joined in the sewer by Carney Waxx and Nicola Moulin. Griks jumped down next, and assisted Akander, who was suffering severely from his wounded buttock. Henry Young fell in after him, and that was that. The next man was yanked back out of the hole and beheaded by the battleforms.

Carney used his magnum to keep the battleforms from jumping down into the sewer, while the others ran down the tube into the darkness. The sewer was five-feet wide and high, so they had to run crouched over. It was tiring work, and the sewer grew less sweet within fifty meters where still active residential pipes joined in, but they kept up a fast pace none the less.

The battlebeasts stopped sticking their heads through the sewer aperture after Carney shot the third one. Their communicator bulbs rasped and beeped. They turned to other tasks.

Carney waited a few seconds, but when they still didn't show themselves he ran on down the sewer, crouching over, eyes seeking the others who had gone ahead. He caught up with them about one hundred meters farther on inside a larger sluice, one a good eight-feet high.

They made as much haste as they were capable of. Judge Feinberg was a regular jogger, but she was soon tired, then she was slipping into exhaustion. Griks ran at her side, helping her over small mounds of debris, ready to catch her if she stumbled.

At last they reached the point where the inlet from the sawmill entered. They found an inspection door set in the side of the sewer wall. They kicked the door open and tumbled out into a utility room, filled with sluice-clearing equipment. They scrambled up some stone steps to the work floor of the sawmill, dominated by the central complex saw, which bulked up the ceiling. A few lights were burning, but a quick scout of the place revealed nobody else around.

Griks checked the view out the front-office windows. People were streaming past the front gates of the Sawmill, running up Cotes des Neiges Avenue. Someone was scrambling over the high front gates. There were shots and his body was suddenly plucked away and dropped out of sight.

The battleforms came into view, farther down the avenue, on the steep part of the climb. They used gun butts and feet to herd the people ahead of them. More people surged about the gates, which began to shake.

"They're going to break in here, and the things are going to follow them," said Griks.

"Why do they want the people?" said Judge Feinberg. "Why won't they leave us alone?" The judge was starting to crack.

"I think we better find a way out the back. We can't fight those things and stay alive for very long," said Carney.

"Mr. Waxx is correct," said Griks. "How can we get out of here without attracting attention?"

"The sluice," said Henry Young, pointing up the length of the sawmill's work floor. "It goes out the back, curves up the hill, and then drops down to the pumping station by the river below Presque Village."

"Good idea," said Griks.

The sluice entered in a large trough built of rough wooden planks wired together in a U-shape five-feet deep.

"Come on, the gradient isn't too bad," said Carney, and he started up.

After a brief hesitation they followed him, Griks coming last, still helping Judith Feinberg.

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

IT WAS COLD AND IT WAS BORING IN THE PRISON. WHEN the humans had been assembled in the spaceport terminal the Hostmaster decided on a whim to visit the place and view the herd.

Naturally the freshly hatched manytappers went, too, a cluster of smoothly shaped creatures, like bowling pins with tentacle clumps growing along the body carapace. They moved on twelve stout little legs, each tipped with a pair of retractile claws.

As they moved they caressed the Hostmaster with their tentacles and kept up a bright rain of chatter. It was even perhaps excessively so, but that reflected the low numbers in the court. With only a dozen manytappers, the primary disposition was to cast them evenly with half optimists, a quarter pessimists, and a quarter with random and foolish opinions.

The Magenta Point, leader of the court and chief of the Optimists, commented favorably upon the snow. "It is good to taste this freezing water when we are young again, and comparatively insensitive to the aesthetic principle. We shall enjoy it the more!"

The Hostmaster found it difficult to enjoy dragging the lobes through freezing slush. The tentacles were blue with cold. It grumbled. Its gravid lobes were painful. "When, oh when, will my holluschicks be ready?"

"Soon, soon, the pretty ones will be here. The soft and sensuous ones will be among us."

"I want to be stroked so badly," moaned the Hostmaster, easing its lobes through the slush.

"You will be stroked! The holluschicks will make everything well again."

"What might divert me until they are hatched and my gravid lobes can be discharged?"

"Let us have a tasting of the host things!" suggested the Cyan Point.

"A marvelous suggestion," chimed in the Blue Point.

"Yes, of course," agreed the Hostmaster. "We shall taste them by age and size and general disposition."

"Yes, of course," chorused the Optimists.

Even the Pessimists, lead by the Ebony Point, conceded that it sounded like a good way to take the next meal.

The Military Form watched the higher forms depart from the prison with mixed feelings. Higher forms could be such a pain in the processes!

Now there were holluschicks to hatch. When they did, they would caper like the sexy little things they were and the Hostmaster would slide lobes toward them. The reproductives would be fertilized and then there would be young.

Young that would have to be inserted into the host things to live. Once there were young then the Imperial Principles in Regard to the Guarding of Young would come into effect. All other lifeforms larger

than a mimu would be slaughtered or converted to laborforms. Only herds of foodforms and laborforms would be retained.

All of which meant the Military Form would have to waste precious time and attention. An immense effort would have to be mounted to produce total expungement of feral host things, an effort that would be largely a waste!

It was imperative that they seize the incoming interstellar ship and depart the system and hide somewhere in the far reaches of the galaxy. As far as the Military Form knew, they were lone representatives of the Gods of Axon-Neurone in the current time span.

The humans and their old rivals, the Laowon, were spread far and wide through the galaxy according to the data that the Secondary Form had rooted out of the KYB computers.

If the Gods of Axon-Neurone were to survive to rule as they should, the Military Form would have to seize that ship. Failure could not be countenanced. Failure would mean annihilation and the end of everything.

Once the fugitives climbed out of the sluice at the top of the slope, things got somewhat easier. Climbing out of the sluice had been almost too much for Judge Feinberg, but Oriks and Moulin gave her assistance, and even Carney Waxe lent a hand on the scaffolding that pegged the sluice to the brow of the hill.

The street lamps were still lit in Gagny. There were neons in the shopping centers, but no home lights. The town center was dark and devoid of life.

They found a car in a side street but couldn't start it. Then they found a snocat but it was broken down, too.

Akander grumbled; his whole leg was growing oddly numb as an effect of his buttock wound. He was using his rifle as a crutch but it wasn't much good for that kind of thing.

They continued to stumble northward, and after an hour or so left Gagny behind, and wound their way up into North Beliveau on Blue Lake Road, not Gagny Road itself, which bore more toward the northwest and the warehouse district along the edge of the spaceport.

During this time they saw no one and heard only occasional shots and flurries of shots, coming from the west and the south. The whole city north of the Cote des Neiges was empty of people it seemed.

They heard the field guns go into action again, and they took shelter nervously in a vanished family's living room and listened tensely to the thuds of the distant shellbursts.

The house had three stories and shared one wall with another house in a row that extended up the street for six houses. Across the street was a similar row, but of smaller houses, and beyond them, just up Blue Lake Road, a shopping precinct.

The guns they heard were firing on the KWZ building, snuffing out any vestiges of the TV stations that had been housed there. The transmitter field down in Larchmont had already been pounded to scrap.

No communications offworld were to be allowed. But ammunition for the field guns was running low. To find more, a force was sent across the bridge to seize the blue-glass tower that had been identified as a center of military response within the host thing concentration-reef.

The expedition met unexpectedly stiff opposition. An impudent force of human sharpshooters had scattered through the damaged buildings in the central section and taken up good firing positions. A storm of fire lashed down on the bridge.

Eight battleforms were lost in the first wave that rushed over the bridge. Ten were lost in the next. Thirty-two made it across safely, however, and began to clear the sharpshooters from their positions with

impeccable imperial technique.

Another forty were ordered out of guard positions in the north, where the human presence was negligible, and sent south to reinforce the party moving toward the police building.

In the house on Blue Lake Road the sudden flare up of small arms fire was a distant roar, a metal surf, echoing from the walls of the downtown towers.

In near planetary space, where the orbiter hung above the equator south of Beliveau City, the shuttles began to mate with the orbiter docking frame. The orbiter commander continued to ignore the security prompts from the orbiter computer.

The battleforms assaulting the orbiter were led by the Secondary Form, which had been promoted to its fullness. The plan was the Military Form's, however, and it depended on the presumed reluctance of the humans to attack their own ships.

Fortunately this reluctance was evidenced very clearly. The humans aboard the orbiter, a big spinning torus, were confused about what was happening, and they simply failed to react.

The first three shuttles were docked, the other two stood off. When the shuttle doors opened, battleforms emerged that raced through the orbiter killing the crew and passengers wherever they found them. A handful, including the orbiter commander himself, were spared and herded into a single room for conversion or food purposes.

A message was beamed groundward to the Military Form.

In the house on Blue Lake Road up in North Beliveau, Griks and Moulin examined Akander in the light of a flashlamp they'd found in the house.

The power was out all across the north section of the city now. The transmission wires were down as a result of the fighting in Downtown. The water was still running though, and they were able to clean the wound and apply antiseptic spray. Afterward Akander lay down and went to sleep on a bed in a room on the first floor. A young boy's room, filled with toys and sports mementos, banners for the Vraillent Tigers covered one wall. Ice skates hung nearby. Akander went quickly to sleep. In another room Judith Feinberg was also asleep.

Carney Waxx was trying to scratch under the bandages. His nose and his scalp itched something terrible. The bandages were getting pretty dirty, too, but it was unlikely that they'd be replaced all that soon.

Carney had four shots left in his magnum. In the light of what they now knew about what they were up against they were precious shots indeed. Akander had two dozen rounds for his rifle, Judith Feinberg had a full clip of twelve in the small handweapon she'd been carrying, Griks had less than ten left for his rifle.

Just killing one of those things could take all four of Carney's precious rounds. Carney cradled the gun. He'd had it for years, this pistol, even though it was really too big and too flashy. He'd only ever used it in anger once before, years back now in the early boom days for runners. He'd missed his man then but scared him off enough to let him make his escape and make it into Boldover with his load.

Still, he had a fondness for it, just because it had been around all these years. Not much else had stuck to him, but the gun was still his. And now he had really put it to use. The thought of the things again, made him shiver. He absolutely had to get some more ammunition.

He held the gun with both hands, feeling strength flow from it. "I'm going out to look for some ammunition," he announced. "I've only got four rounds left."

"You're sure you want to?" said Griks.

"There has to be a gun store in this section. Every section up here has one, everybody hunts at the weekends. This is real old-style Saskatch up here."

"Well I guess we can't stop you. Try not to let anything follow you back."

Carney sniffed, and then scuttled down the road toward the shopping section.

There were half-a-dozen small stores, a grocery, a periodicals and video place, a repair house, and a gun and tackle place. Locked and bolted. Carney examined the door cautiously. Sometimes they used booby traps, but it seemed to be just a matter of a lock and a locked bolt.

He stared up and down the Street. There didn't seem to be anything watching. He shot the lock and then the bolt, the two blasts sounding very loud, echoing in the empty road.

He pulled the door open and plunged into the darkened interior.

What if the place didn't have slugs for a WAKmagnum? A sickening thought. If they didn't have ammo for his big, fancy magnum then he'd have wasted two shots to get in here. Then in the gloom he saw a rifle on the wall and relaxed. The shop sold rifles, too, so he'd take a rifle if he had to.

He blundered his way to the rear of the counter and looked along the racked ammunition boxes. It was dark but he had a pocket light built into his anorak and he used this to hunt for green WAK boxes. He found WAK shotgun shells galore. WAK were the most popular shotguns on Saskatch, the company was famous for them. What they were not so famous for was their line of big, flashy handguns, like the magnum.

Carney couldn't find anything WAK in the handgun section and he'd just about given up hope when he stumbled on a box of WAK magnum exploders, stuck in with rifle ammo on a rack above his head. He clucked happily and examined the box. Quickly he reloaded his gun and checked it, then put the box into his pocket.

When he stood up though he found himself staring down the barrel of a shotgun, and behind the gun was one of the things.

His breath froze in his throat. The thing regarded him with those wobbly flowerlike eyes. It kept the barrel pointed directly at his chest. He didn't doubt that it would shoot him before he could get to his own gun.

It stepped back and opened the door, then gestured for Carney to walk outside. Carney edged forward, got to the door, and slid slowly outside with the thing's gun barrel pressed close to his chest.

The thing followed, its glistening armor plates rustled slightly, its head held at a queer, inhuman angle.

There was a sudden very loud noise, repeated twice, and the thing was gone, toppled, the head blown to fragments.

A young woman holding a gun in both hands, wearing a Saskatch hat and a big coat, was standing on the far side of the doorway.

He picked up the fallen thing's shotgun and backed away. Sure enough, points appeared in the creature's body and the armor plates peeled off. The skin ruptured, and the nerve parasite itself appeared. Carney shot it and destroyed it.

He turned to the woman. She had a strange expression on her face, as if she were sleep walking, frozen, beyond shock. "Thanks, you saved my life, lady. I owe you one."

Her face came alive. An odd performance—she was a beautiful woman, but there was a hardness, a coldness visible in her eyes.

"Maybe you can do the same for me," she said. "Those shots will draw more of them. I've been watching them. They're pretty predictable."

"I've got what I came for."

"Let's go then," she gestured for him to follow her.

They went back to the house on the corner. She knew where he'd come from.

"You were watching us?"

"I saw you come up the road. There aren't many of the things around here. Now there will be more of them coming to investigate our shots, you can count on that."

CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

AFTER REVIEWING THE HERD OF HOST THINGS, A SELECTION was made for a tasting. Screaming people disappeared into the overlapping manubriums of the higher forms and were devoured. Only the bones and a few scraps of indigestibles were spat out.

Pleasantly sated, the higher forms returned to the detention center, now warm and comfortable with fires going in the big coal boilers. The holluschicks were about to hatch. The Hostmaster was in a frenzy of anticipation.

More than once during the feeding, the Magenta Point had suggested that the manytappers undertake to reduce the Hostmaster's "burden" by conjoining with the swollen lobes.

"Perhaps if we were to lighten your load a little, my Hostmaster, we could ease those distended lobes!"

And indeed the lobes were stiffly inflated, with the rampant reproductives. But sexual congress with manytappers would engender manytapper young. Raucous points of view, discordant voices in the court! The Hostmaster huffed gloomily to itself before refusing the offer. The lobes were painful, but it would wait until the little holluschicks were hatched. Holluschicks had no sex identity themselves, no point of view either, which made them less than fascinating intellectual company, but indispensable in the matter of discharging the lobes in reproductive safety.

And now the holluschick capsules had hardened and turned black with scarlet tips. It was almost time.

"Now, my Hostmaster," said the Blue Point, "if you will indulge the whims of your court, let us in on the secret of your own preferences in the matter. Which end of the host thing spectrum did you prefer from our tasting of them."

"The younger ones, the ones with more muscle than fat."

"More muscle than fat," chorused the Optimists.

Sally had binoculars with infrared scan, and she kept a constant watch on their surroundings.

When they were still a couple of kilometers distant and had not yet spotted the fugitive humans, she picked up the pair of battleform scouts coming down Blue Lake Road at the customary Olympic sprinter speed.

The fugitives hid themselves in the back yard of a house and watched nervously from cover as the things sped past, heading due south. Then from a second-floor window Sally discovered more of the things, a squad of six, in nearby Fontayne, breaking into houses in search of people, pushing a small herd of captives ahead, leashed and bound. People who had scoffed at their neighbors and stayed in their houses in Fontayne and Vrailent. The trouble was confined to that damn prison, so they had thought. Now they stumbled toward that prison and one or another form of hideous death; the conversion program had been stepped up. More than eight hundred new battleforms were ripening inside the

detention center.

But the field guns were out of ammunition, and a more or less continual firefight was still sputtering in the stretches of the city to the south and east of the downtown, where the militiamen continued to hold out against the relatively small forces of battleforms that were available to send against them. Without the field guns to oust them, the militiamen were proving a stubborn foe. The Military Form's opinion of human fighting abilities had risen considerably, along with the casualties among the battleforms engaged on that front.

From Blue Lake Road, the fugitives followed the snowy ruts of the western lane. Up ahead was the spaceport, with the winking warning lights on their towers high in the sky, among the stars.

And now they were close to the spaceport line. They could see across the vast white expanse to the lights of the airport, red and whites and friendly ambers, still winking kilometers away.

Dotted across the spaceport itself were the white and red lights of the blast-pan sites, most of which still had power.

To the south loomed a district of warehouses and even larger structures, with corporate graphics and security fences. Between those buildings long straight avenues ran due north and south.

They crouched together in a small corner store on one of the avenues. The front door had been broken open, torn off its hinges and thrown outside. The interior had been disturbed. Snow was everywhere.

"There's the spaceport. What are we going to do?" said Carney.

"We've got to stop moving soon. I'm not sure I can do much more of this." Akander sounded exhausted.

"We can't stop here, we're too close to where they're coming from," said Sally.

"What? You know where they're coming from?" said Griks.

She flushed, suddenly confused. "The prison, the Beliveau Detention Center," she said in a whisper.

"Of course, we knew that."

"That's not far from here?" said Akander in disgust. "You mean we're closer to them than we were out on Blue Lake Road."

"Yes."

"That depresses the hell out of me. You've had me walking for hours, and with a bad leg, and I'm nearer to them than I was?" Akander was mortally disgusted.

"There's only one way to get out of here alive," said Sally.

"And what's that?" said Carney.

"Only way to survive is to get out of this system. This place is finished. We need to get to a Baada-drive ship."

"You're out of your mind. Those things are running the spaceport now," said Akander.

"I don't need them to take a shuttle up," the woman said with a calm conviction that betrayed the licensed space pilot.

"But what if they want to stop you?" said Judith Feinberg. "From what I've seen of them, they might certainly try."

"It doesn't matter, believe me. If you stay on this planet the things will have you."

She also said this with a lot of conviction.

"I've been studying them, you see." She gestured toward the distant bulk of the prison. "And you know something, there seem to be fewer of them around than there were earlier. I wonder if it means they're up to something."

"Or maybe they just sent them south into the rest of the city?" said Carney.

"Which means this might be the best chance for just walking in there and grabbing a ship and taking off."

"You're crazy," muttered Akander.

"Look, I'm not forcing you to come. I'll go on my own if I have to."

Griks was still puzzled. "Why shouldn't we just head north and get out of the city?"

The woman gave him a level look. There was something ever so slightly insane there. A sparkle of damnation in that blue. "Well, first of all because they've blocked the north-bound roads. And, secondly, because they've got parties out in the northern sectors now hunting for people. They're taking a lot of people back to the detention center."

She held out the binoculars. "Take a look with these.

You can see them over there, to the east and the north."

"You know something," said Carney Waxx, clapping his hands together firmly. "I'm with you. Let's go and get a shuttle and get the hell off this planet. It's too damn dangerous here. It's time for a long vacation, somewhere else." He gave Griks and Feinberg a defiant look.

"I know what you're thinking, Griks, and I want you to know that you're right—I ain't coming back here. It ain't worth it trying to buck the Fixer Brothers and the Tusseaus."

"It's all right, Mr. Waxx," said Judith Feinberg calmly. "I'm for taking a shuttle ride, too. This is more than just a raid. These things are collecting people for a reason, and I don't want to be collected."

Griks shrugged. There was a point in that. "There's one problem, though. Five shuttles went up earlier today. They must have gone to the orbiter. If they took the orbiter, we can't go there."

"We won't," said Sally with a toss of her head. "We'll go further out, to the Baada points. We've got to get to the ship first—that means getting to the Baada points."

"Can the shuttles get out that far?"

Sally hunched her shoulders. "Most of them. They're outsystem ships mostly, bigger than they need to be."

"I take it that you know something about flying spaceships?" said Akander. "Because I don't think anyone else here has much idea of how to."

"I do," said Sally flatly. "I don't carry my pilot's license with me, but I've flown every grade of space vessel there is except a Baada liner."

Akander snorted. She looked more like a fashion model than a space pilot, and Akander believed you could always tell what a woman was by how she looked.

"Well"—she shrugged—"you don't have to come. If you feel safer hiding here or trying to get on the north roads, then go on, do it. I'm going for a shuttle. I don't need anybody else, but I will take passengers."

"I'm in," said Carney.

"So you said." She smiled bleakly.

And so it turned out were the others, even Akander who never actually said anything but simply

tagged along. So they set out once again, scuttling across the avenue and crossing the deactivated security fence that quarantined the spaceport under normal conditions. It still had to be climbed, three meters on a side, with a drop on the far side that almost broke Judge Feinberg's leg.

They were on the snow-covered expanse of the spaceport landing field. Several kilometers to the south was the spaceport terminal, a dimly visible line of darkness. Directly west, a kilometer away, was the nearest blast-pan site. Red lights winked above it. A logo was dimly visible on the maintenance torus at the base, lit up from below by white lights.

They started toward it. If it had a ship, then the chances were good that the ship would be ready to take off. The Baada-drive trader Gracelyn was due shortly and every working shuttle would be booked solid for the ensuing two or three days.

They pressed on, even Judith Feinberg, who couldn't shake the feeling of being very exposed out there, a moving dark figure on a field of brilliant white. She resolved not to panic, not yet at least.

"What if they see us?" she said.

"Then we'll have to hold them off long enough to take a ship up," Sally replied.

"What if they use the field guns?"

"Then we're probably dead, but at least it will be a clean death."

"What are you talking about?"

"They want human beings," she said. "They transform people into those things."

"How do you know that?" said Judge Feinberg.

"I don't know it, I worked it out. No that's wrong—really, I guessed it."

Judith Feinberg stared at her; the woman seemed to know what she was talking about. But how? Judith shivered. She realized she didn't want to know. She just wanted to be safe from those things, whatever the hell they were.

They straggled into a long line now as Carney and Sally lead the way to the Blast Pan 24, the farthest from the spaceport terminal. Akander and Judith brought up the rear.

Carney was first to a door on the maintenance torus, but found it locked. "How are we going to get in?" he said.

"Through the front door, silly." Sally produced a credit card, the Arntage master card, and went to the card box set in the side of the main doors. "This blast pan is used by the Arntage Trading Company—see the logo."

"Yeah."

"And this is Mr. Arntage's ultraprio card. It will have all the necessary codes, I'm sure."

She entered the card, the door panel flashed for her touch and zipped open. "This is why I came out here. This is the Arntage blast pan, and he's got a ship lined up and ready. He would never miss a Baada liner, you can be sure of that."

They were looking at her with new eyes. She had access to Rieben Arntage? One of the most legendary billionaires of the entire human drift, a noted media figure with popular video products in a thousand star systems. A campaigner against unlimited colonization, slash and burn cultures, infamous on Saskatch as the man who'd singlehandedly stopped the highways, creating the worst traffic jams known on the stellar frontier.

"How did you get Mr. Arntage's card?" said Judith Feinberg.

"At gunpoint."

"Oh, I see." Judith shrugged, everything about the woman was somewhat strange; this would just have to be added to the rest.

Sally stepped inside. They were left to their own devices. They followed her in.

She went immediately to the elevator and activated it with Armtage's ultraprio card.

CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

FROM THE FIRST EMBRACE THE HOLLUSCHICKS WERE light. Their slippery, slithery little bodies were simply irresistible. The Hostmaster sidled its lobes at them and they fondled and rubbed and crawled under until the reproductives discharged in fountains of pleasurable release.

And thus it was time to seed some host forms. The Military Form had foreseen the need, of course, and there were ten men, stout specimens picked from the herd in the terminal. Now they were immobilized and placed before the Hostmaster, which extended the long ovipositor and set the young to work upon the host things.

"There are young on this planet now!" announced the Hostmaster with trembling joy.

"I know, my Hostmaster," said the Military Form, feeling dogged by misfortune.

"There is a threat from feral host things. It must be ended at once!"

"Yes, my Hostmaster, it will be. But in the meantime, as we discussed earlier, it is time that you and the court prepare to leave the planetary surface. We must rendezvous with the alien space vessel. We must leave this system."

The Hostmaster ruffled its lightened lobes.

"Are you absolutely certain?"

The Military Form was adamant.

The Hostmaster emitted a hormonal sigh. "Well, if we must, then I suppose we must. Go ahead with the preparations. But, tell me this, how are we to transport the young? In the boost ships of the lowly host things?"

"It must be."

"There are no alternatives?"

"There are no alternatives."

"Oh well, in that case." With a vast flutter of disapproval the Hostmaster settled its lobes in a gloomy pattern, points drooping.

Polyps swelled and burst among the manytappers.

"Damned irritating Military Form!" said the Ebony Point.

"Why can't the problem of the alien ship be taken care of by the Military Form? Why do we have to go along, too?" said the Paradox Point.

The Military Form felt impelled to reply, "Because it is imperative that we leave this solar system. The host things are not simply the helpless creatures we have here under our control. They are also members of a vast interstellar organization. They will react to our presence. They will seek to annihilate us!"

"Always did think the Military Form was a bit of a Pessimist," said the Magenta Point with too much brio.

"I am not a Pessimist!"

"Apologies, Military Form, apologies."

"I am just a Military Form."

"Oh, we know that," said the Ebony Point with malicious glee. The manytappers twittered. The Military Form turned away and set about the many tasks required of it.

It was two in the morning when the snocat finally turned in at the entrance ramp to the airport. The journey had seemed to take place in a dream, or a nightmare, depending perhaps on how close one was sitting to the Bulmunk in the back of the cab.

At first, of course, they had all stared at it. Then after a few minutes they grew embarrassed. The Bulmunk did nothing but sit, squashed up in its seat, with its feelers waving around above its lobsterlike head. After a while they all did their best not to even look at it, although they were acutely aware of its presence.

The long dreamlike journey across Boldover and Fontayne counties had been on roads almost empty of traffic and mostly unplowed. There'd been lots of wrecks and breakdowns, a lot of city cars that had died in the snow.

They had to keep their speed up near these broken down cars because desperate people would run out of the woods and try to climb onto the snocat if they slowed down.

Because of the unplowed roads, they had to stop and put on another fuel can, on a deserted section outside Boldover Township. From there they crossed the bridge into Vrailent and then struck northward, up the river to Fontayne County, where the Traders' road ran west through a handful of small Saskatch hamlets, until it finally crossed the north end of the spaceport, way out beyond the safety zone. There, they turned south toward the airport

On the west side of the spaceport was the Beliveau City Airport, a cluster of three small terminals and a pair of hangers for the long haul jets that connected the colony with the other small areas of human habitation on Saskatch.

Rieben had known that the air terminal would be deserted. From what they'd learned on the road and the radio, the violent events of the previous day had just about emptied out Beliveau City.

The airport was empty of life, or almost. A dishevelled man got up and ran after them when they smashed through a window and drove into the cargo terminal. They drove out the other side through a pair of big cargo doors and got onto the ITAA "bonded" lane that connected the airport and the spaceport. The dishevelled man waved after them and then went back to his lair in a locker in the terminal.

They reached the gate. The ITTA guards weren't there that day, an unheard of dereliction of duty by possessors of this most intensely coveted sinecure.

They drove down the bonded lane between the airport and the spaceport and onto the spaceport itself, then headed north, behind a row of warehouses set at the side of the field, which covered them from view from the spaceport terminal.

"We must move quickly now." Rieben pointed ahead. "We don't know whether they're watching this field or not. The Arntage blast pan is right at the northern end of the array."

Yen Cho turned the snocat onto the field.

"But we will take the snocat to the warehouse first, to check the status of the shuttle," Rieben said. "We will only want to make one approach to the blast-pan site, and that will be our moment of greatest risk."

"Fortunately we have the darkness to cover us."

In the rear of the cab, the Bulmunk sat silent and grim throughout. Pandi gripped the arm rest on her left to keep herself as far away from the thing as she could. Although it had saved her life she could not overcome her innate revulsion. It was too alien, too bizarre. The fishy odor had grown stronger during the trip.

"It told us to bring the fuel; it knew that we'd need it." Yen Cho reminded them.

"It is intelligent, there can be no doubt about that now," said Rieben. "The Bulmunk is a fully sentient being. The entire colony here is therefore illegal."

"The problem of illegal development will be over with then," said Bruda Dara.

"Indeed," murmured Rieben, half to himself. "There may be no colony at all in a few more days."

"No colony at all?" said Sebastian.

"It doesn't matter," said Rieben, but Bruda spoke up loudly.

"ITAA rule number one is that intelligent lifeforms own the planets they inhabit."

"Why did they hide from us then?" said Sebastian, who found it difficult not to keep turning and staring at the massive Bulmunk, which looked as if it weighed three or four hundred pounds at the very least.

The central torso was a squat barrel a meter wide. The long lower limbs rode on an extended hip girdle. The upper limbs were folded into the chest. The head was like a giant lobster, with black tufts for eyes and long, antennae that flicked about constantly, restlessly, in a motion that was inherently disturbing to humans.

"Who can say?" said Rieben with a shrug. "We have barely opened communications with it, and we are clearly going to have difficulties even keeping up a conversation if it can only talk to us when we're asleep."

"Why would it want to come with us though? Its home is in the woods, always has been," said Bruda.

"Why would it rescue Pandi? Because it knew that she would tell us her story if she lived and made contact with us. It knows about this invasion that's going on. It wants to escape."

"Well I still find it hard to believe that they're really intelligent," said Sebastian.

"Sebastian!" Bruda was aghast.

"Well, why wouldn't they have said something? Complained or something, about our invasion of their world. You know my grandfather, he used to hunt them, he had the head of one stuck on a board and placed over the mantle in Liesse house!"

"Sebastian feels guilty because of his dreadful old relations," said Bruda lightly. "Don't worry, Sebastian, we won't blame you for what others have done."

"Thank you, Bruda. But I find it hard to believe that bulmunk are as intelligent as humans."

"Of course," said Rieben, "it might simply be that they are vastly more intelligent than we and that they disdained us enough to prefer not to communicate with us, not even to complain about our treatment of them or their world."

"But it feels strongly enough about this situation that it consents to ride in here with us. Is that what you mean?" said Sebastian with a shrug. It was baffling. Bulmunk turned out to be geniuses, and some kind of alien lifeform was destroying Beliveau City.

"You realize that if bulmunk are intelligent, then we shall all have to leave, even the old Saskatch

families. Hell, my people have been here for a hundred and twenty years, we can't give it up now."

"You are a Liesse, Sebastian, I know that," said Arntage. "But consider this. The Bulmunk is coming with us. What could the Bulmunk know about the coming developments here that would make it want to come with us? Perhaps the Bulmunk dabbles in prescience? Perhaps it can read the future? Perhaps the future for our beloved world of Saskatch is one that should be avoided by any sensible, rational creature that prefers life to death?"

"Oh you and that Lashtri III stuff again." Sebastian sounded tired and grumpy.

"It happened on Lashtri III, Sebastian, and it's happened here. You heard the girl. Do you think she made it up? Do you think the Bulmunk is playing games with us? A creature that has avoided all human contact for the better part of a century?" Rieben was getting worked up, he could hear his own voice grating. He willed himself to stop, to calm down.

He consciously set to soothing himself, cutting out the stress that had been building up. Running his relaxation mantra through his head a few times. Then in a cooler voice he said, "Never mind, let's not argue about it. If I'm wrong then I'll be out the cost of a shuttle lift without permission plus the resulting fines, If I'm right..." He didn't finish the rest, but in his own head he heard the words run on... Then this lovely world will have to be cauterized with nuclear fire. Nothing could be allowed to live. Not even the bulmunk and the rarest of the Saskatch crabs and molluscs.

They rolled into the loading area at the rear of the Arntage Trading Company's warehouse. Rieben led them to the front gates which he opened with his personal command codes, cross checked with his secret numbers.

Once inside he checked the fueling status of the shuttle out in the blast pan. As he had feared, Mercury had not been fueled. The booster fuel cells, hexagonal pods of hydrites and shaped oxidant, were loaded onto a trailer tractor sitting before the big doors that opened onto the spaceport. By Arntage company rules the ship was only fueled at the last minute, a device that had stopped hijackings on more than one world. Once the blizzard turned south, the spaceport was closed down to liftoffs and the fuel had been left on the truck.

The fueling system was automatic. The truck just had to drive into the blast-pan site and into the loading platform built underneath the shuttle. Robot arms attached to the blast pan would lift the fuel cells into place.

This would take only a little while, maybe five minutes, maybe less.

Rieben and Yen Cho climbed to the upper floor of the warehouse. There was a window there, on a catwalk that went around under the roof, offering a wide view out over the darkened spaceport.

They lifted their binoculars and studied the blacked-out spaceport terminal carefully with the infrared amplifier.

They glimpsed movements in the gloom within, pale flashing shapes that appeared momentarily behind the darkened glass walls, like goldfish swimming beneath the surface in a dark and murky pond.

Then the doors opened and naked and semi-naked people were pushed outside, and herded into a dense circle by a dozen of the things, each holding a handgun and a club. Another group of the things moved into the crowd and began dragging people out, throwing them to the ground and tying their arms behind them. The people were jerked to their feet and led away in ones and twos, back into the terminal.

"What are they doing?" said Yen Cho in wonder. "That place is full of people. They've been collecting people from all over the city."

Rieben grimaced. "The lifeform is omniparasitic; it takes all other life as either host or substance. I fear those people are doomed to most unpleasant deaths."

Yen Cho gave his head a somber shake. "We gonna get long enough to get away?" he said.

Rieben shrugged; it was a gamble.

"Are they watching the field that carefully? Will they see the tanker? It's a ways over there, if they're not actually watching they might miss us. The terminal is without power so they don't have the benefit of security cameras."

"Then this is the right time to try and escape. We have to reach the Baada points before they do."

"If they know about the Baada drives; I pray they do not."

"The orbiter?"

"The radio reports said they launched five shuttles, and they also report that all contact with the orbiter has been lost. I fear that the orbiter allowed the shuttles to dock. I also fear the attitudes of the captain of the Gracelyn and his passengers. They will not want to miss this opportunity to dock at Saskatch. All of them will be traders for TA45, even the captain and his crew."

"So we have to convince them that they must immediately turn around and leave this system."

Yen Cho nodded. "I see problem. Yes, a most delicate moment. If they doubt us, will they approach the orbiter and allow contact?"

"TA45 drives people to aberrant actions."

"Something new is happening. Look."

Rieben lifted his binoculars, focused once more on the spaceport terminal. More of the things had appeared.

They were driving groups of people out to the nearest occupied blast pans. Roughly those numbered from eight to twelve, in the secondary tier beyond those of the major spacelines.

"What are they doing?" said Yen Cho.

Rieben focused on the desperate people, staggering forward. "I'm rather afraid that they're in the process of loading those shuttles. They're putting people in them, which means they intend to take people with them."

"They intend to leave, then?"

"Clearly that is their intention. They must have discovered the fact that Baada-drive ships voyage to this system and that one is expected soon.

"And they will intercept it?"

"The ship captain will not know what to expect. He will let a shuttle dock, thinking it has simply lost communications, and they will be overwhelmed by the things."

"We must get there first."

"Yes, old friend," said Rieben. "We must."

They opened the doors of the warehouse garage and drove the big tanker out and crunched through the snow toward the BP 24.

CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

"WE DO NOT WANT TO TRAVEL IN THE BOOST SHIPS OF THE host things," the Hostmaster announced while releasing a thick cloud of dominance pheromone.

The cloud made it hard for the Military Form to think straight for a minute or more. "Alas, Hostmaster, it is necessary. We do not have any alternative."

"Build Imperial-grade booster ships. That is an alternative."

"But, Hostmaster, that would entail remaining on this planet too long. Our presence is detected. We must escape before the host things react as I know they must."

"How do you know this? Show me!"

The Military Form expressed the equivalent of a deep sigh. "It will be difficult. There is not the equipment here to show you. Equipment will have to be moved here..."

"Then do so. Furthermore, I want to know the situation regarding the feral host things."

"That situation is under control; we reduce their numbers hourly."

"They must be expunged before the birthing of the young!"

"But, my Hostmaster, why will it matter if we are no longer on this planet? Why waste our efforts in this direction, why not immediately take ship and escape?"

The Hostmaster squirmed its lobes around. "I will not risk losing the young! You are neuter, what do you know of these things? Attend to the expungement."

The Military Form emitted another sigh. "I will have equipment brought and set up to show you the magnitude of the threat we face."

The Hostmaster ruffled its lobes. The manytappers extended tentacle tips to the lobes. The slippery little holluschicks crawled under, smoothing and caressing all the higher forms indiscriminately.

The Military Form turned and scrambled up the stairs from the prison basement. It noticed the transition from the superwarmth of the boiler-heated basement and the chill outside where snow was still blowing in occasional gusts of wind.

Battleforms scurried forth from the detention center's ruined front gates.

South of the Elizabeth River, the grim work went on. In the darkness of full night, a force of several thousand battleforms, the hatchlings of the night, moved through the city, killing all humans except those beneath a certain size and age.

Tens of thousands of humans were now podded, with converters at work in their guts. Tens of thousands of others had died. Organized resistance had ended. Half a million people had fled into the forest towns and down to the coast, where they formed frightened mobs in main streets and shopping malls, but thousands remained, convinced that somehow they would ride it out, or trapped by a lack of transport or illness.

In Beliveau City any young humans that were found were dragged out and herded north to the detention center.

Humans were best when eaten young, thus it had been decided by the higher forms. Older humans therefore were only to be tolerated as host material for conversion.

Block by block they worked, routing out the humans they found and killing or converting them.

In a room in an apartment built over a greengrocer's establishment in East Beliveau, Colonel Henri Tusseau sat, shivering on the bed of some teenage girl, who had long since abandoned her home and fled with her parents to their woodshack out in Boldover.

His uniform was in rags, his long coat torn, one sleeve gone. He'd been cut about the head by flying glass earlier and the blood had caked on his face: His hands and knees were filthy, from crawling through garbage. His eyes were wide, staring.

He heard someone screaming briefly, just up the street. There was the crash of glass. The screaming stopped with a thud.

Tusseau crept to the window and peered around through the curtains. His fingers left big black marks on the pink material. The streetlights were still on in East Beliveau. He could see a still figure sprawled in the middle of the street.

There were more screams; an elderly couple was hurled out the window from the second floor of a building up the street. They hit the ground together. One of them was still moving. A battleform sped to the spot and struck once or twice with its horned feet. Then it dragged their bodies to the other ones and piled them together.

More battleforms emerged from another house, pushing a young man ahead of them. He cowered in the center of a group of the things as they measured him and reported him to the herd controllers at the spaceport terminal.

He was too old for the food herd, and too slight for use as conversion material. A command whistle was followed by a decapitating blow. The body was added to the others.

Henri Tusseau shrank back into the pink cushions of the little girl's room. Dolls and pink bears and toys and shoes were piled everywhere. Tusseau took out his gun, a small automatic handgun. He had two shots left. He shivered. He was too exhausted to run any further. The things were too close.

The gun barrel was cold, metallic tasting. He pushed it to the back of his mouth. There was a loud crash downstairs in the grocery shop. Tusseau gagged, tried to pull the trigger and failed. He pulled the gun out, and lay shuddering on the bed.

He couldn't do it, he couldn't.

The loud noises were closer now. Something made of glass smashed loudly in the kitchen.

Feet clattered on the stairs in obscene speed.

Henri stared at the gun.

The handle of the door moved, it opened. A pair of the things came in.

Henri raised the gun, the things charged, he fired and missed. They had him in the next moment and pulled him to the floor and spread-eagled him while they measured him and radioed the spaceport terminal herd master.

He was big enough to merit conversion. The things inserted the conversion module. Then they left him, crouched in the corner of the room, next to a row of giant pink bears and fluffy horses.

He felt something sharp stab him in the guts, and then a curious numbness began to spread through his limbs. He could barely move, his eyelids felt heavy. He emitted an odd groan of despair and began to curl into a fetal ball.

CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

THE SHIP WAS UNFUELED! DISASTER! SALLY STARED AT the board. Struck numb through the center of her heart. She hadn't even thought to check before, preferring to run down the control decks, to get the feel of the ship. She wanted everything to work out, without effort, allowing her to run on automatic. She wanted to do things that she didn't have to think about. It was better somehow if none of this was allowed to be really real.

She turned back to the exterior cameras and focused on the spaceport terminal. Groups of naked people were being driven through the snow by the battleforms with whips and leashes. She watched them

pushed into the blast-pan sites in the midrange, where the smaller spacelines kept their shuttles.

More people were visible, a dense mass of them, packed into the spaceport terminal lounges. And there were other battlethings, approaching the outer shuttle blast pans in pairs. Hurriedly she scanned the approaches to Blast Pan 24.

A pair of the things was on the way. They covered the ground quickly, despite the deep snow, heading straight toward them. The things wanted all the shuttles! It seemed desperately unfair and greedy to her. Why couldn't they leave just one shuttle alone? She had her gun cradled in her lap. She had quite a lot of ammunition for it, too, but even so she knew it meant nothing if she had to face an army of those things.

She stood up, unsure what to do, where to go.

She was just about to turn away when an alarm called her attention to a shot of a big tractor trailer, lumbering toward BP 24. Somebody else out there was interested in this shuttle. Sally stared for a second, then she ordered the gates opened. The trailer bore an Arntage Trading company logo; it carried fuel cells.

She went to join the others on the lower floor, waiting.

The big tractor drove in and rolled to a stop in the loading position. Automatically the loading devices sprang into action. Robot noise erupted, the whine of the lifters, the clack and crash of the fuel pods.

People got out of the tractor cab. A man and a girl, they came up the stairs. Carney and Akander had hidden themselves.

A snocat with no lights on drifted in the doors and came to a stop. The doors opened and more people got out. Sally emerged from the elevator at about the same moment. She found herself facing the little old man and his hired killer. For some reason this struck her as tremendously funny, and she dissolved into giggles.

"Roxann," said Rieben, "we meet again. Rather sooner than you had wished, I expect."

Sally stopped her giggles.

Bruda and Sebastian were there. Bruda was stunned. "It's her! How did she get here?"

"Why be so surprised dear?" snapped Sally. "The only hope for saving my behind lay in getting out of here. I came for Mr. Arntage's ship. I was sure he'd have one waiting."

Then she saw Pandi, and Pandi's stern young face that filled with condemnation when their eyes met. You left me, Sally, you left me to die, they seemed to say.

Sally wanted to scream, to run and hide, to die. But the thought of death brought up even less welcome thoughts. "The things are on their way here, too. I came down to warn everyone."

"How far?" said Rieben with a slight tremor in his voice.

"There are a pair of scouts on their way here. They'll be here in a couple of minutes, maybe less."

The Bulmunk climbed out of the snocat at last and moved toward the elevator that rose to the passenger section of the shuttle, which stood on the blast pan, above their heads.

At the sight of the Bulmunk Sally screamed and raised her gun reflexively.

"No, Sally, don't shoot!" said Pandi in a scream.

Sally turned shocked eyes to Pandi. "Whyever not, child?"

And then Yen Cho knocked her hand up, dislodging the gun which flew away and hit the wall with a clang. She doubled up clutching her forearm.

"What are you doing, you madman?" she screamed.

"It's not enemy," said Yen Cho.

"It's not? What is it?"

"Yeah, what is that thing?" Akander said emerging from his hiding place. He had his rifle raised.

"Bulmunk," said Bruda Dara, "an adult bulmunk."

"A bulmunk?" said Carney with wide eyes. "But what's it doing here? What if it makes us go crazy and kill each other?"

"We don't know why it's here," said Rieben. "It has given us assistance in various ways already. Ways that suggest to me it knows what is going to happen."

"But they're mad creatures. I've heard it said they kill babies in the light of the moon," Carney said.

"That is a myth, my friend." Rieben patted Carney's arm.

"Hey," said Carney pointing at Rieben, "don't I know you from somewhere?"

Bruda looked hard at Carney. He was well hidden behind all those bandages, then she exclaimed.

"You're the TA45 smuggler we rescued up in the Black Ruks last summer"

Carney stared back at them. "And you're those people? The ones who screwed me with the Fixer Brothers?"

"Now, now. We just tried to save you from your folly in TA45." Bruda clucked.

"A lot of people have tried to save this particular fellow from TA45," said Judith Feinberg, "and I don't think any of us succeeded very well."

"In fact," said Sally, "this is Rieben Arntage himself."

"Gracious," said Judith Feinberg. "I never dreamed I would meet Rieben Arntage."

Rieben acknowledged them all with a tight smile. "Roxann is correct. I am Rieben Arntage, and she has possession of a small piece of my property, which I would like returned, at once."

Sally stared at them. It wasn't a dream, and her chances for a fortune were evaporating once again. "Oh all right," she said. She pulled out the ultraprio card and gave it to Arntage. "I never used it, well, except to shop with a little. I don't think you'll ever notice the loss."

"Thank you, Roxann. Or is it Sally, Sally Xermin I believe."

"She told you, then."

"Yes, Miss Beshwan tried to keep it all a secret but in the end something pricked her conscience, fortunately."

"Or unfortunately, considering that we're trapped," said Sebastian.

Rieben turned to Yen Cho with a smile. "Observe. The Bulmunk has hidden itself near the elevators, see, behind those compressor tubes. It knows something. We must have a chance, or why would it be here?"

"It think it survive?"

"It knows—it reads the future, my friend. It is an extraordinary creature. We have much to learn from it."

Yen Cho cast an ironic eye to the Bulmunk's hiding place. "But does it want to teach us? That is question number one."

Rieben avowed that that indeed was unknowable, then turned to Carney and the others. "Fate has served us a strange and complex hand, my friends. We meet here in the shadow of doom, truly. I suggest that we join forces and endeavor to finesse it to the best of our abilities."

Rieben had no gun and little purpose in a battle. Sally was the only other pilot. It was agreed that they be the first to board the shuttle.

Pandi was given a handgun by Nicola Moulin, who was left with just her rifle.

"If they get through, I want you to use one of those on me," said Nicola in a whisper as she handed the gun to Pandi. "Remember, save one for me. Will you do that?"

Pandi stared. Death was very real and close again. She felt her mouth go dry and her heart begin to flutter.

The gun seemed very heavy. Her sore wrist was barely able to stand it.

Nicola held her hand, squeezed hard.

"Yes," she managed to say.

The fueling continued in a cacophony of machine noise. The doors were winched shut and bolted.

"Get ready!" said Johan Griks from the door.

The humans who had guns took them out and checked them. Even Judith Feinberg had a gun, a small handgun, twelve shots. A police-approved .22 automatic. She checked the safety catch and left it on. The weapon felt smooth and warm in her hand, and recalled the horror she had witnessed in the old police building. She licked her lips. She would use the gun if those things broke in; she knew this with great certainty

"They're coming," said Henry Young from his place by the front door.

Young and Griks had seen that all the doors were closed and locked. The things wasted no time on the doors. After finding them locked and bolted within, they attacked the windows of the maintenance torus and broke their way in to a ground-floor workshop.

They opened the door from the workshop and were met there by Carney, Griks, Henry Young, and Nicola Moulin. Their guns went off in an executioners' volley and kept firing, the detonations booming inside the blast-pan site, knocking the battleforms down and destroying them, plus the controlling things that emerged from their bodies in death and tried to escape.

The last shots echoed away.

"What will they do now?" said Bruda.

"I think we're in trouble," said Carney.

"There'll be an army of them on their way out here. If they can they'll use the field guns to shell the blast pan. We are doomed, I'm afraid." Griks was downcast.

"But the loading is almost half-done," said Carney wanting desperately to live.

"Face it man, we're screwed," said Akander bitterly.

"We have been from the beginning. Whatever this thing is it's better than we are."

"Better at what?"

"Better at surviving!"

"What can we do?" said Pandi.

"We need to fuel the ship to capacity," said Rieben, "We'll need every ounce to get out to the Baada

points and retain some maneuvering ability."

"So?"

"So we must keep them out of here long enough for at least a few of us to escape."

"Count me in the ones that escape," said Carney.

"Yeah, me, too," said Akander. "And anyway, what has happened here, man? I'm in the dark, me."

"Well," said Bruda, who looked to Rieben.

"This planet has been invaded by a deadly, inimical lifeform." Rieben said it with complete certainty.

"Yeah, I've seen them, both kinds."

"This has happened before, but not to a human colony world. It happened on a Laowon world long ago."

Judith Feinberg nodded suddenly; she had heard of this somewhere, sometime.

"What happened?" said Akander.

"The Laowon fleets used nuclear weapons to scour the surface of all life."

Akander swallowed. Hefted his gun.

"Lashtri III," breathed Judith. "I have the opera disk, so sad, so terrible."

Rieben turned to look at her. A woman in her visible middle years. So she was probably at least a hundred.

What was she doing here? Who was she? How had her path been set to bring her to this spot at this time. Rieben mused briefly on the dark idiocies of fate.

"Lashtri III is correct," he said. "It is our duty to the rest of the human race to escape and get to the Baada ship, when it comes."

"Surely someone must have got a message out to the ITAA?"

"The orbiter was attacked. We no longer have the capacity for the deep space link. We cannot know if a message was sent earlier. I don't know about you, but my opinion of the reasoning abilities of the city rulers is not very high. Tusseau and his bunch would have fought like devils to keep from calling the ITAA in here. They know that would finish them."

Carney swallowed heavily at that thought. If those fools downtown had failed to call for help... Carney didn't care to think further on that. But once this lifeform, whatever the hell it was, got hold of a Baada-drive ship it would become a very different class of enemy.

The loading mechanism continued its relentless rhythm, too slow, too slow for them. The battlethings were on their way, a party of two dozen this time.

Griks, Young, Moulin, and Akander, who had the rifles, took up firing positions at the windows. Sebastian, who'd retrieved his handgun, was behind a crate directly in front of the main doors.

The others took shelter behind equipment and walls, between the front doors to the BPS and the elevators. Crates and larger pieces of equipment for the blast pan's hydraulic systems were stacked on the concrete floor to one side.

The things stormed forward through the snow. They had discovered a technique for dealing with deep snow by then, lifting their legs high in rapid pumping motions they could push quite quickly through sections that were even knee deep.

Griks and the others opened fire when they were two hundred meters away. They scored some hits,

dropped one or two. But then the things with rifles returned fire, and soon overpowered their defenses with uncanny accuracy.

While they were pinned down beneath the windows or behind desks, the things rushed to the walls and entered through the windows of the maintenance shops.

Griks and Nicola Moulin rolled to the right and dived for cover. Henry Young and Akander scrambled to the left, behind some hydraulic equipment stacked on a pallet.

Everyone with a gun let fly, the sound was deafening, stunning to the ears. Bullets whined around the interior.

Caught in a hail of bullets, the things were simply destroyed, shot to pieces.

Judge Feinberg looked up, she found she had blazed off half her clip with her eyes shut! She wanted to laugh for some reason, amazed at herself.

Pandi Beshwan, however, did not look up. She was crouched in the corner of the space behind the compressor tubes. She hadn't fired her gun, the sight of the things coming for them like that had been too much. The gun fell from her nerveless fingers, and she turned and pressed herself back into the recess behind the compressor tubes.

She was rigid with fright.

So, she discovered, was the Bulmunk, standing in the shadows behind another compressor tube.

The guns roared some more, Carney's big magnum playing a dominant role. Carney had practiced for years with the gun but never expected to use it like that!

But the magnum slugs did stop the things cold! They kept coining through .22 and .30 stuff and even rifle fire just stopped them temporarily, but the magnum shells were different, they blew bits off the things, which frequently killed them. Little else had that kind of impact on them.

Five were down out of that first half dozen through the windows, when the sixth reached Henry Young.

Henry squealed once, long and high, and then slumped sideways while his head spun end over end and bounced off the wall. His rifle clattered to the floor and the thing bent to pick it up, but Akander's rifle boomed amid a torrent of curses and the thing collapsed. Akander ran for the elevator.

There was one at the door with a rifle. Akander was hit and staggered. He was hit again and went down, and slid a few feet before coming to a halt. He didn't get up.

Nicola Moulin got the one with the rifle at the door. She sidled up to it, keeping flattened to the door and then shot it at close range when it leaned in. It flew backward and she retreated sideways toward a dispatch counter at the side of the space.

Something small skittered after her. Other similar things were rising out of the bodies of the dead host. Guns blazed again.

Nicola gave a shriek as something scuttled up her back and two wirelike arms wrapped themselves around her.

More gunfire erupted.

She heard somebody jump over the counter. A gun boomed twice, concrete chips spattered her, and the horrible grip of the thing eased. She stripped it off her neck and shoulders with urgent, shaking movements. The touch of it made her want to retch.

Carney Waxx helped her to her feet. They ran for the elevator, crouching low, praying they'd beat the bullets.

None came.

They reached the compressor tubes. The elevator to the passenger section was already in motion. The refueling had finished.

The elevator was gone.

Carney turned, his eyes staring, mouth slack.

"Those bastards! They left us!"

"Look out!" screamed Moulin.

There came a crunching noise below them, and a section of the floor broke open suddenly and a pair of battle-forms wriggled out and came for them.

Sebastian slipped from hiding and shot the things with his handgun. They turned on him; he kept shooting. Carney fired and hit one, while the other grappled with Sebastian, even as it was dying. Sebastian was hurled to the ground, an armored foot almost decapitated him. He rolled desperately away. Carney hit the thing again and it went down for good.

Sebastian staggered to his feet, blood pumping from wounds on his forearms and neck. The stain spread across his anorak.

Judith Feinberg grabbed him and pulled him to shelter behind the compressor tubes. Bruda Dara was there. She stared helplessly at his wounds. They had nothing to bandage them with, no way of stopping the bleeding.

More rifle fire came from the front door, and then a battlething broke in above them, from the second floor of the maintenance section. It dropped into the space behind the compressor tubes. Bruda screamed and bolted.

Sebastian turned to face it.

"Damn you!" he roared and stood in its way. It gutted him with a horn-tipped foot. His shot struck the floor.

Judith Feinberg emptied her gun into its torso and it strode over Sebastian for her.

She squeezed the trigger again, but she was out of bullets. She stared at the flowerlike eyes and waited for death.

Nicola Moulin appeared on the far side of the compressor tubes; her rifle came up. Instinctively Judith threw herself to the floor. The rifle cracked and the battleform collapsed.

The elevator was back. It opened. But bullets sliced through the blast-pan site once more, right into the elevator, too. Ricochets whined down the space behind the compressor tubes. Nicola Moulin was down, too, shot through the back of the head by a ricochet.

Judith Feinberg was weeping. She could barely see through her tears, and she could barely believe she was doing what she was doing, but she turned Nicola's body over and grabbed her rifle. Then she used it to destroy the horror that started to climb out of the dead body of the battleform. She amazed herself by not vomiting on the spot. Then she turned and moved to the side of the space close to the elevator.

Yen Cho appeared briefly above her then slipped out of sight around the compressor tube.

The defensive fire had weakened, and the things readied themselves for the last rush.

The survivors were bunched around the elevators. Yen Cho had Akander's rifle, and only four shots. Carney still had ammo for the WAK magnum.

Johan Griks, however, was down to his last round, and he was also still stuck down near the front doors, hiding behind a crate. He decided to retreat back toward the elevators and started up and immediately met a battleform that had crept in through the shattered floor to hide near him.

Johan saw it first and fired instantly, hitting it in the leg with his first shot. It sprang at him and he stepped backward, falling over a crate, his legs in the air, his rifle dropped at the feet of the battleform.

It picked up the gun and shot Griks twice, the bullets shattering his right hip and thigh bone. Then it charged into the space behind the compressor tubes.

But there it ran into the Bulmunk, which seized it and rammed it hard against the rear wall. The battleform reacted with a convulsive thrust but could not break the Bulmunk's massive grip. Then it struck at the Bulmunk's lower limbs with its armored feet, and the Bulmunk emitted a woeful moan and jumped back and dropped the battleform.

It sprang to its feet. The Bulmunk retreated, waving its appendages desperately.

The battleform leaped, and the Bulmunk changed color and expressed an ultimate form of defense, unique to its kind. A terrible wave of nausea swept the zone around the blast-pan site. Every human vomited, almost spontaneously, diaphragms digging for more, in the most acute fit of nausea any had ever experienced. It dropped them to the floor, wrung out and weak as wet rags.

The battlethings within range, however, were turned inside out. They became unworkable host, a mess of tubes and spasming muscles and viscera.

Slowly, shakily the humans got to their knees. Yen Cho helped Judith Feinberg up. She saw Bruda Dara get off her knees and stagger for the elevator.

Feinberg looked back and saw Johan Griks struggling to get to his knees. He was in agony, his face contorted into a dark mask by the effort.

Judith went to him. "Take my arm," she said. Griks almost pulled her off her feet when he did so. But Carney Waxx joined her and together they got Griks up onto his feet and started for the elevator.

The Bulmunk was waiting by the doors. It let them pass and then marched in and stood in a corner and became absolutely still:

Yen Cho and Pandi crowded in last.

The elevator doors shut and the elevator rose. They could feel the engines igniting.

"They're gonna take off and leave us, they're gonna let us fry!" said Carney in panic. But almost immediately the door opened into the interior of the shuttle's passenger lounge. They crowded in, the Bulmunk waited patiently until last.

By then the ship was starting to move, the door was still open and the security system was walling alarms, but they were lifting in a thunderous roar of engines as they developed thrust and drove the shuttle out of the blast pan on a pillar of fire.

CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

SET UP INSIDE THE DARK WARMTH OF THE BASEMENT OF the detention center, the video screen was an incongruous patch of brightness and color. The screen offered images of the humans' space empire. One particularly striking graphic was a 3-d module of human and Laowon space systems set within the galactic context.

Another was a video clip of several enormous space vessels set against starfields. The vessels were circular, bloated things of a dull, brownish hue.

The Hostmaster ruffled its lobes. "Such a large volume of space is infested with these host things, something must be done about it."

The Military Form tried not to let the discussion be sidetracked. "So you see, my Hostmaster, why it is imperative that we take to the remaining space shuttles and leave the planetary surface."

The Hostmaster shivered in rage. To be confounded like this by a mere Military Form? It was not to be borne!

The Hostmaster dug itself in with an irrational spasm of spleen. "No, we shall not move until the young have hatched and been initiated." Lobes ruffled, the manytappers exchanged supportive pheromones. The Hostmaster recovered control of itself.

"Go," it commanded, "complete the expungement of the feral host things. Order the battleforms already off planet to capture the interstellar vessel that you're so confident is coming, and then report to us once more."

The Military Form was silent. Something close to despair rose up in its mind. There was an urgent beep in his communicator bulb. The news from the spaceport was electrifying. "I must leave," announced the Military Form immediately

"Why? What has happened?"

"An unknown force has seized a booster."

"What? Feral host things are active—how could you allow this to happen? Destroy them at once!"

"Yes, my Hostmaster. At once."

"How you can expect us to wish to trust our safety to the host things' boost craft, when there are feral host things active on the spacefield, I cannot understand."

The Military Form raced out of the ruined detention center. A line of orange fire was rising into the sky. A great rumble roared across the city.

An urgent call was sent to the orbiter. All shuttles were to be readied for immediate launch.

The descriptions of the casualties in the blast-pan site were bizarre. The Military Form stared after the booster flare. What did it portend?

Aboard the Arntage booster Mercury there was a strange and terrible mixture of emotions.

Despite the crushing g-forces, Sally was whooping and screaming, all the way up through the atmosphere. So was Carney Waxx, who had tears of relief flowing from his eyes.

Others were not so elated, particularly Pandi Beshwan, who wept uncontrollably, barely understanding why she did so, barely wanting to think anymore. Bruda Dara wept, too, for Sebastian, and for all the other people down there, who were doomed. Johan Griks, his hip and leg packed in an emergency bandage, rode next to her, mercifully unconscious. He'd lost a lot of blood. Bruda wasn't sure he was going to live long enough to get medical help.

In the seats ahead of them, next to Sally and Carney, Rieben Arntage rode in silence. Nor did he weep, although his heart was filled with sorrow for the loss of Sebastian and so many others. He rode rather in fear for his own life, aware that the crushing g-forces were putting a great strain on his body. His artificial heart could handle it, but he could not be so sure about his arteries and veins, he dreaded the hidden internal hemorrhage. He had to survive, at least as far as the Gracelyn, so that he could be certain to deflect the ship from the doom that awaited it in this system.

Further trials loomed ahead, however, and he had to conserve all his energy to face them. He concentrated on lowering his racing pulse and shedding stress. Underneath his surface patina of alertness he was already suffering from deep exhaustion. He would eventually require hospitalization, he was

certain of that. But before he could surrender to the medics, he had to be sure of the Gracelyn.

At the rear of the cabin rode the Bulmunk, and it too was "weeping" in its way, which produced a seepage of grease from an organ beneath the feelers. It wept for the world it left behind, the home for so long of its race. Only it and the eggs it carried were left to carry on that lineage.

The Mercury was a powerful vessel, easily capable of reaching high orbits straight from the planetary surface. Rieben had told Sally everything she needed to know, she was enough of a pilot to do the rest.

An alarm wailed. They stopped rejoicing. The computer announced a ship on a collision course, closing fast from the direction of the orbiter.

Sally got a fix on it, calculated an evasive course, and hit the switches while screaming to everyone else to hold on.

The booster's forward attitude jets fired. Simultaneously, Sally cut back on the main jets, almost choking them off for a second or two, which slowed them on their course by a fraction of a second. Everyone was hurled forward in the seat belts and then slammed back into the seat.

It was enough, barely.

In that fraction of a second saved, the other ship missed them, hurtling past within fifty meters, unable to correct course quickly enough to ram.

Pandi had her fingers in her ears, her eyes closed, expecting violent sudden death. It didn't come. Instead she opened her eyes and struggled to find her breath.

Carney was whooping like a madman.

"Missed us, you fuckers!" he yelled at the screens, waving a hand bent into an ancient gesture of derision.

"They've launched more shuttles. We're picking up the exhaust cones." Sally pointed to the video screen on her control board.

"We're ahead of them," said Rieben. "We just have to stay that way."

The Mercury plowed on, pushing higher and higher into an orbit that would take it past Leopold, the little Saskatch moon, and out to the Baada points, where the interstellar liner would materialize at the end of its enormous leap across the voids of space and time.

The acceleration continued as Sally committed most of their fuel to the burn. They continued to pace the shuttles from the orbiter.

"We will not have much time to convince the captain of the ship," said Yen Cho.

"A problem," agreed Rieben. "If those shuttles are allowed to dock with the ship, they will be overwhelmed. It will be just a matter of time."

"And then?"

"And then this horror will be exported to other star systems. Who knows what it might lead to? A war for survival between humanity and those things?"

Rieben's words filled Yen Cho with dread. He could easily imagine armies of the alien things dropping from space on helpless human worlds.

"There's a Baada ship." Sally gave out a whoop. "It just came in. They're dumping gray-waves now."

Rieben punched up an analysis on the arrival codes broadcast by the ship as it entered the system.

"It's the Gracelyn all right. How long before we can reach it?"

"Without deceleration?"

"No, of course not."

"With deceleration, about six hours."

"And how long will it take the other shuttles?"

"A little more than six hours, perhaps thirty minutes leeway."

"I will try and raise the Gracelyn on the radio."

Rieben opened a hailing frequency.

"This is Rieben Arntage, president of the Arntage Trading Co., calling the captain of the Gracelyn. I have a vitally important message."

There was a long half minute of silence as the message covered the space between them and aroused a response. Finally a voice broke in and an image wobbled into life on screen.

"This is Captain Blasik, Mr. Arntage. What can we do for you?"

"A terrible tragedy has taken place here. I must ask you to place your ship under ITAA emergency rules."

"Gracious me, Mr. Arntage. What can have happened that would require that? We've heard nothing from the ITAA."

"It is most important that you listen to me and understand what I have to tell you. First, we must dock with your ship. We are being pursued by other shuttles, you can see them?"

"Yes."

"They must not be allowed to dock with your ship. Whatever else happens in the next half hour you must promise me that you will not allow one of those other shuttles to dock with your ship."

"Mr. Arntage, this is a trading vessel. We're here to allow trading with all corners. I can't arbitrarily exclude others from the ship just on your say so. No, no, any ships that want to beat the rush and spend fuel to reach us while we're way out here are perfectly welcome to dock and begin their business."

Rieben felt his pulse begin to hammer; it was as he'd feared.

"Those shuttles are not piloted by human beings." He tried to keep his voice from rising to a shriek. "They are controlled by an inimical lifeform that has landed on planet Saskatch and undertaken a most horrific slaughter. I warn you that those shuttles contain your death if you let them dock."

Captain Blasik stared at his screen. What was going on? To his second in command he whispered, "Get me a check on this Arntage. Is it really old man Rieben, the big boss himself? What the hell is he talking about?"

"Crazy, you think?"

"Could be, I can't tell."

The astronavigator broke in. "Hey you two, this system has a proscription code you know. The level three procedures are to be put into effect in the event of something like this."

"Level-three procedures?"

"They're asking for a docking lane."

"What's the interval between their docking and that of the others?"

"About thirty minutes."

"All right, let Mr. Arntage dock. We'll continue to move inwards, but as a precaution I want security down there by the docking structure, weapons on stun."

"That will not conform to the level-three procedures."

"Damn the level-three procedures. I've got a ship full of businesspeople, you want to tell them we're not docking?"

"What about the other shuttles?"

"I don't know. Call the orbiter, get some kind of confirmation on this for me."

"We're not getting anything from the orbiter, sir, and we're not getting much at all from Saskatch either."

"What are we getting from Saskatch?"

"Weird stuff, sir, I never heard anything like it."

"Sir, I have transmissions between the orbiter and the shuttles."

"Put them up!"

"Yes, sir!"

The concrete violin sound of the ancient battle codes of the warriors of Axon-Neurone blasted out of the audio

"What the hell is that?" said Blasik.

"Not machine codes, I have a definite on that."

"There's no video signal, nothing at all."

"I have that as an alien language, sir, unknown variety."

"Bloody hell!" Blasik stared at his officers. "What is going on here?"

A few minutes later the Mercury docked with the immense Baada ship, slipping down a long docking entry port to the central modules.

Once through the airlocks Rieben and the others scrambled down the corridors. They were met by polite security officers.

"I must see Captain Blasik."

"Sir, Mr. Arntage, sir, this is most irregular."

"I must, this is vital, young man. If you value your life you will lead me to the captain now."

A faintly patronizing smile came over the young man's face.

"Look, pay attention!" snapped Arntage. "I can tell you're having a hard time with this, but listen to me, it's vital that you do."

"Well uh, sir, I..."

"I am Rieben Arntage, you know my name, my ships dock with you in several systems. I am a proud man, why would I put myself in the position of begging you like this unless I had good reason?"

The security officer wavered, then agreed.

"Yes sir, well, come with me, sir."

They scrambled through the capacious interior of the Baada ship, past big lounges full of travelers. An expectant roar of business came from the bars and cafes.

They rode an elevator to the bridge deck. Rieben was doing his utmost to calm his raging pulse. He could feel a vein throb in his forehead. He had never been quite so frightened in all his long life. Not even

in the blast-pan site when they fought the alien things.

They almost ran into the bridge.

Captain Blasik was handling his fifth call from a very important trader. This one a Venturer Merchant from Keroan 2.

"Yes, Mr. Uganu, we will be approaching the orbiter. That is confirmed, sir. Yes, sir, I know how vital this trip is for you sir. Yes, sir, I know of your financial interest in the Gracelyn, yes, sir, yes, sir."

Blasik put down the phone and wiped his forehead. He had more than fifteen hundred passengers aboard, all traveling at premium-class rates. A glittering assemblage of traders and merchants and their agents.

And here was Mr. Arntage, with this new problem to be faced, except that it was hard to believe it was really Mr. Arntage. For instead of a prince of interstellar capital he was facing a wizened old man dressed in a dirty and stained parka. His face haggard and his hands filthy.

Could this really be the famous billionaire?

"Mr. Arntage?"

"Yes," said Rieben, "listen to me Captain Blasik, for the sake of all our lives, including your own, do not let those other shuttles dock with this ship!"

"But what is this all about?"

"Have you received any communications from Beliveau City?"

"Not yet, we are having some difficulties apparently."

"Well you won't hear much unless you tune in the radio stations outside BVC. There isn't much that's human left in BVC."

A page with a phone approached the captain. Blasik took it with a sigh. "Excuse me, Mr. Arntage."

A familiar, robust female voice echoed in the captain's ear.

"Yes, Madame Glasneek," he said into the phone. "Yes I do intend to allow passengers to disembark for the orbiter. No I have not ordered any emergency. There is nothing to worry about Madame Glasneek."

He put away the phone.

Arntage felt like he was on the verge of a heart attack.

"Captain Blasik, under no circumstances can you allow your ship to approach the orbiter. It is no longer staffed by human beings, can you understand this?"

The phone was going again, another merchant, alarmed by the rumor that there was trouble in the system. Blasik was sweating; he wiped his forehead again. He had his own life savings tied up in this trip, was planning on smuggling twenty universal ounces of TA45 back to Soyantor base.

He stared at Arntage irritably.

"We have request for docking lanes," said his second in command. "Their computers are working fine."

The phone beeped. His private line, he knew it would be Madame Glasneek once more.

"Mr. Arntage, I cannot allow the disruption of trading at the convenience of any one trader. It is the iron rule of our company. You must understand this."

Blasik made a surreptitious signal to his chief security officer who spoke a code word into his hand

set.

"I am not talking about trading, Captain Blasik. How often have you found me willing to endure lift off from the planetary gravity well to pursue a trade in person? I am here to warn you, to urge you to take your ship out of the system and to broadcast immediately an alarm to the ITAA."

A security team in red uniforms appeared around them.

"Mr. Arntage, enough." Blasik waved his hands. "If you are Mr. Arntage, and I'm not entirely convinced that you are. After all as you said, how often does Mr. Arntage leave the planetary surface to conduct trade? He doesn't in fact, and why should he when he can afford the best agents there are? No, I'm ordering you taken down for tests. I won't order your arrest yet, but I do think we shall put you back on your vessel and send you on your way very shortly."

Sally Xermin reached for her gun; it was time for direct action once more. She was getting used to it.

A strong pair of hands caught hers however. She whirled and kicked to break the grip. A woman in security red was holding her. She parried Sally's kick and tripped her. Other security people were going into action.

Yen Cho spun one over his shoulder and dropped another with a fist to the solar plexus.

Yen bobbed to the surface of the brawl and moved at once to protect Mr. Arntage. But as he shifted direction another red-clad figure whacked him with a shock baton that knocked him off his feet.

Carney Waxx had already received the baton and was lying in a dazed heap on the floor. He was yanked to his feet and cuffed.

The security team started hustling them back, out of the bridge.

As they did so, however, they became aware of another commotion. There were screams, howls, and the sounds of things breaking as the elevator opened and the Bulmunk emerged.

The security team raised their weapons instinctively at the sight of the alien creature.

Captain Blasik felt his jaw drop. He stared.

"What in the name of..." said his astronav.

"Don't shoot," screamed Bruda Dara, "it's harmless."

The Bulmunk stood rigid, by the elevator, not daring to move. Its feelers waved frantically around as it sifted the immediate future for the correct actions. How to survive? How to live, caught up in the machinations of the alien spawn? Desperately it probed, its brain throbbing from the effort.

Captain Blasik stared at his security officer. This was an alien lifeform, indubitably.

"Shoot!" said Blasik, taking no chances.

The Bulmunk gave a sick groan and employed its ultimate form of defense once more; a mind-bending wave of nausea enveloped the Gracelyn. Fifteen hundred wealthy agents, merchants and traders fell to their knees and vomited up everything they'd eaten in the last few hours.

Yen Cho, however, had anticipated it, and having experienced it already once was partially prepared and made a swifter recovery.

He had the security chief's gun out and pressed to Captain Blasik's head within another second and a half.

Slowly everyone got back on their feet—everyone except for Rieben Arntage. Bruda knelt by his side. Rieben was unconscious, barely breathing. Bruda was convinced he would die. Tears welled up in the corners of her eyes.

Sally took another gun and slipped past Captain Blasik and activated a screen on the astronav's board.

"The other shuttles are coming. We have to get out of here."

Blasik was red in the face with rage. "I protest this act of piracy. I don't know how you did what you did but I warn you, the ITAA takes a very dim view of space piracy. You'll all do fifty years sooner or later."

Sally jammed her gun hard against the astronav's head. "I don't have time to banter with you, Captain, get this ship moving. We can't allow those shuttles to get close to us."

"They're still asking for docking lanes," said the astronav in a surprisingly calm voice. The gun felt very real and very close.

"It's only the computer that's asking, no video signal," Sally said, pointing to the blank screen.

"They must not dock with this ship!" Bruda Dara shouted from the floor where she crouched by Rieben Arntage.

"What happens if we don't respond?" said Carney.

"No docking lane means they can't come in and dock," said Sally. "Means they'll have to go past us, or try and turn and match our orbit, which will, be difficult for them since they're coming fast and they're intersecting us from below."

"They may not even have to dock," said Sally.

"What do you mean?"

"Well look, they're not slowing down, they're still on an intercept course that will take them right onto your docking passage, if you continue on your present course." Sally pointed to the screen on the astronav board.

"They're going to ram you," she finished primly.

Blasik's eyes popped in outrage. "You have committed a gross act of piracy! You will not get away with it, believe me..."

"Shut up, Captain!" said Sally. "Just tell me how to take this ship into Baada drive. We have to leave this vicinity and we have to leave it now!"

On a radar screen they could see the nearest shuttle mirv, as a number of other, smaller but still reflective shapes split from the single blip and spread toward the Gracelyn.

"They're aiming for the dorsal-entry ports," announced the second officer.

"If you think I'm going to give you Baada-drive initiation codes, you're crazy!" Blasik was in a rage. These people, that awful thing they'd brought with them that was still standing there. He'd be damned if he'd listen to a word they said.

Rieben was finally coming around. Weakly he sat up,

Bruda Dara holding him carefully like some exotic plant.

"Where are we?" he whispered. She told him.

"Where is Captain Blasik?" Bruda got her arms under him and picked him up. He seemed even lighter than before in her arms. She carried him over to the captain.

"Captain Blasik, isn't it? Captain, you must take your ship out of this system at once. It is vital that you do this without allowing those other shuttles to dock."

"They won't dock, they can't dock, there's no docking lane."

"Captain, those things inside will simply ram the docking structures. They are terrible warriors, mightier than anything you can imagine. Once they are aboard this ship we will be virtually helpless. They will take this ship and use it to begin the rebirth of an ancient horror, that will quite possibly annihilate all other life in the galaxy."

Rieben sank back in Bruda's arms.

"They aren't pulling aside, no course deviation, Captain, and they're too close to avoid us," said the astronaut.

Alarms were wailing as the approaching shuttles entered an impact certain zone. Blasik stared. The shuttles were definitely on a collision course with the Gracelyn, arrowing toward the dorsal docking portal.

"What's in those shuttles?"

"Death for everything human."

He paled. It was looking very ominous. Quickly he called out the initiation series to the computer. The Gracelyn would go into Baada drive without warning; some passengers would get hurt. They would sue, as would many others, and his career was over, of that he was convinced, but it wasn't worth dying for.

Of course his life savings had been sunk into the trip to buy him the captain's seat. But if these people were right, then he wouldn't be alive much longer anyway.

The Baada countdown took thirty-nine seconds. Before it was over there was a shuddering crash as the first shuttle kicked into the docking structures.

"There's a breakthrough on the arrival lounge level. In a maintenance section," announced the security chief.

There were red lights all over the board, a siren was wailing.

"I..." Captain Blasik gasped, and finally the ship kicked into Baada drive and spun outward along the gravitational vortices to an outsystem point chosen randomly by the computer, a light-year out, beyond the comet cloud.

Most people were thrown to the floor by the torsion of sudden jump, which was why they usually rode jumps in their acceleration couches.

Now they lay everywhere, in the lounges and salons, in corridors and dining rooms, there were people screaming. There were broken limbs, one or two corpses, and a rising tide of red-blooded rage among the high cost consumers. A spectacular level of noise arose.

There was a security alert, a red light flashing on the board, and notice of an entry in the docking arrivals lounge. Atmosphere had been lost until an emergency hatch had shut in the airlock passage.

Something seemed to implode in Sally's heart. Without conscious thought she grabbed a gun and ran for the elevator. She found Carney Waxx and Yen Cho running with her.

There was an elevator waiting. It dropped them to the arrivals lounge in a few seconds.

The atmosphere had been restored, but it was cold, so fresh from the recycling tanks that it was virtually without moisture.

They filtered out of the elevator. There was nothing to be seen except the couches and mirrored pillars of the arrivals lounge. No passengers had been in here fortunately when the air was lost.

A flicker of movement and a pair of battleforms leaped toward them from behind a pillar to their right, Sally's side.

Sally and Carney fired almost simultaneously, the sound seemed to explode in the air.

A third came for Yen Cho from behind and Yen Cho took an outstretched arm and flipped the thing over his hip and brought it crashing to the floor.

It bounced and came up as if made of rubber. An armored foot lashed out and Yen Cho was almost beheaded. He ducked away and nearly lost his balance. The thing sprang on him as if it were a tiger. He went down beneath it.

The guns roared; the other two kept coming. Sally ducked, but hers was already down, its head shattered. As she came back up, she shot the one atop Yen Cho and saw it fall, too. Less accurate, Carney kept his magnum blasting, right up to the moment he was taken down by a waist-high tackle. His gun spun across the floor while Sally shot the battleform in the back of the head from close range. It toppled off Carney and fell on its side.

Carney got shakily to his feet. He had a bad cut on his forehead and another on his arm where the thing had grabbed him. Those hands were like fists full of knives!

They were dead, but they were not dead.

Security people rolled out of the other elevator. Grimly, tonelessly Bruda Dara told them what to do when the flesh of the dead hosts began to tear.

Yen Cho was badly wounded, unconscious, with blood all over his head and shoulders. Sally fell to her knees beside his body and wept as she groped for a pulse. She found it, weak but persistent, and as she felt the tears roll down her cheek, she also felt something huge lifting from her shoulders. She groped for the unnamable, just something to give thanks too. But Sally had no gods and no higher force that she believed in, and so she wept instead, just letting it all come out in a river of tears.

Gunfire began behind her as the alien parasite things rose out of the bodies of their dead hosts. Only the fact that these beasts had been unarmed had saved them.

Finally they were destroyed. Sickened, several of the red suits were leaning against the wall, sobbing for breath.

On the bridge Captain Blasik stared at the mess on the screen. He swallowed, several times. He turned to Rieben Arntage. "You saved our lives," he said in a shaken voice, but Rieben was already fast asleep, in the arms of Pandi Beshwan.

EPILOG:

The Military Form completed the expungement on the third day. As far as could be ascertained no concentrations of wild humans remained alive on the planet. There might be occasional strays, out on the glaciers perhaps, and there were fugitives still in the tropical jungle interiors, where the humans were much more difficult to find. But no threat to the young remained on the planetary surface; the victory was theirs. But the war had been lost.

The Military Form scanned the sky, waiting for the fire. The orbiter had disappeared from the screens an hour before. What radar they had managed to get working had been destroyed shortly afterward by missiles from the sky.

Great ships coursed up there, Baada-drive warships, the Sector Fleet of the ITAA, headed by the battleship North Atlantic. The Military Form sensed them and sensed their inevitable purpose.

The Hostmaster was still in the basement of the BDC, staying warm, surrounded by manytappers and holluschicks, cooing to the ripening young within their cocoons.

The Military Form had not bothered to visit since the arrival of the enemy fleet. There was no point in spoiling the last moments. The Hostmaster would indulge itself until the end.

The sky brightened suddenly to the west, then to the east. Then nearby, overhead, very bright now, the blast wave reached down and there was no more.