

# The Manna Trail

# The Manna Trail

A NOVEL

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## The Manna Trail

## Acknowledgement

Grateful acknowledgement is made to the Hearts of Space.  
<http://www.hos.com>

I love these little people; and it is not a slight thing when they,  
who are so fresh from God, love us.

Charles Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shoppe*, 1841

## Important Note

The glossary at the end of the book is optional, but it does contain some supplementary material. The reader is encouraged to take a look.

*Dedicated To Anyone Who Has Ever Helped A Child.*

CHAPTER ONE

## Charles Dunn

The blast caught him by surprise, just like it did everyone else. It slammed heat and air and people across the open expanse of decorated marble groundwork that stretched between the House of Governors and Alliance Park. Charles Dunn choked for his next breath as the invisible force tossed him several meters to a violent landing on the colorful but cold stone slabs.

Dunn lay still for a moment, ears ringing in the sudden stillness. Was anyone else still alive? There had been quite a crowd in the plaza, a diverse bunch of pedestrians including tourists, business executives, and politicians. Dunn heard no movement now. Without turning his head, Dunn couldn't see much more than one of the stout, artificially bred trees that decorated the edges of Alliance Park. They were purely luxury items, placed there to impress visitors from the other Outer Consortium nations. Dunn recognized the Dreschler corporation logo lightly faded into the tree's dark bark, acting as genetic copyright protection. The logo was the word Dreschler in stylized cursive, a double helix weaving a mosaic of color through the bright green letters. The model name and number would be embedded on the underside of all the inner leaves, but that didn't matter now.

"Nice tree," said the voice in Dunn's head. "But not that nice. Did you have to land so close to it? You could have hurt me!"

Dunn ignored her. Another meter and they both might have been part of the Dreschler product. It overlooked the manicured green of the stylized park beyond, its wide thick branches and leaves giving shade where none was really needed. The carefully controlled weather of the Roth bubble always provided perfect sunshine, perfect climate, twenty-four perfect hours a day.



Someone was screaming. There had been survivors after all, people caught on the unfortunate outskirts of ground zero. They would need medical attention.

"You can't help them," the voice said. "You can't be seen here."

An alarm went off somewhere. Dunn's cue to disappear. The Rothans were an overconfident bunch, more arrogant than suspicious, but there was nothing like watching your own people die to turn confidence into paranoia. Now the peacemen were on their way and Dunn did not care to talk to them.

"Wrong place, wrong time, Charlie," came the voice again from deep inside his head where no one else could hear.

"I can see that," Dunn responded. He kept his words inaudible. Internal sensors would pick up the articulatory muscle movements of his cheeks, tongue and jaws, and generate speech based on phonological and semantic algorithms.

"Someone's going to think you're a United Nations spy," the youthful female voice continued. "Or maybe a terrorist from one of the unrecognized nations."

Dunn was not a terrorist, but he could be mistaken for one. He was on Roth City on behalf of the legitimate governments of the Inner System, but he was not on legitimate Inner System business.

"How much time?" Dunn asked.

"Of course you're not exactly a spy," Daphne said. "Not today, anyway."

The burning from inside the ornate House of Governors sent foul smelling smoke his way. Dunn's dark blue business tunic was ripped at the knees and elbows where he had slammed into the patriotic decorations of the cold stone slabs. The chest creases had already neatened out again, but the rest of the tunic would take a few minutes to repair itself.

"How much time?" Dunn asked again.

"More like a thief," Daphne said.

"Daphne!" Dunn said.

"You really better get moving," Daphne said.

Dunn took a quick look around at the devastation as he jumped

to his feet. He should have been dead. Everybody else near him was. Their bloody bodies lay quietly now on the festive marble, many of them against and across each other in gestures of intimacy they never would have expressed when alive. Clumped together not far from where he stood, multiple copies of one man lay broken and bleeding against each other and against the broken pavement.

"Who's the VIP?" Dunn asked, glancing toward the lookalike group. Only Very Important Persons could afford to make clones of themselves and train them as bodyguards and decoys. Although in the end, the effort hadn't done the deceased much good.

"His name is Will Cranton," Daphne said. "He's a senator from Ganymede with strong ties to the soft drink industry there. Would you like to offer him a Dr. Ponc?"

"If I even knew which one he was," Dunn said, turning away. The clones had died with their owner. Perfectly legal under Outer Consortium laws. Human cloning and engineering were outlawed in the Inner System, except for a few specialized medical applications. No human could own another under United Nations rules, regardless of genetic modifications.

Sirens. Peacemen or rescue squads, it didn't matter. Where one group went, the other was not far behind.

"Are you running yet?" Daphne asked. "You really should be, you know."

The last thing Dunn needed was some suspicious investigator asking him how he had survived. His reinforced skin itched in all the wrong places at all the wrong times, but he would not have traded it for all the money on Mars. Duraskin was not contraband, but few people would tolerate the surgery and the subsequent irritation. It was unusual enough to be questioned.

"I'm running," Dunn said.

He took one last glance at the House of Governors and then put it behind him. The magnificent building was not in bad shape, but a dark smoking hole existed where the ornately decorated entrance used to be. Like the plaza around it, the building was constructed with debris brought here from Jupiter's outer rings.

"What about the Avni painting?" Dunn asked as he sprang forward.

"It wasn't hard to extrapolate the blast patterns," Daphne said. "The painting was destroyed."

A priceless Martian treasure, stolen by the Jovians half a century ago in the 2402 war and never returned. Its loss would not help relations between the Jovian Alliance and Mars, no matter who was responsible for the blast.

"And the permadoc?" Dunn asked. It was supposed to be hidden in the frame behind the painting.

"Are you kidding? You could throw that thing into Io's hottest volcano chain and not even dent it," Daphne said. Io was Jupiter's most volcanically dynamic moon. "It was designed for everlasting permanency."

Yes. That was the problem, and why he was sent to retrieve it. But now was not the best of moments.

There was some cover on the far side of the park, but it was a hundred meters away. The huge trees that adorned the park's edges were way too far apart from each other to do any good. A Special Services instructor had once told him to take advantage of whatever landscape he could find. The instructor was a waste of good air. Childhood in the Miami swamps had taught Dunn everything he needed to know about using terrain features to his advantage.

The sirens weren't getting any quieter. As his damaged tunic finished repairing itself, Dunn moved to put the closest tree behind him and started a mad dash across the park for the nearest real cover.

"What you need now is a big pink lizard, Charlie," Daphne said.

His innerware had a point. The pink lizards were another Dreschler product. Bred with canine emotions and gaudy reptilian appearance, they were this year's rage in fashionable pets. People often strolled with them here in Alliance Park. A pink lizard would be handy cover. He could pretend to be normal. He saw several of the big ungainly pets now. They galloped madly across the plush green grounds a hundred meters away, stretching their glittery leashes as they dragged their owners away from the blast site.

"Maybe next time," Dunn said, busily putting one foot in front of the other.

What was that? From behind the nearby Dreschler tree came the hopeless shriek of a child's anguish. Another screamer. Dunn turned his head, drawn to the child's despair. The little girl clutched a lifeless woman who wore a stylish long coat of slender russet fibers and too huge red earrings. Near the woman lay a blood streaked man wearing a coat of the same cloth. Their flushed skin, fat red rubies and fat coats the dark red color of ripe Martian manna gave away their origin. They weren't from around here.

"You don't have time for this little whiner," Daphne said.

She was a Mars blonde, sun colored hair dusted in spots with dark crimson powder. She had fair skin and hazel eyes. The delicate little face was reddened with tears and twisted with grief. Her stature looked normal for her age range, which meant that her family had been wealthy enough to raise her in standard gravity. Otherwise she would be a sprout, a too tall human that wouldn't last long in normal gravity. Extreme tallness and skeletal fragility were the chief physical characteristics of the Martian poor, their skeletal systems unleashed by subnormal gravity in their developmental stages.

Dunn stopped. "They are either executives or tourists."

The girl looked up at him with the wide eyed trust that only a child can show.

"So? The peacemen will take care of her," Daphne said from inside Dunn's head.

Would they? The peacemen were synthegens, intensively trained for a limited number of tasks. How would they react to a solitary Martian girl in the midst of the current disaster?

Dunn stooped over the adult bodies, checked pulse and breathing. He turned to the girl. "They're dead." There was no time to put it nicely.

She stared at him, stunned, her shoulder length hair falling in front of her face as if to protect her from the news. Her tunic was a crisp white and gold. Somehow this girl had escaped the force of the blast.

"Ima!" she finally managed to shriek. Mommy!

The little girl spoke Martian street Hebrew. She was recovering from her initial stunned shock, but she still hung on to the dead woman's arm. Roth City's omnipresent daylight gleamed off the multifaceted control bracelet on her right wrist. It was a kid-sized bracelet for kid-sized tasks, but all the facets were full. The girl had all the modules a child could need.

"Mommy's gone," Dunn told her. He held out his hand. "Let's go. It's not safe here."

"Hey, no passengers allowed," Daphne said.

"I can't!" the little girl said. "Mommy! Daddy!"

"The peacemen will take care of them," Dunn told her. "How old are you?"

"Five," the girl sobbed.

Dunn translated that to ten, maybe eleven. He had spent most of his adult life on Mars, but old Earth habits died hard. The United Martian Republic was the only society outward from Earth that didn't base its activities on Earth time. Even the Jovian Alliance ran on the old Eastern Standard Time, along with all the recognized Belt nations.

"You're old enough to understand that this is not a good place for you to be right now."

The girl looked around. "But Mommy..."

Dunn admired the cute Mars accent, English colored by centuries of contact with Hebrew speakers. "You were very lucky. You lived. How?"

"I was behind the tree," the girl said. "I was playing hide and seek."

The child's game had saved her life.

"Good for you. Come with me now."

The girl hesitated.

Dunn looked around. A crowd of the horrified was gathering. Bored citizens from the business buildings on the other side of the park. Some kept their distance when they got a good look.

"We really have to go!" Dunn said.

The sirens came closer. Lightly armored patroller cars dropped onto the plaza. One of them came to a halt right at the entrance to the House of Governors, where the blast had originated. Smoke still rolled out of the ugly hole. Dunn wondered how much of the inside was damaged. He hoped Daphne was wrong about the Avni masterpiece.

Next to the House of Governors was the Roth Pioneer Museum, propaganda central for the Jovian Alliance. The multifaceted structure was apparently unaffected by the blast. The two buildings were separated by an entrance into Parking Comb 0 and surrounded by neat, colorful gardens.

Another patroller dropped from the sky right at the edge of the park, landing on the plaza next to the tree. In front of Dunn and the little Martian girl.

"Too late now, Charlie," Daphne said. "The synthecons are out in force today."

"Mah shem shelach?" Dunn shot at the child in Hebrew. What's your name? She was too young to be wearing ID, so he would have to trust her answer. His brown-gray eyes drilled into hers and demanded an immediate response.

"Sarah Belkin," the girl said instantly. "My address is 617 Bartholomew Lane, Avni City, Naim Province, United Mars Republic, 01A8E9BF."

Good parents. They had drilled their daughter well. Though he could have done without the hexadecimal Martian zip code.

"My mail ID is —"

"That's all we have time for," Dunn said.

A tall, blue uniformed peaceman opened the passenger side of the patroller car. Tattooed webs of coded information lined the inside of his ears. Dark brown eyes peered out from a gaunt white face. The peaceman was genetically optimized for speed and agility. There was no use trying to outrun him, especially with grieving young Sarah at his side.

"Thank you for coming so fast," Dunn panted before the peaceman had a chance to speak. He wiped sweat off his forehead

in a gesture of desperation. “It was a terrible explosion – it killed everybody!”

“Please be still,” the peaceman said calmly. “The rescue agents will be here shortly.”

“OK,” Dunn said. The little girl still held her mother’s arm. “Bubaleh, bevakasha tirag’i.” Honey, please calm down. Dunn spoke with a perfect Martian accent.

Several rescue vehicles pulled up onto the plaza. Blond men and women in the soothing soft white uniforms of the rescue forces emerged. One group attended to the obvious wounded. The other moved efficiently from body to body, checking for any sign of life. Their faces were grim. At least they had turned their sirens off.

A young blonde woman approached him with a smooth stride. Her gentle features narrowed in deep concern. She said, “Sir, how are you?” Her voice was soft and reassuring, the result of generations of precision breeding. She fingered the specialized control bracelet that all her kind carried, pressing a silvery plate to toggle it out of unlock state. A faint rainbow tinge appeared around the bracelet to indicate that it was ready for use.

“I’m OK,” Dunn said quickly. There was a medprobe coming his way and he had to think of some way to dodge it. “I’m OK. But my sister and her husband... I think they’re dead. Could you please check them?”

The synthegeen paused, obviously recalibrating her priorities.

“And my niece? Could you check her, too? I’m really worried about her.” Dunn gave the rescue agent more to think about. The little girl looked all right to him but there was no harm in checking her out now that they were this far into the game.

“Mommy and Daddy are hurt,” Sarah said.

The synthegeen touched her bracelet again and activated its wispy Holographic Interface. Submerging her slender fingers into the shimmering geometry that hovered above her wrist, she approached the bodies of Sarah’s parents and probed for vitals. A faint representation of Sarah’s mother appeared in midair momentarily, accompanied by moving words and numbers and graphs. Sarah’s mother vanished and was replaced by Sarah’s father.

The rescue worker frowned. She blanked the images and turned to Sarah. “I’m sorry. I can’t help them.”

The girl’s face froze up. She looked ready to cry again.

“Your turn now,” said the rescue worker to Sarah. She focused the probe on the little girl and studied the imagery. She smiled. “You check out fine. You must have been standing pretty far away from the explosion.”

“We both were,” Dunn said. “We were behind that tree.” He pointed to the overhanging Dreschler. “I’m fine too, but I think there are others who need your help.” Dunn nodded toward a group of moaning wounded who had received little attention from the other rescue workers. Other blonde-haired blue-eyed rescue agents were checking motionless bodies, offering relief to some and shapeless dark coverings to others.

“I must tend to the wounded,” the young rescue worker said, giving in to her genetic imperative. She moved off to check the fallen on the square.

“You were both very lucky,” the peaceman said.

Tears streamed down the little girl’s face.

“Come here, Sarah,” Dunn said. He stretched out his arms to her. “Your Uncle Luke will take care of you.”

“Uncle Luke?” Daphne mocked inside Dunn’s head.

“I guess that makes you Aunt Daphne,” Dunn said internally.

“No way,” Daphne said. “Statistically, aunts are old people, and I got a firmware upgrade just before we left Mars.”

Sarah hesitated. Dunn didn’t blame her. He was not a pretty man and he was visibly older than her parents. He was sure that even an eleven year old could detect the demeanor of a man who did not always play nice.

“Come on, Sarah,” Dunn coaxed.

The little girl sprang into Dunn’s arms, sobbing uncontrollably. She must still be in shock, Dunn thought, to seek him as a source of a relief. But he was the adult. He could make it all right.

Dunn shrugged, hoping to look slightly embarrassed. “I was playing a child’s game with my niece. Hide and seek, it’s called. We

were behind that tree.” He pointed to the fine Dreschler product not far from them.

The peaceman had probably never played hide and seek on the Dreschler sponsored training asteroid that would have been his childhood home. Dunn wondered if he had ever even heard of the game. Hopefully he wouldn’t think to ask why two people were hiding in the same place.

“The girl has lost her parents,” the peaceman said. “Who will care for her?”

“I’m her uncle,” Dunn said. “Of course I will take care of her.”

“Then I will leave her with you, sir,” said the peaceman. “But I must now request your identification.”

“Certainly,” Dunn said. He sighed through his nose. He used the pause to click his upper right second molar. The tooth moved sideways, and Dunn was suddenly surrounded by the colorful three-dimensional interface into his internal circuitry. Superimposed on his external reality, it was visible only to him. He deftly tongued around his dental sensors and chose his Luke Zeglin identity. Luke Zeglin was a Martian businessman who regularly traveled throughout the Jovian Alliance on matters of interest to the AgriTek Corporation. AgriTek was a major exporter of Martian manna products to the Outer System.

Dunn clicked again and the specialized geometry of his inner interface was gone. His optical nerves went back to real vision mode.

“I really, really hate it when you bypass me,” Daphne complained, unheard by anyone but Dunn.

“I’m Luke Zeglin,” Dunn said. He held out his hand and gave the peaceman a firm handshake while the nanobots in his forearm shifted their microscopic positions to emulate Luke Zeglin’s invisible tattoo ID. The IDs were required in all Outer Consortium nations, even for visitors. “And this is my niece, Sarah.”

The little girl stared up at him in open eyed confusion.

The peaceman activated his control bracelet and scanned Luke’s forearm. “That’s fine. I have your Roth City address now, in case an investigator needs to contact you. Please state what occurred here, for later analysis.”

Later analysis? Perhaps the peaceman hadn’t noticed. The culture that bred him was in immediate danger.

“Peaceman, there was an explosion here. It killed my sister.” Dunn said, pointing at the body of the slain woman. And her husband. . . . Somehow he managed to shed tears for two people he didn’t even know. “My niece Sarah and I were playing a children’s game – hide and seek – we were both hiding behind the tree when the explosion. . . the explosion. . .” He waved his arms again at the two dead Martians. Perhaps he was overdoing it.

“Did you see anyone acting suspiciously?” the peaceman asked.

“I really wasn’t paying any attention,” Dunn said apologetically. “I was playing that game with my niece.”

“Did you see anyone leave a bag or a case anywhere around, and then leave?” the peaceman asked.

“I’m sorry, peaceman,” Dunn said. “I was behind the tree. Sarah, honey, did you see anything?”

The little girl shook her head.

“Thank you for your statement,” the peaceman said. “I’ve deposited contact information for the assigned investigator in your mail account. If you remember any more details that will aid in our analysis of this incident, please reference him immediately.”

“The bodies,” Dunn said. “My sister and her husband. . . I have to take them home, to Avni City.” Dunn held the little girl’s hand. She squeezed his fingers hard as the bodies of her parents were covered by rescue agents.

“They will be released to you after study,” said the peaceman. “Thank you for your cooperation.”

“Come on, Sarah,” Dunn said. He led her across the park, around the wide area being scrutinized for clues by the peacemen. She obediently followed him.

“Now can we go home?” Daphne whined.

Life in Roth City was perfect. All the public relations specialists said so. But the big media networks still needed a framework to support their commercial streams. A handsome young man approached, colorful press credentials tattooed on his forehead. The tattoo was



legally required warning that the reporter's perceptions were being recorded. Any sight, sound, or smell experienced by the cleancut reporter could end up on the other side of a MediaSet.

"Look, we're going to be on the Mset!" Daphne rejoiced. "Did the blast mess up your hair? Has your suit repaired itself yet? How about the little girl? Is she ready for the big time?"

Just what I need, Dunn thought, an Mset debut from the Jupiter system. A terrorist act on Roth City would impact news media throughout Sol system and beyond. In forty minutes it would reach from Roth to HotSpot, the capital of the Mercury colonies. In several years it would reach all the way to the clusters of interstellar city bubbles pioneering like ancient wagon trains out of this solar system and setting up camp in its neighbors.

The peacemen permitted the reporter to walk among the dead with impunity, capturing mediastreams of the tragedy and transmitting them to his home station where a specialized Digital Person would clean them up in real time and stream them out at light speed for public consumption. Dunn was too far away to see the reporter's forehead tattoo clearly. He couldn't make out the insignia of the network the young man represented. He bunched back his tongue and flipped a switch in his molars, activating his onboard information system again. While leading the girl along the well worn lizard path, he began to flip through channels.

"If you want to find the guy's network, all you have to do is ask," Daphne said.

Dunn ignored her and kept clicking channels. What? He saw his own face getting larger, coming right at him! He squinted ahead. Another reporter was running straight toward him.

"Congratulations!" Daphne said. "You're live, on the Mset!"

"Can't you block his signal?" Dunn asked.

"Too late for that now," Daphne said. "You'll have to use one of your spare faces later."

He only had two. He did not look forward to the process of changing.

The man ahead stared at him with bloodshot eyes marked by

dark half-circles beneath them. His expensive emerald tunic could not hide his baggy body and saggy posture. He had not used a depilatory in weeks.

In the videostream, the reporter appeared as a larger than life, muscular, ruggedly handsome avatar whose depilatory echoed the casual splash pattern so popular these days. The pattern was created by carelessly splashing depilatory agent over a burgeoning beard. In order to be effective, the splash had to be repeated several times at varying intervals of at least a few days apart. The effect was so popular that the very casualness of it had become a stylized art form, permeating everything from avatar design to zodiac signs. This was all very nice for news reporters and streamie stars, but a hairless face was still the norm for people who had to work for a living. Years of serving in the Martian military had left their impact on Dunn. His own face was completely free of hair, from tight black haircut to high cheekbones and all along his sinewy neck.

The oncoming reporter announced his bold intention to interview the man and girl headed toward him.

Dunn cleared the image and casually turned off the path. "Let's go this way," he said to Sarah. "It's a shortcut." It was actually the long way around the park. Dunn's sporty little rental flyer was stashed back at Parking Comb 0.

The little girl nodded and clutched even harder at Dunn's hand. She said nothing, but Dunn saw that her head was drooping. She was tired.

A tiny golden lightning bolt flashed at the lower left portion of Dunn's vision.

"You've a got a call!" Daphne said. "It looks like our Belter mole."

"Stop calling her that," Dunn said. He tongued a molar in response to the signal. The lightning bolt call symbol vanished. A green waveform took its place, to let him know the call was live.

"Everest, do you know you're live on the Mset?"

"Trying not to be," Dunn muttered. Everest was the code name Dunn had picked for this mission. He was glad his local contact was

monitoring Mset channels. She was a deep cover agent from Trask who was cooperating with the Inner System on this venture. Trask was an unrecognized Belt nation eager for acceptance into the international community but not quite deserving of it. The woman's pale, slender image ghosted in front of him as he walked away from the reporter.

"How nice! The Zolotoi engineer is watching out for us," Daphne said. Only Dunn heard her. "Shouldn't she be bending energy fields or something? I mean, what if the whole Roth bubble falls apart?"

"You've got two reporters coming right at you," Eden said.

"Two?" Daphne echoed.

"I don't see a second one," Dunn said. He turned and spotted another reporter bearing down at him from his right. She was a dark skinned woman with wide apart eyes, chiseled cheeks, and tattooed press insignia on her forehead. She must be from a competing network. "Oh great," Dunn said. "Any more?"

"So far just those two, but more are surely on the way." Dunn doubted that Eden was her real name. He had only met her yesterday. "Who's the girl?" Eden asked.

"Pretty nosy, don't you think?" Daphne said. "Are all energy bending engineers so inquisitive?"

"She's someone who needs our help," Dunn said in response to Eden's question. "Her parents just got blown up. I couldn't leave her."

"Everest, that was not in the plan," Eden said.

"You see?" Daphne smirked. "Didn't I tell you?"

"Excuse me, sir," the dark skinned reporter said. "Were you close to the explosion?" Dunn got a good look at her. The stylized spinning forehead tattoo indicated that she was an Outer News Network correspondent.

"I'm sorry, my niece isn't feeling well," Dunn said. He did not pause but just kept walking. He flipped channels and got ONN inside his head, just in time for a live shot of his backside walking away.

"Yummy, not bad for a guy in his eighties," Daphne said.

The reporter had put her avatar in the shot, hands on hips and an outraged pout on the lips. Dunn was not surprised to see that the avatar was a bleached blonde with a mild tan. About the only thing she had in common with the real life person was the facial features. But these days nanobots to change race and appearance were available to anybody with the money to pay for them, the stomach to endure their effects, and the patience to spend a few days in bed. Simple visual inspection was no help in determining anyone's genetic race.

"Your niece?" Eden asked.

"Sometimes you've got to improvise," Dunn said, "and take your cover where you find it."

"Did you see the Avni painting?" Eden asked.

"The bomb went off before I could get to it. There was no way to determine if the MacLaine Accord is still sealed in the back of it."

"The Accord's permadoc would have survived that blast," Eden said, "even if the painting itself was destroyed."

"I know," Dunn and Daphne said together.

Eden sighed. "The little girl doesn't look good. Bring her to my place. Here's my address." Eden opened up a substream and sent the information into it.

"I'm on the way." Dunn had no intention of returning to his hotel room.

Eden closed the connection with a wave of her hand.

"Mission aborted?" Daphne asked.

"Mission delayed," Dunn responded.

The pink lizards were returning to the park, and the reporters were finding more cooperative subjects.

"I bet you wish you were back on that cesspool of a planet you grew up on," Daphne said.

"I know you've never been there," Dunn said. "But Earth is more like a trash heap than a cesspool."

"That's not what the song says," Daphne said.

"You mean 'Inner City of the Solar System'?" Dunn asked. "I hate that song."

"It's over two hundred years old," Daphne said. "You should be used to it by now."

Dunn turned to his new friend. "You're not a pink lizard, Sarah," Dunn said out loud to the little girl, "but you'll do."

## CHAPTER TWO

## Sarah Belkin

The passageway was cluttered with floating holo-advertisements for everything from the latest dynogarb to nanobotic beauty aids. Some ads stayed stationery, filling the spaces where corridors intersected with their bright lights and strong smells. Toys and fast foods mingled together in open invitation. Other ads roamed the hallways, spreading their subliminal messages to anyone who passed through them.

"I hate the ones that follow you around," said the man who called himself Uncle Luke. "They analyze your demographics and think they know everything about you." He brushed away a cheering advertisement for a heavyball match between the Callisto Sharks and the Ganymede Crushers.

They stopped in front of a dark oval door that looked just like all the other doors along the brightly lit corridor. Lights from the ads spilled over the door as it slid silently open. Sarah peered inside at a well lit living area. It was smaller than what she was used to.

A very nice lady invited her in. "Come in, Sarah," the lady said. She was tall, but not so tall as to be a sprout. Daddy told her that sprouts were too poor to afford real gravity and had to work outside all day. She had seen them for herself at Grandpa's big house on his manna plantation outside of Avni City.

The lady's green eyes looked intently at Sarah. "Uncle Luke told me about you. My name is Eden."

Sarah felt gentle pressure on her right shoulder as the man who called himself Uncle Luke steered her inside. She took a few steps forward, and the door whooshed shut behind her.



"You've checked?" the man asked. The tension in his face made him look scarier than he had been in the Park.

"Constantly," Eden answered. The pale white walls of the room were dotted at regular intervals with shiny flat kinetic receptors. Eden didn't have the kind that blended so well with the room's style that you would never notice them. Eden motioned with her hands and it registered on the glistening wall mounted sensors. A Holographic Interface popped into view directly in front of Eden. Some of its shimmering controls looked familiar to Sarah, but some did not. Eden had probably customized them. Sarah did that sometimes too. She used to use cartoon characters and but now she used splash music stars. Splash was the best. "You see?" Eden said. See what? Sarah didn't know what she was looking for. "No active or passive spy devices." Eden gestured again and the HI was gone.

"OK. This attack changes everything," Uncle Luke said. "What's the Mset saying?"

The apartment was tight. The kitchen was too small. There was a little corridor that probably led to the bathrooms and bedrooms. There probably weren't many and they probably wouldn't be very big. This was Sarah's first visit to the underbubble. Were all the apartments down here like this? The room didn't even have a view of Jupiter, but how could it? After that Uncle Luke guy parked his flyer, they had ridden a long time in a verticar to get down here.

The news was on the Mset, in remote mode, confining the media streams to just one corner of the room. Sarah saw a mess of shiny vehicles in Alliance Park. The sound was muted, but it looked like a fat man with long braided black hair was answering questions while his pretty pink lizard pulled uncomfortably at its leash.

"Sarah?" said Eden. Her face was pale, and her forehead wrinkled in concern. Her short black hair covered none of it. "Do you want something to eat?"

"When will Barry be back?" the man who called himself Uncle Luke asked.

"A few days," Eden said.

Who was Barry? Who were any of these people? Sarah had a real

uncle. Would they let her call him? She missed Uncle Noam. What would she say? Uncle Noam was on Mars, so it would take half an hour for her message to reach him, half an hour for his response to reach her.

"I have several different juices and sandwich types," Eden said. "What do you like?"

"What are they going to do with Mommy?" Sarah asked.

Uncle Luke stopped his pacing and turned to look at Sarah. Eden leaned forward with a safety tissue in her hand. She wiped the tears from Sarah's cheeks. The cheery yellow and comforting warmth of the cleansing tool soothed her as it absorbed excess salt and moisture and returned her facial skin to a healthy state.

"I'm sure your Mommy loves you very much," Eden said softly. "She's resting now."

"Daddy's resting too," Uncle Luke said. "Try not to worry about them, Sarah."

"I'll get you some hot chocolate," Eden said to Sarah.

Sarah couldn't help it; she began to sob again. She sank down into a big plaid covered chair that immediately adjusted itself to her body size and shape and provided the proper resistance to her movements. It didn't massage her. The chairs in her home would have massaged her. Sarah was too tired to complain.

"Sarah, listen to me," Eden said. "We'll get you back home."

Sarah missed her wide soft bed with pink sheets that were smart enough to wrap around her in all the right places. She missed her grandparents and her uncles and aunts and cousins. She missed her pet teddie bear with its soft black and white fur and delicate way of whining when it was hungry. She knew that it would take the fastest ship more than a month to fly back home. She didn't want to leave Mommy and Daddy here.

"How do you intend to get her home?" Uncle Luke asked. He sounded skeptical.

"Depends on where her home is," Eden said.

"She knows her address," Uncle Luke said. "She's from Avni City." They had to live in the capital because Daddy is a senator. Was a senator.

"Here's your hot chocolate," Eden said. She placed a warm white cup in Sarah's hand.

Sarah sipped the sweet liquid.

"We can put her on a Mars bound ship with child care," Eden said. "Or a relative could take care of her. Maybe someone could come pick her up."

"It would take at least a month," Uncle Luke said. "Will you be the one contacting the family? And where will she stay in the meantime?"

"Eric won't mind a new friend," Eden said.

Eric? Who was Eric?

Uncle Luke grunted. "Where is the little guy anyway?"

"Asleep," Eden said. "Don't worry, you won't wake him. I damped the incoming sound to his bedroom."

"Look," Uncle Luke said, pointing to the Mset. The words "Trask Terrorists" floated in the Mset's little corner. The letters were red and dripping as if with blood. The blood vanished into the darkness of the floor. An announcer was saying something. Sarah guessed it was about the scenes in the floating streams nearby. She had seen those scenes before, so she knew to turn her eyes away now. They were ugly scenes and her parents said not to look at them. There were also some commercial streams flowing around the newsstreams, but Sarah wasn't interested in new drama streamies or exotic vacations inward to the Belt or outward toward Saturn's rings. "Bring up the sound and put it on immediate," Uncle Luke said abruptly.

Eden gestured the HI into existence again and configured the Mediaset out of remote mode and into immediate mode. Eden also brought the audio out of mute. Suddenly the news announcer was in the same room with them and the newsstreams were life-sized. Eden waved away the Holographic Interface. It curled up into a tiny ball and disappeared. The Mset scenes were ugly. Sarah closed her eyes.

"You will recall similar attacks on two of the three principal Belter governments in the past few years," the man said. Sarah recognized the announcer's voice. He was someone Daddy did not like. "Two years ago, the Trask Republic capital of Io was attacked and

several government buildings were destroyed." Sarah had her eyes closed, but she could not block out the terrified screams of dying Trask citizens or the bright blaze of burning buildings against Io's lonely little moon. "The buildings destroyed were the Presidential Residence and the Military Complex building called MilCom. An estimated 6500 people lost their lives when a shipment of Luceon power grids en route to the nearby New Colorado mining facility overcharged as the vehicles carrying them were detoured near the Trask federal buildings by unauthorized navigational overrides. Though the origin of the illicit overrides has not been determined, sources say that the attack was in response to Trask plans to build a catapult that would dump asteroids onto Inner System worlds. The Trask government denies that there was ever a plan for such a catapult, and the United Nations government of the Inner System denies all knowledge of the attacks."

"It's ridiculous that they keep repeating the same streams over and over," Eden said. Sarah was surprised to hear the woman's voice crack. "Does Vasily Krychek really think there is someone anywhere in the whole system that hasn't seen Io City blown into space yet? And why does he keep spreading that unfounded rumor about a catapult?"

"And the other insinuation about the United Nations," Uncle Luke added. "As if we caused that disaster."

"And just last year, Eros, capital of the December Consensus, was completely destroyed by Zolotoi disruptions of unknown origin," Krychek continued. "Over five hundred and twenty thousand people were killed." Sarah kept her eyes shut. She had seen this videostream before too. Broken bodies and buildings and gasps of air and smoke and water turned solid and got blasted into space when the energy bending Zolotoi fields failed. "All evidence of what caused the Zolotoi disruption of Eros is presumed destroyed in the disaster itself."

Sarah cautiously opened her eyes again. The graphic newsstreams had dissolved and Vasily Krychek stood alone in the center of the room in his dark brown tunic with cream colored linings. The silver and green ONN logo spun slowly over his right shoulder.

"Outer Consortium intelligence sources have hinted that the Trasks carried out the attack on Eros to retaliate for the destruction of their own capital, but that has not been confirmed," Krychek stated. "In any case, there is no evidence that the December Consensus has ever attacked the Trask Republic. The Trasks, however, have a pattern of ruthless attacks..."

"Blame it on the Trasks," Eden said.

"Easy target," Uncle Luke said.

"We're not an Outer Consortium member or a United Nations member. So who is there to defend us? We have to do it ourselves!"

"You're not a United Nations member because you don't want to be," Uncle Luke said. "You backed out on the MacLaine Accord, remember? You signed that treaty on Mars over sixty years ago. The evidence is in the permadoc."

"How can we join the UN when all our border nations are OC?" Eden asked. "What good does that do us? It only creates antagonism at home. That's why you have to get the permadoc back, before someone discovers it. What a stupid place to hide it anyway. In the back of a painting. How could you leave it there so long?"

"There was a war going on. The Jovian Force had invaded the Mars capital. Someone moved fast to hide the document from the Jovians, and you should be glad they did. Whoever it was didn't survive long enough to tell anybody where the document was."

"I still don't understand how you only found out about it now," Eden said.

"I told you," Uncle Luke said, "I did not participate in that part of the operation."

"You UN guys..." Eden said.

"We would welcome you to the UN," Uncle Luke said quietly.

"Sure, because Trask controls the prime manna shipping routes. Thanks, but no thanks," Eden said.

"The OC still hasn't forgiven you for your origins," Uncle Luke said.

"Why do you suppose that is?" Eden said. "Because two hundred years ago Joseph Trask and his militia rebelled against the

corporate mining companies? What were we supposed to do? The conditions were horrible. We call it the Trask Revolution; the Outer Consortium still calls it the Trask Rebellion."

"Maybe if you would establish some real borders—" Uncle Luke started.

"Not that again," Eden said. "We claim territory across three of the five major Hirayama asteroid families. So what if the Hirayama groups orbit the sun at different speeds?"

"The asteroid families lie at very different distances from the sun," Uncle Luke said. "The closer asteroids orbit faster; the ones farther out take longer—"

"Which means that at any given moment the Trask Republic could be entering into some other country's territory, or expanding to cover a wider area of the Asteroid Belt," Eden said. "Our borders are not unstable. They are governed by regular physical laws of gravity and centrifugal force. International law has to be rewritten to cover that."

Uncle Luke shrugged his shoulders. "It's not just Trask. It's the same problem with all the unrecognized nations. The Outer Consortium will not recognize any nation whose territory regularly invades the sovereign territory of an OC member."

"Whose territory invades whose?" Eden asked.

"Right," Uncle Luke said.

"The OC will have to rethink their policies," Eden said. "There are too many of us."

A sudden fleet of unmarked spacecraft streamed into the room. Eden and Uncle Luke turned their attention back to the ongoing newstream. Krychek was still talking, but his avatar was somewhere offstream. "The Trasks aren't the only group under suspicion for today's attack. Jovian Intelligence has had several pirate fleets under surveillance for some time. These are outlaw bands that prey on law abiding citizens, hijacking their ships and stealing their cargo. You see here some rare streamage of one of the largest and most aggressive pirate bands. They are known only by their leader, whom they call Marcos X. For nearly five decades, Marcos X has made a savage

career of unrestrained hijackings and murders across vast portions of the Belt. It is said that he killed his first man when he was just a child. Since then, his disposition for violence has only grown worse. . . .”

“Hard to believe pirates had anything to do with the House of Governors,” Uncle Luke said. “Groups like that tend to operate pretty far from the OC.”

“I don’t think the Jovians know anything,” Eden said. “They are pointing their prodar everywhere, probably hoping for a reaction.”

“Yes,” said Uncle Luke. “Their long range probes pick up a lot of data, but Jovian Intelligence is not quick about mining information from it. Look, Krychek is finally coming back to today’s news.”

Sarah leaned forward, the old armchair obediently following her posture. Would she learn anything about Mommy and Daddy?

“Roth City is the first territory of the Jovian Alliance to be attacked by an unknown enemy or enemies,” Krychek continued. Sarah was so shocked that she almost closed her eyes again. It looked like she was back in Alliance Park, walking among the dead bodies and inspecting the debris. Krychek’s voice turned grim. “Today more than 250 people are presumed dead after a vicious attack on the House of Governors. An explosion in the main corridor ripped through the ground floor and tore off the entrance to the building, killing everyone in its path. The damage to the building can be repaired.” The Mset gave the sensation of walking among the dead. “The damage to these lives cannot.”

Another newsstream opened up from a pinpoint of light and swallowed up Sarah and everyone in the room with her. “Investigators are at the site now and are piecing together the details,” Krychek said. “Here is what we know so far.”

An obvious simulation of the House of Governors sprang into view. In slow motion, an explosion blew through walls and people. Its impact extended outside the building, onto the courtyard beyond.

“The cause of the explosion is still unknown,” Krychek said. “Survivors have been interviewed, but so far so none have provided useful information.”

“That’s because I didn’t see anything,” Uncle Luke said.

“Look!” Sarah said. “That’s us!”

She pointed to the shot of Uncle Luke and her walking away from the disaster.

Eden smiled at her. “Sure is,” she said.

In another stream, a reporter approached her and Uncle Luke.

“They took a nice close-up of you,” Uncle Luke said. That seemed to bother him.

“It won’t take long for that signal to reach Mars,” Eden said. “Someone may recognize you, Sarah. It will take another half hour to send a response back here.”

“Or someone right here may recognize you,” Uncle Luke said. “Sarah, how long have you been on Roth?”

“A couple of weeks,” Sarah said.

“Did you and your parents travel to Roth City alone?” Eden asked.

“We came on a big cruise ship,” Sarah said. “There were a lot of people.”

“But did you travel with a group of people, or just with your parents?” Uncle Luke asked.

“It was just us,” Sarah said. But she had met other people on the ship, of course. Mostly in the restaurants and observation areas.

“The trip from Mars to Jupiter at this point in their relative orbits is probably about a month,” Eden said. “I’m sure the other passengers noticed such a sweet girl traveling with them.”

Sarah shrugged. She had spent the first few days on the ship playing with her friends back home, before the communication lags got too long. Then they downloaded their personal avatars to her Mset, but playing with them just wasn’t the same. She played with Mommy and sometimes with Daddy when he wasn’t too busy, or she interacted with her edustreams.

A bystander was being interviewed, but she was boring. Eden sent the Mset streams back to remote with a casual shortcut gesture.

“I’m still working,” Eden said. “I have to get back to these unfinished Zolotoi constructs. People are waiting for the results.”

“I’m heading back for the Accord,” Uncle Luke said.

"Back there? Now?" Eden sounded surprised. "The place is smothered in peacemen. And what if the permadoc's already been found?"

"It would have been all over the newsstreams," Uncle Luke said.

"Don't you think you should wait?" Eden asked. "You'll never get in."

"Can't wait," Uncle Luke said. "It's more urgent than ever. Peacemen are all over the wreckage. They'll probe every inch of the House. With the Avni painting destroyed, it won't be long before they stumble over the Accord."

"Are you sure the painting has really been destroyed?" Eden asked.

"So I'm told," Uncle Luke said.

"Adva Avni is practically worshipped on Mars!" Eden said.

Sarah knew all about Adva Avni, and not just because Sarah was her great-great-something granddaughter. Everybody on Mars knew about Adva Avni. She was an artist and a scientist. There was a statue of her outside of Daddy's office building in Avni City. The short, stocky woman was chiseled in Martian granite. In her left hand, she held a paintbrush. In her right hand, she held a fat manna fruit. It was broken open, so that you could see past the tough outer scales to the soft pink insides. Of course it wasn't really soft, because it was a statue. But the sculptor made it look that way. The manna in the statue was not as big as the mannas on Grandpa's plantation. Sarah's teacher, Ms. Heravi, said that in the two centuries after Adva Avni developed the original manna plant, the Martian people had found ways to make it even better.

"A key piece of Martian art," Uncle Luke said. "Adva Avni was a genius and a patriot. Her 'A Martian Moonset' is the first water color masterpiece to be painted entirely with materials of Martian origin. The design of the UMR national flag is based on that painting."

"You Martians are pretty enthusiastic about your own kind," Eden said.

"You don't know much about Avni, do you?" Uncle Luke said.

"She was from Earth, before the quarantine. Before the embryo shipments even."

It was in the docustreamie they showed every year on Adva Avni's birthday. She had led a group of early pioneers from Israel after enemies poisoned the land and made it toxic. Ms. Heravi said that the Israelis were experts at making deserts bloom. The docustreamie was titled "The Little Ripple with the Big Splash", because Adva means 'ripple' in Hebrew.

"I didn't realize that," Eden said. "Everyone always associates Adva Avni with Mars. We think more about her mysterious death than about where she came from."

"What's so mysterious about it?" Uncle Luke said. "She was lost in a Martian sandstorm. Her body was never recovered. It happened in those days."

"It just seems ironic that she was killed by the planet she loved," Eden said.

"Every relic of hers is precious," Uncle Luke said. "The Adva Avni Historical Foundation has been lobbying for years to get that painting back. Some said they would rather see it destroyed than have it remain here."

"They got their wish today," Eden said. "I wonder if they really meant it."

"The painting was ripped right out of the Ruby Office by the Jovian Force, then openly displayed in the House of Governors on Roth City," Uncle Luke said. "Martians call that a slap in the face."

"Even after fifty-one years," Eden said. "Where were you then?"

"We would have lost everything without the support of the Earth orbiting nations," Uncle Luke said.

"Come on, not that UN propaganda again," Eden said. "What were you doing?"

"I did my part to help," Uncle Luke said. "And I'm still helping." Uncle Luke stood up. "I can't go back out there with this face. I need your bathroom."

"You have extras?" Eden asked. "Ouch. You really came prepared. But — Ouch. That's going to hurt."

"Sarah," Uncle Luke said softly, "I have to change my face now. It's because I was on the Mset. I'll look different when I come out of the bathroom. But I'll still be your Uncle Luke. Please don't be afraid of me, OK?"

Sarah gripped the white cup so hard her fingers almost matched its color. "Are you going to leave me here?"

"Eden will take care of you," Uncle Luke said. "I'll be out in fifteen minutes." He vanished into a narrow corridor that led away from the living room.

"How's the hot chocolate, Sarah?" Eden said. "Do you want some more?"

"I've had enough," Sarah said. "Thank you."

Eden took the cup from her. "Let me change the channel. Here's something you might like better than newsstreams." Eden gestured the news away and brought a musicstream into the room. "How's that?"

"Thank you," Sarah said. Pep music. Almost as good as splash. It would do.

"I have some work to do," Eden said. "Will you be OK for a while?"

Sarah thought she would never be OK again. "I'll be OK."

Eden sat in a chair in a corner of the room. Her back was to Sarah. She surrounded herself with a cylinder of symbols. Sarah had no idea what the woman was doing there. The Mset was showing a band called Solar Soul. Sarah had seen this musicstream before. The four band members, two men and two women, danced and sang around her. Sleep pulled at Sara's eyes, forcing them shut, beckoning her into blackness. She caught herself at the edge. She would not fall asleep without calling Uncle Noam first.

From behind her somewhere, Sarah heard a baby crying. At first she thought it was a dream, but she opened her eyes in time to see Eden wave her hand and her work dissolve around her.

"Eric's awake," Eden said. She got up and disappeared into the same narrow hallway that Uncle Luke had used.

A baby? Here? Sarah never expected that. She wanted to follow

Eden, but just then Uncle Luke entered again. Uncle Luke with a different face. The eyes were hollower, the cheeks further apart, and some of the hard angles were replaced by gentle curves.

"Well, Sarah?" Uncle Luke said. "It's not too bad, is it?" Even his voice was different, not deeper, not higher, but just different somehow. And he was sweating, too. There was a flushed redness to his new face that Sarah didn't think was supposed to be there.

"Uncle Luke?" Sarah asked.

The man smiled. "It's still me." His breath smelled faintly of vomit.

"Sleepyhead is finally awake," Eden said. She was carrying a little toddler with black hair and beady black eyes. He looked not even a year old. Out here they would say he was almost two years old, because they still used Earth time. The little boy looked at his visitors in wide eyed astonishment. He clutched his mother's auburn tunic with both tiny hands.

Sarah got up from her chair to take a closer look at the boy. "Hey, heartlight. You're a sweet little seed."

Eden smiled back at Sarah. Eric glared at Sarah with wide black eyes and clutched his mother even harder.

"I'm going to feed you now, Eric," Eden said.

"Bye, Eric," Sarah said. "Have a nice meal!"

Eden turned toward the small kitchen. A cupboard door drew open as she approached it.

"OK," Uncle Luke said. "The girl can stay here?"

"Until we figure out something better," Eden said.

Uncle Luke turned toward Sarah. "Eden will take care of you," he said. "We'll make sure you get home safely." But he did not say that he would be back.

Then Uncle Luke was walking away from her and the oval door to the outside was sliding open.

"Good-bye, Uncle Luke," Sarah said.

Uncle Luke stopped and turned around to look at her. He smiled. "Good-bye, Sarah." Then he was gone.

The warm chocolate had seeped into Sarah's stomach, and was



having its effect. Her eyes kept trying to close, despite her determination to keep them open. Eric was a nice distraction, but even the comical sight of the toddler trying to feed himself could not keep her awake.

"I need to use the bathroom," Sarah said.

"Help yourself," Eden said. She had her hands full with her son.

Sarah stepped into the bathroom and the soft white disinfectant light immediately bathed her. She closed the door behind her and reached for her control bracelet. She toggled the unlock and then the HI switch. Her personal Holographic Interface came to life. She quickly turned off the audio part. Her personal music had no place here. It was easy to navigate to the commset, diplomatic channel. Daddy had put a macro in there for her. It looked like her teddie bear, floating in space in front of her. A very innocent picture, Daddy had said.

Sarah stroked the little teddie bear and he stood up on his hind legs to let her know he was activated. His little pink tongue went sideways as he triangulated locational data from nearby navigational satellites. He then tagged Sarah's current coordinates with her personal signature and key physiological indicators so that the recipient of the information would know the general state of her health. The little teddie bear found a manna leaf to nibble on as he encrypted the message with Martian diplomatic codes and scattered it across a dozen different frequencies into multiple communications satellites. Uncle Noam would know what to do.

Sarah shut down the HI and attended to the rest of her bathroom needs. When she opened the door again, Eden was once more immersed in her work and Eric was playing nearby, swatting holographic butterflies that turned into silver snow when his hand passed through them. Neither seemed to notice her.

She returned to her chair, surrounded by the pep musicstream. She had done something about her situation. She could sleep now. She was still aware of Eden and Eric, but they were too far away to have much of an impact on her dreams. . . .

Sarah played with her real teddie bear and fed him manna milk and cherries. Uncle Noam sang happy birthday to her, and her cousins Rebecca and Samuel and Matthew invited her outside the Avni City dome for a flight in Uncle Noam's flyer to the big hotel on the top of Olympus Mons, the highest point on Mars. From the viewing deck she could see for many, many kilometers. They teased her about Olympus Mons being a volcano that might erupt at any minute, and then they danced and watched the sun set and in her dream the sky was clear enough for them to watch the land below come alive with scattered lights. . . .

It was the silence that woke her, not the utter blackness. The pep music was gone, and the air was still. Air that was not moving was air that was not being recycled, recirculated, refreshed. It was air that was dead, and it would not be long before anything that needed air to breathe would also be dead.

"Don't fight them," Eden said from somewhere very close to Sarah.

The oval shaped door to the hallway suddenly slid open, and bright white light forced its way into the room. There had been no polite introductory chimes. Men with long weapons jumped through the doorway one by one like they expected to find something dangerous here.

"Down! Everybody face down!"

Sarah's eyes hurt from the sudden light. She couldn't see who was yelling.

"Down, Sarah," Eden urged.

Sarah felt Eden's hands grip her and pull her down to the floor. She trembled, unable to see anything beyond the blackness.

"Hands behind your backs," another voice commanded.

"Check the other rooms," someone ordered.

"My baby's in his room!" Eden cried.

"Get your head down," someone yelled, and Sarah winced at the sharp crisp smack to the face right beside her own.

Sarah's eyes filled with tears as her hands were gripped from behind. A pair of restraint rings were shoved down over her wrists. They snapped together with a tiny clinking sound.

"Get up, little girl."

Sarah shook so much that one of the men had to pull her to her feet. She looked around, blinking away the light and her tears. There were eight of them. Seven were very tall. Peacemen, Sarah realized. Like the one she spoke to in the park. Where was Uncle Luke now?

Eden was standing again, too. Her hands were trapped behind her back. "Who are you and what's this all about?" she demanded.

"I'm Investigator Reeds," said the man in the middle. He was shorter than the others, but that was just because they were so tall. He wore striped green and white earrings shaped like flat coins and a splashed up brown beard. His identification hung dully on his static gray tunic. He waved his hand over it and it flashed brightly and briefly. "These peacemen are part of my team. You're both under arrest on charges of espionage and conspiracy."

A woman with a tattooed forehead entered the room. She said nothing, but she watched very carefully. She seemed interested in everything that was going on. She was slim and even shorter than Investigator Reeves. Her hair was silky black and barely reached her shoulders. Tiny epicanthic folds adorned her eyes. She was very beautiful. Her tunic was crimson, gold, and emerald, dynogarb whose soft colors slowly flowed around each other like molten lava. She carried a shiny black purse.

"Under arrest? You've got to be kidding," Eden said to the investigator.

"Look around you," said Reeves. "How could you even think that?"

A ninth man came out of the apartment's tiny corridor. He was tall like the others.

"Hey!" Eden said in surprise. The yellow light from the corridor illuminated her features as surprise turned to fear. "Get away from him!"

The peaceman had Eric curled into one arm.

"He'll come with us until we figure out what to do with him," Reeves said. "Is there anyone else here?"

"Get away from the girl!" Eden shouted. Her hands were stuck

together behind her back and her face was red with desperation. "Leave her alone!"

"Gag the woman," Reeves said.

"Yes, Investigator," said one of the tall men. The peaceman slapped something over Eden's mouth. It was white and stuck to her face. "The mouth restraint is porous," the peaceman explained. "You can breathe through it, but the acoustics are damped."

"No one else present," said another peaceman, emerging back into the living room from the bedroom area.

"You two stay behind and conduct the search," Reeves said. "The rest of you, let's go."

Reeves began to move toward the door. Three of the peacemen led the way. The others followed behind, with Sarah and Eden and Eric. Eden struggled through the white gag, but no sound came out. They emerged into the corridor.

"Wait!" Investigator Reeves said. He stopped, as if he were listening to something. But Sarah didn't hear anything. The investigator must have a commset in his head. Maybe even a Digital Person. The investigator said something, barely moving his lips. Sarah could not make out the words.

Suddenly the investigator spun around to face the peacemen. His gun was in his hand and he was making an adjustment to it. He did it very fast. And then he pointed it at the tall men, waving it in each of their faces. "Go," he said. "Get out of here, now!" Even the woman with the tattooed forehead looked afraid. "Wait! Leave the boy here with me."

The tall men looked confused. The one carrying the boy nearly dropped him, but managed to put him down safely. The peacemen bumped into each other as they stumbled down the corridor. In moments, they were gone. The slender woman watched them leave. Then she looked at the investigator.

Eric stood alone in the corridor and started to cry.

"Don't worry, Eric," Sarah said. "Mommy's here, but she can't talk to you right now."

"You better keep your mouth shut, little girl, or I'll tape it up just like Mommy's over there," the investigator said.



Eric continued to cry. "Mommy?" he whined. "Mommy?"

The investigator paused. He held the gun on them, but he was not looking at them. Sarah guessed he was distracted by his endoware. Some adults carried internal Digital Persons to help them remember things and keep in touch with other people. At least that's the way Mommy and Daddy explained it. Sarah would get her own when she matured.

Eric sank to the floor in tears. Eden rushed toward him.

"Stop right there!" the investigator yelled. "No sudden moves."

Eden glared back at the man, but stayed where she was. Maybe it was better that her mouth was muffled. Sarah thought she would probably say something to make things worse.

"Eric!" Sarah called. "Mommy's right here. Can you see her?"

"Mommy?" Eric said.

"Look, she's right over there," Sarah said.

Eric looked around. Eden was profiled in the light now and the boy got a good look at her. He jumped up and wrapped his arms around her legs.

The investigator pointed his gun at the toddler. "No sudden moves, kid," he warned.

"He's just a little boy!" Sarah said.

The gun swung around in her direction. She had never seen a weapon from that angle, not in real life. The interior glowed red. The pistol was fully charged; she knew that much from the action streamies. Sarah's throat tightened and she couldn't say anything else. She was glad the woman with the colorful forehead was watching. Reeves might have shot them all by now if the woman hadn't been there.

"Just wait," Reeves said. "Wait. Don't do anything. Just wait."

The man kept repeating himself. He started to pace nervously around the room, but the gun was always pointed in their direction. What were they supposed to be waiting for? Many minutes passed, but Sarah did not speak again.

Eric fell asleep at his mother's feet.

"All right," Reeves said. "All right, move it, all of you." He

must have gotten new instructions through his endoware. He was still pointing the gun at them. It was waving around a little bit. He moved away from the door and gestured for Eden and Sarah to go ahead of him. Eden nudged Eric awake and motioned with her head for him to come with them. The investigator marched them all down the hallway. It was empty. There were no other people there, and even the floating holo-ads were gone.

The investigator ignored the tattooed woman, who accompanied them without a word. A few doors slid open as they passed, and some neighbors stuck their heads out to watch them. The investigator glared angrily at the neighbors, and they went back into their apartments. The man guided them down the long hallway to the verticar waiting area.

A verticar was already there. Its door was open to reveal the cushioned benches that lined the three interior walls and the gripping poles that crisscrossed the ceiling. No one was inside.

"Don't get in yet," the man said to Sarah. "You are going to be separated. Another investigator is coming for you, little girl."

Sarah was going to be separated from Eden? How would Uncle Luke find her then?

Reeves returned Eden's silent but demanding stare. "We have a treaty with Mars," he told her. "Your interrogations will be handled differently."

Sarah had just lost Mommy and Daddy, and now she was going to lose Eden? But Eden had been so nice, with her hot chocolate and soft furniture and cute son. And Uncle Luke was gone. He probably wasn't coming back. How would Uncle Noam find her now? Sarah felt lost. She felt afraid. A bad feeling got into the bottom of her stomach. She was trembling again. Eden was watching her. Sarah tried to smile, but she couldn't.

"The boy, too," Reeves said. "Someone else will be by for him."

Eden's eyes went wide in panic. She shook her head vigorously in protest.

"Get in," the investigator said to Eden. "I'm taking you with me."

But Eden refused to move. She put herself between her son and the investigator. Her face was strained. Behind the acoustic damping cloth, Sarah thought Eden must be yelling. Muscles popped out of her arms as she pushed uselessly against the silvery restraining rings.

"I said, get in!" Reeves shouted. "Get in now!" He raised the pistol toward Eden and this time Sarah thought he really would shoot.

"No!" Sarah screamed suddenly. She was behind Eden, so she ran forward to be in front of her. The investigator's pistol was charging up, but Sarah could block his aim if she moved fast enough. Surely the man wouldn't shoot a little girl. Sarah would not leave Eden, and she would not wait here to be taken by another scary man in a gray suit, and she would not let Eric be separated from his mother.

The investigator stepped forward with his hand outstretched, making a grab for Eden's shoulder to force her into the elevator. Eden shifted away. Sarah didn't expect that. She ran into Eden so hard from behind that Eden stumbled and fell onto the investigator. The investigator fell down and dropped his weapon. For a moment, Sarah saw fear in the man's eyes.

Then the man grabbed his gun and stood up, outraged. Sarah was closest to him. The man raised his gun toward her and pushed the button but Eden jumped in front of him to block his fire. He acted like she wasn't even there. Without hesitation, he blasted her out of his path. The acoustic damper was still tight over her mouth. She collapsed onto the floor. Her body shook so hard Sarah could hear the bones pop. Then Eden stopped. She died unable to scream. Eric was too stunned to cry. The investigator turned his gun on Sarah.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Charles Dunn

Dunn targeted his rented Daschonic three-seater to snap into the honeycomb matrix that bordered on Alliance Park. He had bypassed the autopilot to make good time here, teasing the top of the speed limit with the little orange flyer, working the velocity algorithms so as to just barely avoid detection by law enforcement prodar. The comb's parking magnets sucked the little flyer into spot A3I. Dunn popped open the transparent top and stepped onto the moving walkway. The vehicle snapped shut behind him as the walkway carried him through the parking area of Public Comb 0.

"I am so under appreciated," Daphne said. "I would have been happy to drive for you. I'm fully compatible with the piloting systems on your little rent-a-toy."

The smooth whirl of the walkway accented the emptiness of the large parking complex. Most slots were empty, unusual for this time of the afternoon. Roth City residents had little tolerance for unexpected acts of terrorism, and most tourists felt the same. Only the sheer size of the parking complex hinted at the multitude of business and government buildings that bordered on Alliance Park.

"Daphne," Dunn said. "I have to ask for your help." He paused as he came to an intersection of moving walkways. He was looking for the floating glowing signs that would lead him to the House of Governors. It was difficult to distinguish directional signs from the barrage of floating holo-ads for everything from the hottest party-wear to the latest streamie.

"I knew it," Daphne said. "You're lost already. Look over there to your left. The House of Governors is that way. I saw the sign out of the corner of your vision."

"That's not what I meant," Dunn said. He turned to the left and spotted the directional buoy. "I would have found it in a minute."

"Why don't you let me go visual for you? It will be easier to point these things out if you can see me."

"No," Dunn said.

"But I've downloaded the parking comb layout from Roth public files. I can help you with your directions."

"Not now," Dunn said. "I want you to scan the media streams for any information about the House of Governors attack."

"Using mainstream media for intelligence purposes?" Daphne asked. "You said they never get it right and that they are government controlled corporate puppets."

"Especially out here in Jovian space," Dunn said. "But the Department is too far away to provide the kind of information I need. The time lag to the nearest station is over twenty minutes. And you can bet Jovian Intelligence is tightening up their sentinel systems today. They'll be scanning for the faintest trace of anything suspicious in all communications."

"They should have given you more contacts here on Roth," Daphne said. "The Zolotoi energy bender is cute, but she's in no position to know anything. She's a Trask immigrant, and just an engineer! And her husband is only a teacher. He's not even on Roth right now."

"He's a jovologist," Dunn said. "He teaches at Roth University, but he also researches Jupiter and its moons. He spends a lot of time out on the university's research station."

"You know what I mean," Daphne said. "Anyway, there's nothing you haven't already seen in the news media now. The investigators aren't talking."

"Just keep me posted," Dunn said.

Above the intersection was a magnificent open skyway. Jupiter's red, brown, white, and blue bands filled most of it, jet stream winds that twisted and turned as they pushed against each other in opposite directions. Planet sized eddies rotated slowly where the massive currents met. Twice the size of Earth, the stormy crimson center of the

Great Red Spot was just rotating out of view on a distant horizon. The glowing gas giant sparkled in the brilliance of the far off sun.

"Why is it that other people have the good sense to walk away from disasters," Daphne asked, "while we always seem to head toward them?"

The walkway spilled Dunn out onto the stationary stone sidewalk that ringed Alliance Park. The Roth Pioneer History Museum stood solidly to his right. Dunn turned left toward the House of Governors. Some stray people scattered toward him and then past him toward the few remaining parked flyers in the comb.

Dunn found the House of Governors cordoned off by floating blue warning buoys flashing holographic red "Peace Barricade" warnings. The buoys were spaced about two meters apart and suspended about a meter from the ground by a mildly rainbow tinged Zolotoi field. They emitted a low growling warning sound that bordered on the subsonic. The buoys completely surrounded the House of Governors and a large part of the mosaic marble plaza in front. Three peacemen stood vigilantly just inside the barrier.

"Now what?" Daphne said. "You can't just go walking through the buoy line without the proper ID frequencies. You'll be caught up in a tractor web and probably get my tiny little circuits fried."

"You'll just have to take that chance," Dunn said. The three peacemen looked in his direction. They had noticed him. "But not right now."

Dunn shrugged and turned away from the barricade as if nothing more important than casual sightseeing had been interrupted. He walked casually back toward the parking comb entrance. There were no pink lizards in the park any more.

"You have something really twisted in mind, don't you," Daphne said.

"The peaceman I shook hands with this morning. You got his DNA makeup when I touched him?"

"Standard operating procedure," Daphne said. "And a fine young man he was."

"You just like him because I had to look up at him. Tall enough

to be imposing, not so tall as to be threatening. That's how they design them."

"He could whip your butt with one hand tied behind his back," Daphne said.

"He's designed for that too," Dunn admitted. "Did you get his serial number?"

"Of course, silly. The peacemen's genetics are nearly identical, but their serial numbers are individually encoded in a specially designed chromosome group."

"I want you to check the Dreschler records for his private codes and digital signature."

"The Dreschler records? You mean like from the Dreschler product database, confidential section? How am I supposed to do that?"

"I uploaded it to you when you weren't looking," Dunn said.

"You little sneak. Hmm, here they are. I have your information but I'm supposed to caution you about using it. Dreschler doesn't know that their data has been compromised, and your boss would like to keep it that way."

"There's no point in gathering intelligence if we're not going to use it."

"You can explain it to Ethan," Daphne said. "I'm just a Digital Person, what do I know? What are you going to do with our friendly peaceman's data?"

"Not me," Dunn said. "You. The peacemen use a homing frequency characterized by their genetic serial number and encrypted private codes. I want you to emit it."

"Imitating a peaceman's personal communication is illegal. It says so right in the tourist's guidebook."

"I'm sure they'll make an exception for you," Dunn said.

"Can't we just shoot somebody?" Daphne asked. "It's so much easier. The no weapons rule on this bubble just jangles my protein sequences."

"Quit whining," Dunn said. "You saw how thorough the inspection was."

"Are you sure we couldn't have smuggled anything here? We could have had your fingernails altered to shoot radioactive heat-seeking genetically modified smart nanobombs."

"Locate the codes for five others in our guy's batch," Dunn said. "Batchmates are usually assigned sequentially by serial number. Use the two above him and three below."

"And then what?"

"Hold off on emitting the homing beacons until I give the word." Dunn was entering the parking comb again, but he was not headed toward the flyer.

"ONN is coming through with some new information," Daphne said. "You want to see it?"

"Just sum it up for me."

"They're saying that the blast was the result of an uneven Z balance. A variety of otherwise harmless Zolotoi components were found around the Park and nearby buildings. When triggered together, they could have created an unfocused energy network that would overload and go boom. They're still working out the details. Investigators suspect that key elements of the dispersed Z net were destroyed in the explosion itself."

Dunn was silent for a moment.

"You're wondering who did this," Daphne said.

"Isn't everybody?"

"Yes," Daphne said.

Dunn walkwayed down another thin corridor.

"Anyone we know?" Daphne asked.

"I'm thinking," Dunn said.

Dunn took a turn down a side walkway. The ventilation was cooler here. He passed a white labeled entrance to a maintenance shaft.

"Where do you think you're going?" Daphne asked.

"I want you to talk to the flyer," Dunn said.

"That little toy? What instructions?"

"How far to the closest peacestation?"

"About four kilometers, according to the map I downloaded when we arrived."

"Send the flyer there. Have it circle around and come back."

"The flyer's disembarking now. Why are we doing this?"

"Let me know when the flyer reaches the peacestation."

"There's something important coming through on ONN," Daphne said.

"Hold off on that for now," Dunn said. "Where's the flyer now?"

"It's just getting to main skyway level. It will be a few minutes."

Dunn stepped off the walkway and took a footpath. He was moving into a less populated area.

"It would be helpful if you could monitor peaceman radio frequencies," Dunn said.

"Even Dreschler can't do that," Daphne said. "Roth peacemen use a proprietary encryption algorithm. Without the keys, it's all just noise to me."

"We're doing this blind, then."

"Please don't be mad at me," Daphne said. "I'm doing the best I can."

"I know you are," Dunn said.

"The flyer is just reaching the peacestation," Daphne said. "Do you want to hear what's happening on ONN now?"

"No," Dunn said. "I want you to turn on our friend's homing beacon in my head. Peace Command has to think I'm him."

"But that means his homing beacon will be duplicated," Daphne said.

"That should get someone's attention."

"Yeah, but whose?"

"How about our guy's five batchmates? Send their signals out of the flyer," Dunn said.

"Done. So it looks like five counterfeit peacemen are on the way from the peacestation to rendezvous with another peaceman. Is that what you're after?"

"If we're lucky, all the beacons we've chosen are together inside the peacemen cordon."

"So?"

"So, Peace Command will be confused about who's counterfeit and who's not. The peacemen will be recalled for verification," Dunn said.

"Leaving the House of Governors unguarded. Won't Peace Command send replacements?"

"In time," Dunn said. "But I would recall all the peacemen from the whole bubble and shoot whoever's left, wouldn't you?"

"I'm glad you're not a terrorist," Daphne said.

"Only then would I send my carefully verified replacements."

"You are going to cause a citywide panic," Daphne said.

"Would you rather have the MacLaine Accord be discovered? And reveal to the Outer Consortium that the Trask Republic once planned to join the UN?"

"Could you please explain to me why I am transmitting from your mildly graying head? You'll be the first target!"

"I'm not a target," Dunn said. "I'm bait. The investigators will see all the homing beacons converging around one point. That is where we will meet."

"And then what? You get a disruptor in the face, or at the very least taken in for questioning."

"Investigators are unmodified humans. They are not used to fighting their own battles. That's what peacemen are for. I will have a physical advantage over an investigator that I would not have over a peaceman."

"You mean you will have a fighting chance."

"I'll take it," Dunn said.

Dunn walkwayed through the outskirts of the parking comb, checking the signs at every intersection.

"Didn't you want me to help you find your way around here?" Daphne asked.

"I'm looking for a place where I can see them coming, yet not be particularly visible myself," Dunn said.

"I think that's called an ambush," Daphne said. "You won't find anything like that around here. The Rothans design their parking combs with everything out in the open."

"What are my options?" Dunn asked. "I need to stay near the exit that leads to the House of Governors."

"You should keep moving. You'll be more interesting as bait. Stay away from busy intersections and any intersection of more than two walkways. And get ready. ONN is now reporting a problem with the peacemen. If I may talk about ONN now."

"That's a little sooner than I expected. Is that what you wanted to tell me?"

"No, I wanted to tell you that the investigators have put Eden's apartment under lights out and that they currently have her under wrist restraints and an acoustic damp."

"What?"

"Sarah is restrained, too."

"But —"

"Someone's coming," Daphne said.

Dunn reached the inner wall of the parking comb, where Roth's upperbubble daylight met the interior glowing light of the parking labyrinth. His timing was good. Dunn recognized the dull gray uniform of an investigator. The man had the faraway look of someone involved with his internal imagery. No doubt he was following an endographic directional indicator to Dunn's position.

"Shut down all the locator beacons," Dunn said.

"What about the flyer?"

"By this time it's been identified and targeted by the impound tractors. We won't be going back to it."

Suddenly the investigator looked up, confused. Dunn knew that Daphne had cut the signal. Dunn was already rushing forward, studying in slow motion the several vulnerable points exposed by a man caught by the unexpected. Dunn chose the inner elbow, nudging it outward to throw the man off balance. He stepped sideways into the man's center and bent his knees, pressing his hip into his opponent's stomach while still holding the inner elbow and guiding it over his head and across his back. The man flipped over Dunn's back and splatted on the walkway, stunned by the fall. Dunn wrenched the arm around in one smooth motion, controlling the man's body

with it so that he ended up face down. Pinning the man's shoulders with his knees, he slapped a sleeper hold on his neck. In moments the investigator was unconscious, blood circulation to the brain cut off by pressure on the jugular vein. The man never had a chance to draw his weapon.

"Yeah, but he was smaller than you," Daphne said.

Dunn stripped the unconscious investigator of his tunic and then took off his own clothes. He donned the investigator's robes. They were slightly large, but they would do. He used the investigator's ID to override the pistol's DNA preferences and force it to accept his own pattern. He was surprised to see that the pistol was set on max. He pulled the slider control back across the barrel out of the red zone so that the pistol was set on stun.

Dunn ran toward the exit and out the door. No time for pink lizards now. Nor was there any need. A running investigator wouldn't attract too much attention today, and he took full advantage of that.

"Hey! It's against the law to impersonate a Rothan investigator," Daphne said.

"Did you find that in your tourist guidebook too? Update me on Sarah and Eden. No, wait a minute."

Dunn paused in front of the growling peace cordon in front of the House of Governors. Rainbow energies sizzled between the floating blue buoys. The investigator ID would use its own distinctive Z signal to open a path. Or so he had heard.

"No time to be shy," Daphne said.

"The ID in this jacket," Dunn said.

"I know," Daphne said. "It will get us past these annoying peace buoys without frying me. At least we hope so. You think I didn't know what you were up to? Now go!"

Dunn dove into the cordon field and came out the other side. No tractor web triggered.

"I'm fine," Daphne said. "Thanks for asking."

Dunn looked around. The building fires were extinguished, but the stench of smoke remained.

"I didn't quite get to do the reconnaissance this morning," Dunn said. "But maybe you know where the painting is?"



"Yes," Daphne said. "It was in my tourist guidebook. The painting is supposed to be in the main hall."

"Right where the Rothans can make the most of its propaganda value," Dunn said.

"What a mess," Daphne said as Dunn entered the blown out arches of the main entrance. Scorched stone surrounded him as he made his way through.

"Templeton, is that you?" an investigator's voice rang out. "What happened? You don't respond to my calls and now I get a reading that you've come back through the cordon."

Dunn blasted the investigator with Templeton's weapon. The thin young man fell to the floor.

"It's so good to be armed again," Daphne said.

"It's only on stun setting," Dunn said.

"He said the other guy is not responding to his calls, so he must still be out cold."

"Not for much longer," Dunn said.

"The peacemen in Eden's apartment got called away for a biocheck," Daphne said. "They were ordered straight back to Peace Command. Seems there is a problem with counterfeit peaceman signals."

"I'm sure they'll clear it up soon," Dunn said. He bent over the unconscious investigator and confiscated his weapon and jacket. He ripped the ID from its bulky protective covering and examined it briefly. "Thank you, Investigator Poliachik," Dunn said. He used the ID to tune the weapon to accept his DNA and then slipped his new acquisitions into the pile of his clothes that he still carried under his arm. He stepped back and took a look around. The mosaic floor beyond the stunned investigator had developed a smoking crater. The charred walls may have held paintings at one time, but not any more.

"The investigator in Eden's apartment looks confused," Daphne said. "He seems lonely without his peace squad."

"Then he is probably more unpredictable than ever," Dunn said.

"The 'Martian Moonscape' is not where it's supposed to be," Daphne said.

"Then where is it?"

"It's a few meters beyond the far side of that crater in the floor," Daphne said. "Most of it, anyway. I'm extrapolating from the blast patterns."

"What about the Accord?" Dunn had to push debris out of his way. "Do you see the Accord anywhere?"

"I can show you," Daphne said. "Let me go visual."

"Quit fooling around," Dunn said. "Where is it?"

"Kick some of that broken stuff over there."

"Here?"

"No, a little more to the right."

"Here?" Dunn asked.

"I'm hand gesture capable, you know. This would be much easier if I appeared to you."

"I don't want your visual, I told you," Dunn said.

"You don't want to look at me now?" Daphne asked.

"Just tell me where the Accord is."

"Four of your strong manly paces toward your two o'clock," Daphne said.

Dunn turned slightly to the right and took four slow paces through the broken furniture and artwork. His foot turned up a thin hard coin, the color of dull gold. The United Nations seal was imprinted on both sides. The permadoc had survived the blast. Anyone could have found it.

"I don't know why you don't want to look at me," Daphne said.

"Let's get out of here," Dunn said.

"What are you going to do with the Accord?" Daphne asked.

"Bring it back if I can, find some way to destroy it if I must," Dunn said. "Those are the orders."

Dunn headed for the blast-widened exit. Still running, he transferred the investigators' weapons to the pile of his clothing under his arm. Then he tossed off the inspector's uniform and got back into his own clothes a few steps at a time.

"You're such an exhibitionist," Daphne said. "Need some help with those pants?"

Dunn reached the marble plaza outside, but did not advance beyond the buoy line.

"What's ONN saying about Eden?" Dunn asked.

"The Investigations Bureau sourced a Martian diplomatic signal to Eden's apartment. They are very jumpy today."

"A Martian... That could be Sarah. But how?"

"Well, her father is a senator after all," Daphne said. "She must be trying to tell someone where she is."

"He's what? Who is he? What's he doing on Roth?" Dunn demanded. "No, wait. She said her name was Sarah Belkin."

"Her father is Frank Belkin," Daphne said.

"Obviously," Dunn said. "Now. Why didn't you say something earlier?"

"Like you said, Charlie. It was obvious."

Should he blame himself or accuse Daphne of a systems glitch?

"What will they do with Sarah?" Dunn asked.

"They want to know why such a high ranking Martian politician was so close to the attack," Daphne said. "They don't believe it was coincidence."

"He's here representing the Adva Avni Historical Foundation," Dunn said. "They've been negotiating for years to get back the 'Martian Moonscape'."

"So they think there's a connection," Dunn said.

"They want to question Sarah."

"A Rothan interrogation? We can't let her fall into their hands!"

"They want to question Eden, too," Daphne said.

"She's from Trask, Daphne. They'll treat her like a prisoner of war."

"What are you going to do? You don't even have a flyer any more."

"No," Dunn said, "but our new friend Investigator Poliachik does." Dunn tapped Poliachik's metallic ID. "Speed limits and skyway boundaries don't apply to him." Dunn used the ID to summon Poliachik's flyer to his location.

A sleek blue flyer with investigator markings dropped out of the sky to land next to Dunn inside the buoy zone. The tinted top popped open and he hopped in.

"This stupid car won't let me anywhere near its piloting systems," Daphne said.

Dunn was thrown back against the stiff seat of the four-person flyer as it jumped up over the skyway and slammed across Roth's Zolotoi ceiling.

"Investigator Reeves seems to be waiting for orders," Daphne said. "It's all over the Mset. I can hear Eric crying. Reeves is pacing. His pistol is set to max."

"Just like Templeton's," Dunn said. "They really are nervous without their pet peacemen." He kept the flyer below the Zolotoi danger borders but high enough above the other traffic that the little specks below them offered no impediment to his forward motion.

"Looks like Reeves just got his orders," Daphne said. "He is marching his three prisoners out of Eden's apartment."

Jupiter filled Dunn's vision.

"Time to bring this baby back down," Dunn said.

"Sure hope the heat shields hold up," Daphne said.

Dunn homed in to Outer Comb 9. It was the most direct route to Eden's vertishaft. He dropped the vehicle out of the sky but didn't let it touch the ground. He flipped the switch that put the flyer into standby mode and jumped out.

"They are approaching the vertishaft," Daphne said. "An empty verticar is already there."

Dunn raced over to the vertishaft area. It was much more crowded here than in Alliance Park. Dunn forced his way through the throngs of people that waited for any of the ten verticars to arrive. He flashed Poliachik's ID across the flat blue identiprobe embedded in the waiting area wall and commandeered the shaft control system. When a verticar appeared, he commandeered it. No one challenged his investigator ID. No one challenged his drawn disruptor. Dunn set the verticar controls to target level 338.

"Reeves is forcing Eden into the verticar," Daphne said.



"What about Sarah?"

"He's telling her that another investigator will come for her."

"He's going to separate them?"

"Something to do with different treaty arrangements."

"And Eric?"

"He wants to separate the little dirt spurt too."

The verticar plunged down the shaft at emergency speed. Dunn's breathing sounded especially loud. He didn't bother to sit down. He crouched near the door, weapon in hand.

"Sarah doesn't want Eden to leave her and Eden won't be separated from Eric. They're — Sarah just ran to Eden. Knocked her right over. Eden fell into the investigator. The investigator is on the ground. He is grabbing his pistol now, aiming at Sarah, but Eden..."

Dunn stood for an eternity as the verticar locked into the passageway and the door dragged open. The sharp crackle of disruptor discharge slammed his ears. Eden lay trembling on the floor, voiceless, breathless, dead.

Without speaking, Dunn drew his disruptor, aimed it at Reeves and pushed the trigger button. Reeves dropped to the floor. Dunn's finger dropped on the button again. The gun was set on stun, but two shots could kill. He fired at the reporter instead. The woman dropped to the ground.

"Sarah!" Dunn said. "It's me. Uncle Luke."

The little girl stood as if paralyzed. She had seen Uncle Luke gun down two people without even blinking.

"Eric! Remember me?" Dunn said.

The boy finally burst into tears and ran to his mother.

"Sarah," Dunn said. "Can you do something? Help him?" Dunn was already searching Reeves. He grabbed the investigator's ID from its clumsy protective jacket and snatched up his disruptor pistol. Then he turned to the reporter. She carried a small black bag strapped to her waist. There was no time for a leisurely review of the contents. He ripped it from its adhesive attachment and turned to the girl.

"Sarah?" Dunn said. "I'm going to release your wrist restraints." The girl did not respond as Dunn fumbled with the investigator's ID.

He overrode the peaceman's passcode. The metal bracelets expanded and unmagnetized. They fell to the floor.

"Let's go, Sarah. Eric, too. Let's go!"

The children were not moving. They stood over Eden's wrist restrained body in stunned disbelief. No time for this. Dunn picked them both up and hauled them into the verticar. They offered no resistance. Sarah was limp with fear; Eric was shaking with grief. Dunn punched floor 0, ground level. With any luck, the flyer was still on standby and he could use it to escape. He had retrieved the Accord. Mission accomplished. It was time to exit this bubble.

"No more news reports?" Dunn asked as the verticar door closed. He was recalibrating Reeves's pistol to his own DNA. Just in case.

"Just because you disrupted one reporter? You're going to have to do better than that. ONN switched to another feed. The shaft-top is surrounded by patroller cars and peacemen. They all saw you shoot Reeves and the reporter. You are going to have to change your face again. Do you know what an ache in the gut it is to design spare faces? Do you have any idea how much they cost? And you only have one left!"

"I thought the peacemen were out of commission!" Dunn said. Nothing like a live newsstream. He had just thrown away his second face in one day. Changing faces again so soon would be an ordeal.

"Faces have to be matched against every known database to be sure you don't use one that somebody already owns," Daphne scolded.

The verticar began its upward ascent.

"Daphne!" Dunn said. "Where did these peacemen come from?"

"They were rotated out from Peace Central. They were checked there, and they've been cleared. More are on the way."

Dunn dropped the children to the verticar floor and slammed the stop command into the controls with both hands. There was no response. He tried brushing his stolen IDs one after the other against the dark blue identiprobe embedded in the front wall, but a holo

readout told him the IDs were invalid. The interior lighting faded and died. The ventilation choked and was silent. The verticar was blacked out.

"They've deactivated all the IDs. They've taken control of the whole shaft," Daphne said.

"Yes, I can see that," Dunn said.

"They're forcing us back up," Daphne said.

Dunn's night vision automatically activated. Darkness was not a problem for him. It would be for the children.

"No! No! I can't see anything!" Eric sobbed.

Dunn dropped to his knees on the verticar floor and gently stretched out his arms to sit Eric on one of the cushions against the left corner of the rear wall. "I've got you," Dunn reassured the boy. "Don't worry. I can see everything. I've got you."

Eric clutched Dunn's arm, his tears soaking through the thin tunic to moisten Dunn's forearm.

Dunn put his free arm around Sarah. She was shivering. He lifted her onto the seat next to Eric. "You're a brave girl. It'll be OK."

"How do you figure that?" Daphne asked.

"Look, you two," Dunn said. He put Eric's hand in Sarah's and closed her grip around it. Now they would know they were not alone. "Stay together." He stood up.

"No," Sarah said suddenly, the words shuddering from her mouth. "Please don't let me go. I can't see anything." A tiny hand clutched desperately at his chest, pulling at the front of his tunic.

Eric was crying. "Mommy..."

"OK," Dunn said gently. "All right. I've got you both." He sat back down between them and put an arm around each child. He held them tight and looked up as if a solution might spring from the ceiling. The verticar was picking up speed, accelerating upward to surface level and the patiently waiting peacemen.

Dunn held the children close. "I'll take care of you," he promised them. To Daphne, he said, "Looks like I won't need that last face after all."

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Ethan Marshall

Ethan Marshall was only a few days away from his hundredth birthday. But what was there to celebrate?

The spectacular view from his office at the edge of NYC3, perhaps. On those rare moments when he turned his graying head from the ongoing activity around his desk, he might catch himself admiring the blue, gray, and green shades of Earth as the quarantined planet rotated slowly outside the large oval window a few meters to his left. Should NYC3 be on Earth's night side, he might sink his gaze deep into darkness tinged by a halo of sun. Once many lights had broken that darkness, glowing with the activity of humanity's first and greatest cities. Now those lights were snuffed out, some by the noxious byproducts of humanity's self-absorption, others by the nuclear devastation of humanity's self-hatred. Few new lights had arisen to challenge the gloom.

This was one of the planets he had sworn to defend. He had never set foot on it, yet he never tired of admiring its re-emerging turquoise beauty. He mourned the careless past that had rendered it nearly unfit for human habitation. In his role as chief spy for the Inner System, Ethan found the gradual rebirth of Earth his primary inspiration. Every day he examined it for signs of healing, as a doctor might worry over a patient's open wound.

A far off sphere of sparkling lights swam into Ethan's view. A NEON quarantine assurance satellite was making its rounds. The Network of Earth Orbiting Nations prohibited any contact with the planet below, except for ten specially designated tourist areas. The NEON automated defense system would shoot down anything or

anyone that attempted to penetrate Earth's ecosystem without UN authorization.

The call notification signal flashed yellow over Ethan's broad brown desk, a shifting lightning bolt that spilled golden light into his holod map of the solar system. The map expanded across the room's central conference table, ignoring the solid dark slab of vat grown wood and the deep chairs that encircled it. It turned slowly to reveal the locations of all the planets and the major asteroids in their orbits. Space based cities gleamed in midair with the colors of their allegiances. Red, white and blue claimed the coveted Lagrange points around Earth, glowing forth from Capitol City, Apollonia, NYC3, and several others. The remaining Earth orbiting cities were speckled with a myriad of other colors. The shining map warped solar system dimensions to fit into the human space of Ethan's office, and to highlight what Ethan considered the most strategic areas.

The incoming call generated the ID codes of the Martian prime minister, Paula Betancourt. The heavily encrypted communication would take a few minutes to collect all its quantum bits from the scattering of telecom satellites between Earth and Mars. At this point in their orbits, Venus was more closely aligned to Mars than Earth. Earth orbited the sun twice as fast as Mars, and only lined up with it every five hundred days. Venus orbited faster still, and lined up with Mars much more frequently. While Earth was on the opposite side of the sun from Mars, it was not unusual for communications between Earth and Mars to route through Venus to avoid the sun's disruptive influences.

Ethan sipped a glass of water while the commset's buffer filled. Media streams ran text at eye level. He studied them while a deep blue progress bar stuttered across Betancourt's ID codes to track the progress of the UN Special Intelligence decryption algorithms. Ethan grimaced while reading a story about a group of sun worshippers who commandeered a tour ship and took it straight into the sun. He would skip the videostream on that one.

Finally, the message light flashed green. Ethan waved the communication into real time, guessing that the Martian prime minister

would pick up directly from Ethan's last transmission to her. She was one of those people who did not allow speed of light limitations to disrupt the flow of her conversations; she expected her colleagues and counselors to act accordingly.

"Yes, Ethan, I was informed of the UN vote." Hour-long sessions between conversation turntaking did not distract Ethan either. "You don't have to remind me of the outcome. But the situation has changed now. The news of a terrorist attack at the Roth House of Governors just reached us. You must have seen the ONN transmissions; if not, you had better check your sources. Roth is in the middle of a crisis and Senator Belkin is dead. The Adva Avni Historical Foundation has lost their loudest advocate but it won't be long before they find another. Belkin had a mandate to negotiate for the return of the Avni painting to Mars, but we will have to take it now. There is no other way. We can make a case that the Rothans were unable to protect the painting properly and apologize later if we have to. The Rothans won't make an issue of it, given the senator's death in their space. Give the order now! Get word to your agent on Roth. Tell him to grab the Avni painting along with the permadoc and bring it home. We can make apologies later if we need to."

The Betancourt Farms heiress was the youngest PM in the three century history of the Unified Mars Republic. Many said that she was also the prettiest. Her light blonde hair fell straight and simple over her shapely back and descended almost to her trim waistline, where the tips were tinged with crimson. Two ruby moons hung around a ruby planet that dangled from each dainty ear. Her pretty pink lips fell into a natural pout when she paused. Though born with green eyes, she had dyed her pupils red in the latest Martian fashion. Historical records might later say that her beauty had gotten her elected. Ethan could only say that it certainly wasn't her charm.

Betancourt was broadcasting from behind her desk in the famous Ruby Office, the seat of power in the Unified Mars Republic. The UMR flag hung behind her, and beside it was a portrait of Adva Avni in a meadow of tall thin plants with pink flowers. The prime minister gestured the visual focus around to her secretary of state. He

had squeezed his lean dark height into a chair beside the desk, long legs stretched out before him over the plush red carpet. Karin Lim was a sprout who had fought his way up from the Oshrit manna fields to one of the most powerful positions in the Inner System. His ancestors had been part of the early embryo shipments from Earth. Extensive surgery had strengthened his skeletal system so that he could withstand normal gravity. This was an avenue into normal gravity that was not available to women. They might withstand the painful surgery better but they were more prone to bone disorders. The exercises Lim performed to help him live in normal gravity endowed him with a tightly muscled look. Subnormal gravity does not mean subnormal people, Ethan remembered. The old slogan definitely applied to Lim.

"That painting belongs to the Martian people," Lim said. His was not the deep, resonant voice one might have expected from such a large man. Like most male sprouts, Lim's vocal pitch was high enough to lie in the questionable range between male and female. "The Jovians have held it long enough. The War of 2402 is over. They won it. We want the MacLaine permadoc, but we also want our painting back. We have changed our policies toward the synthecons. They never did us much good anyway. The Rothans have resisted our negotiations to get the painting back. There is only one way to get it, the same way they got it from us. Take it forcibly from them. Or the deaths of Senator Belkin and his family will have been for nothing." He spoke fast, as some people tended to do when comm distances were long. Somehow they thought that by speaking fast, their message would arrive sooner.

The video focus swung back to Betancourt. Her hands were white fingered, clenched on the arms of her chair. Old Jack Betancourt would have disagreed with her politics. Jack's corpse lay buried on the Betancourt Estates, a casualty of the 2492 war, but his stubbornness reached across two generations and came back to life in his granddaughter. Ethan did not like being on the receiving end. He imagined the Jovians had felt the same before they killed the old man. Paula Betancourt's face was as determined as her voice.

"There is no time to for another vote, Ethan. No time for long discussions with pompous UN diplomats on NYC3 who think that overriding the Martian veto will make their careers. We think that if the vote were taken again under these new circumstances, the outcome would be very different. I want you to act in accordance with that. Get my painting back."

The commstream blinked out, and Ethan found himself staring once again into the cloud wrapped planet outside. This time, two NEON satellites stared back at him.

Who did Betancourt think he was, one of her plantation sprouts? He didn't work for her; he wasn't even a citizen of her country. Did she really expect him to defy the decision of the UN Exterior Relations Committee on her whim alone? The Adva Avni Historical Foundation must be putting a lot of pressure on their government for him to be getting this kind of treatment. Ethan wondered if Betancourt remembered that he had once bounced her on his knee. Probably. He wondered if she still blamed him for her grandfather's death. Probably. She blamed the whole Jovian war on him, for his outspoken encouragement and support of Jack Betancourt's Synthecon Escape Hatch activities.

Ethan's eyes narrowed into tense tiny slits, through which only dark gray pupils showed. He touched his desk to summon a glowing Holographic Interface into existence. He glowered at its clean colors and precise shapes for a minute, then snapped ID codes into the air. He tapped impatiently on his desk as Giacomo Moretti's welcome screen pulsed in front of him.

Finally Moretti stood in front of him. Or rather, Moretti's avatar was commstreamed into Ethan's office.

"Hi Ethan," Moretti said. His avatar raised its bushy black eyebrows, so much like the real Giacomo. "What's the twinkle? I'm on my way to a dinner date in Washington Atrium." The avatar was dressed casually in a two-piece tunic with a Rocky Resorts motif. Did it come from a catalog or had he actually visited the Rocky Mountains? Good for him if he had time and money for a vacation to that tourist trap. Either way, the UMR delegate appeared ostentatiously

Earth friendly. Ethan suspected the real Giacomo would be dressed in something a little more subdued.

"Your prime minister thinks she can order me to retrieve the Avni painting from Roth," Ethan said. Giacomo would see Ethan's avatar only. "You're on the Exterior Relations committee. Do you think the attack on the House of Governors changes anything?"

Moretti's avatar shrugged its broad shoulders and averted its gaze from Ethan's avatar. "Doesn't matter what I think. The veto override still stands."

"Of course it matters what you think. It wouldn't be the first time you Martians ignored a UN vote."

"Old news, Marshall." The avatar lost its initial friendliness. "We have the right to refuse entrance to anyone we wish. They're our borders. Outer Consortium refugees put us in a bad spot politically. The Jovian War settled that question for us."

"That was half a century ago. Mars is stronger now. You don't let the Outer Consortium dictate your policy."

"The Unified Martian Republic has an interest in maintaining the peace," Moretti said. Of course; no one wanted to lose access to the Outer System manna markets.

"So the synths have to travel all the way to Earth to find a home? Come on, Giacomo! They have nowhere else to go." Mars was a rich planet that could afford to provide refuge.

"What synths?" Moretti asked. "Jack Betancourt's Synthegen Escape Hatch is long gone. Or are you working on a new one? I'll find out if you are. Let's face it. The frankies don't do anything for our gene pool. They can't even reproduce, and you can't clone more because their copyright locks make them unviable. And their presence on our planet boils the bubbles off Dreschler Corporation. We don't want another war over this. We signed an agreement after the last one."

Ethan stopped, stunned. The frankies? He hadn't expected such talk from a high-ranking Martian UN delegate. The slang term Frankensteins for synthegens was used only by the most profane. This young man wouldn't have survived long in Jack Betancourt's government. Yet he was flourishing in his granddaughter's.

"Let's pull this conversation out of the black hole it's fallen into," Ethan said. "I called you because I want a sense of committee reaction to the terrorist attack on Roth and the loss of Senator Belkin. Will they agree that now is the time to take the Avni painting?" Ethan felt silly asking the question. There was no dispute that Adva Avni was a genius and her work was a masterpiece, but no painting was worth risking a war over, no matter how hard the Adva Avni Historical Foundation pushed.

"It's really too soon to tell, Ethan," Moretti said. "I can't give you an answer now."

Just like a politician.

"So?" Moretti asked. "What are you going to do?"

Ethan's DP flashed his Holographic Interface to announce an incoming call in real time. The Digital Person had flashed in privacy mode; the amber light was visible to Ethan, but Moretti's avatar would not register it.

"I can't give you an answer now," Ethan said. "Enjoy your dinner date." He broke the connection.

The comm signal flashed with the ID codes of a junior operative from CSV Affairs. Ethan waved Dominic Ayotte into existence in the room. The Digital Person had done the right thing in admitting the call. Ethan needed to turn his mind to other matters. Bad things were happening in the Commonwealth States of Venus, and for once they had nothing to do with Mars or its arrogant prime minister.

Ayotte had brought along his own virtual reality. Ethan nodded his head to accept the invitation to join. Ethan's drab office surroundings morphed into a clean bright room with curved walls and nearly transparent furniture with just a hint of pastel colors. His gray pupils shrank at the sudden flood of light. Outside the big glass window fumed the famous fiery children of Bahet and Onatah. The man made volcanoes provided power to more than three quarters of the population of Venus. The scene was from Fortuna, the city of power and light, a major economic center on Venus and Ayotte's hometown. The parent volcanoes Bahet and Onatah watched over the vibrant metropolis like guardian angels. Or like hungry predators waiting for



the right moment to crush their squirming prey. Ethan had seen this scene before, even visited it in person, and he was never quite sure.

"Ayotte," Ethan said by way of greeting to the young man with the serious face and gaunt features. "You've got something on the Jubak strikes?" Jubak Industries was a Venus based mining and manufacturing consortium. Normally a prosperous company, it was now reeling from simultaneous strikes by several workers' unions at once. The Girard crime family controlled the unions and was blasting a major economic hole into the political panorama of the Commonwealth States of Venus.

"I've been speaking with Perrier," Ayotte said in his dry way. Francois Perrier was Dominic's boss. The Chief of CSV Affairs was stationed on Venus and therefore out of realtime for NYC3. He must have passed a few messages back and forth to his agent on NYC3 earlier in the day.

"Go ahead," Ethan said. So Perrier wanted to convey him a message in realtime, but couldn't because he was on Venus. He had chosen Ayotte to do that for him, probably to get a sense of his reaction. Ethan tapped his desk with his thumbs, wondering what the delay would cost him.

"The Commonwealth Federals have agents inside all the unions. Perrier has managed to convince the Federals to cooperate with us."

Ethan knew that. It was good news because the CSV Federals were not known for their openness to interdepartmental cooperation. It was bad news because if the Commonwealth States of Venus were cooperating with UN Special Intelligence, somebody on Venus suspected a bigger picture.

"What have they found out?" Ethan asked. The criminal involvement was obvious, but he could not rule out political sabotage. It was his job to check on these things.

"They are looking into why the Girard family is pushing these strikes," Ayotte said, with the smug air of someone who is about to impart important information.

"We know why," Ethan said. His desk tapping grew louder. It didn't penetrate into Ayotte's Fortuna virtual reality. "Jubak's Board

of Directors is a bunch of stubborn Venusians. They refused to pay protection money and they refused to name a Girard family member to their ranks. And Louise Jubak told Marc Girard to piss up a volcano. That's reason enough for the Girards."

"That's true. But the Commonwealth Federals thought it was strange that the Girards would be driving the strikes, especially so many at once. The Girards are more likely to be bashing heads and breaking kneecaps than making threatening moves on giant corporations."

Ethan shrugged. "Lots of businesses diversify."

"I'm going to introduce a substream in here," Ayotte said. He gestured over his desk sensors. A still stream fluoresced the air over a faint pink coffee table and blossomed to life size.

"Who's that?" Ethan asked.

"This is surveillance streamage taken yesterday by the Federals at an undisclosed location." Ethan recognized the NatureNurture Inc. logo shimmering over a broad brown desk much like his own. The NatureNurture logo was a wreath of green leaves that spelled the company slogan: "NatureNurture. We nurture nature." At the center were the stylized letters NNI. NatureNurture Inc. was a Jubak Industries holding; Ethan's desk was one of their products.

"I can guess the location," Ethan said. It was not a stretch to assume that this was the office of a NatureNurture executive.

"Emerald City, most likely," Ayotte said. NatureNurture's principal factory was on Emerald City, occupying Venus's most stable Lagrange point.

It was a rough piece of streamage, uncut unstabilized original from an Eyes and Ears rig like the media people use, but virtually undetectable. Instead of broadcasting, it stored its results in a body cavity for later retrieval.

"We weren't given the agent's name either," Ayotte said.

Whoever the agent was, he or she was looking at a short unhappy dark skinned man with a blaster in his hand. The Glock 333 didn't look big enough to be threatening, but it could deliver a lethal blow at the tiniest twitch of the trigger button.

"Do you know who he is?" Ethan asked.

"His name is Pierre Renaud. We think he is midlevel in the Girard organization."

Renaud used his blaster hand to wipe the sweat from his finely drawn features. His other hand was splashed with blood, but it wasn't his own. Another man sat paralyzed and immobile in a chair, probably drugged into a muscular freeze. Blood dripped from his face and mouth.

The agent spoke in a coarse male voice. "What's the point? The damage is done."

Renaud glared at him, ebony eyes the focus of the substream. "No. The damage is just beginning."

"It's better to quiet this thing down now," the agent said.

"Quiet?" Renaud spat. "Maybe our friend here should have thought of that before he sent his partners to take care of the senator." Renaud delivered another backhand to his helpless captive. He turned again to the agent. "We wanted this elimination nice and quiet. An explosion on Roth City, taking down dozens of civilians? That's not a hit, that's warfare. Governments do that, not businessmen."

The senator? Roth City? What was this?

"Belkin's gone now," the agent said. "So is Cranton. Our manna trade can continue. We need to focus on that."

Black market manna. Ethan recalled reading that Senator Belkin was leading an investigative task force into manna copyright violations and substandard growing conditions by organized crime. Belkin was on Roth, negotiating for the return of the Avni painting but also working with a Jovian senator who represented Ganymede food growing interests being undercut by the hot manna. Cranton must be the Jovian. Apparently their joint task force had made the wrong people uncomfortable. Jovian VIPs generally hid themselves in specially trained groups of their own clones. The only way to be sure you killed the right guy was to blow up the whole bunch....

Renaud aimed his blaster at the paralyzed man and pressed the trigger. The captive finally slumped forward in his chair. "We need to focus on cleanup first. You thought Belkin's committee was bad? UN

Special Intel's gonna be on us like toxic waste on Earth if we don't close some mouths out in the Jovian system."

Ethan nodded his head in the smug satisfaction he always felt when the bad guys mentioned United Nations Special Intelligence in fear.

Ayotte waved his hand, and the substream wisped away into nothingness. "This is all the Venus Federals shared with us."

The media cliché was true. All roads led to Mars in today's solar system.

Ayotte locked his fingers together on his desk. "Do you have an agent on Roth?"

In fact he did. A good one. A former UMR Special Forces sneak and peek officer named Charles Dunn, who carried in his head a combat grade DP-I0, a Digital Person slightly beyond state of the art.

"Thank you," Ethan said. He saved the substream and cut the connection. He had a message to send to his agent and friend.

CHAPTER FIVE

## Charles Dunn

“More peacemen are being checked and cleared,” Daphne said. “Apparently the process is very fast.”

“Good for them,” Dunn said. He sat the children together and stood up. He pulled out his three confiscated disruptors and pushed their slider controls forward as far as they would go. They were now in the red zone, max setting.

“Three disruptors against a crowd of peacemen and their investigators?” Daphne said. “You are only going to boil their bubbles.”

“Have they evacuated the vert shaft?” Dunn asked.

“That was the first thing they did,” Daphne said.

“Stay together, kids,” Dunn said. With both hands, he aimed the trio of disruptor pistols at the far wall. “Shield your eyes.” Sarah did not respond but her eyes were closed anyway. Eric was looking down. Dunn couldn’t tell if his eyes were closed or not. He grabbed the boy and pushed his face against his chest and blew out the right wall of the verticar. Both children jumped as cold air rushed past, accompanied by the rainbow color of a medium grade Zolotoi support field.

“Uncle Luke!” Sarah cried. “What’s happening?”

“You really needed three guns for that?” Daphne asked. “Or are you just trying to impress the little girl?”

“You know one gun wouldn’t have been enough to penetrate the shielding,” Dunn told her.

“You don’t need to shout over the wind for me to hear you,” Daphne giggled. “I’ve got a direct connection to your Broca’s Area!”

“We’re getting out of here,” Dunn said to Sarah. He focused



on the verticar's movement rather than on what the Department surgeons had done to the speech center of his brain. The verticar was channeled through space by the regulated fluctuation of Zolotoi energy bending fields. The fields were not harmful to humans on a short-term basis but they were not all that comfortable either. Dunn had destroyed the protective Bentrex energy shielding in the verticar wall, but his special skin spared him the goosebumps and hair stiffening that most people would have experienced.

Eric and Sarah did not have that defense, and children were more vulnerable to the effects of Zolotoi forces. He carefully cradled Eric against his own body and kept Sarah behind him. It would not help much. Eric said nothing but Dunn felt him shivering. He imagined that Sarah was doing the same.

Dunn moved closer to the opening he had blasted. It was large enough for him to fall through. The cut was by no means clean. Underbubble levels flashed by faster than he could read them. Dunn steadied himself on one jagged edge and threw one of the investigator IDs through the gaping hole with all the strength he could muster. As it passed beyond the verticar wall and just as it got snatched by the wind, Dunn whipped up a pistol and blasted it. The explosion took place as the ID tumbled down and away from the verticar. The Zolotoi sensitive components in the ID disrupted the energy bending fields that guided the verticar. The little vehicle shuddered and its upward momentum decreased. Dunn pitched the second ID outside the verticar. This was easier because the verticar had slowed and so the rush of wind was not so fierce. The Zolotoi elements in the second ID damped out the controlling energy forces even more. Dunn blasted the third ID outside the verticar. Zolotoi activity around the verticar was completely disrupted by now. The verticar was moving on inertia alone. It shook and rattled as it slowed its ascent.

Dunn snatched up Sarah and pressed her against his chest next to Eric. She said something, but Dunn paid no attention. He braced himself against the center of the back wall of the vehicle and prepared to push off. He raised the three pistols to let loose a stream of continuous fire against the front door and whatever was beyond that. As

the little vehicle shuddered and shook its way to a midair pause, he slowly squeezed the triggers with both hands.

"Wait," said Daphne as the verticar rocked and pitched to a dead slow.

"For what?" Dunn cried out. Without Zolotoi field support, the verticar would go into freefall. There was nothing between it and the shaft bottom, and it was a long way down to the end of the gravity pit.

"Just be patient," Daphne said.

The verticar reached the climax of its upward inertia. For a moment, Dunn felt himself pushed up into the air by his own ascent.

Slowly and inevitably, Dunn came back down. The verticar began to do the same. It was falling.

"Now?" Dunn demanded.

"Not yet," Daphne said.

"Have you blown a fuse?" Dunn said. The air began to rush in again as the verticar picked up speed.

"Now! Hit it!" Daphne ordered.

Dunn pushed off the back of the verticar to gain momentum as he let loose a stream of continuous fire at the wall straight ahead of him. He dived out head first, still firing, blasting through but not knowing what to expect on the other side. A gray lifeless floor rushed up at him and he caught himself just in time to roll into it. He landed hard, but he shielded the children with his body. The verticar whistled away down the shaft behind them.

"Always showing off that superhard skin," Daphne said.

His skin really wasn't that hard. It was just strong. And it itched.

Dunn sprang to his feet with Sarah and Eric in his arms. "Are you two OK?"

Sarah gasped. "I think so. I still can't see anything."

The faint Zolotoi rainbow emissions from the shaft behind them did not provide much illumination.

Eric was smiling. "Again! Again!"

"There are no lights in here," Dunn said. "But don't worry. I can

see just fine, and I can guide you.” He looked around the room while his clothing repaired itself. The room was filled with tools. “Where are we?” he silently asked Daphne.

“You were about to plunge headfirst into a busy underbubble supermall,” Daphne said.

“What is this place?” Dunn asked.

“Well, the supermall wasn’t that busy. Most people are at home by now, immersed in Mset streams.”

“Where did you say we were?” Dunn asked.

“We’re in an old maintenance shed, left over from the Roth Expansion 2 project. We’re very close to the old Zolotoi generators.”

That made sense. They were still in the same sector as Eden’s apartment. As an Zolotoi engineer she worked from her residence but her residence would be close to the Zolotoi generators.

The rainbow illumination from outside faded and died. Now the darkness was complete.

“The peacemen lost contact with the verticar,” Daphne said, “so they deactivated the vertishaft.”

Sarah was crying. Dunn knew this because he felt warm tears on his neck. Eric was struggling to be put down.

“Is it safe to turn on a light?” Dunn asked.

“Better not. ONN says the peacemen are going to search the bottom of the shaft for your remains. We’re several kilometers up but we don’t want to attract attention.”

“Where are we?” Sarah asked.

“We’re in an old maintenance shed that was left over from Roth City’s second expansion,” Dunn told her. He spoke gently, hoping she would be reassured by the sound of his voice. It was not the way he normally spoke. “Workers kept their tools here when they expanded the city for the second time. Roth has been expanded three times now. They make the city bigger when it gets so crowded the people start stepping on each other.” He smiled at her, then realized she couldn’t see him in the darkness. “It’s cheaper to expand a bubble city than to build a whole new one.”

“Can we turn on a light?” Sarah asked.

“I don’t even know how to access this room’s lighting system,” Daphne said. “Roth public files just aren’t that specific.”

“I’m sorry, Sarah,” Dunn said. “I don’t know where the light is in this room, or even how to activate it.”

“OK,” Sarah said. She sighed and leaned against him again. “Please don’t put me down.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll be getting out of here soon.”

“I want to get down!” Eric said.

“Eric, stay with me,” Sarah said. She put her arm around the boy. “It’s too dark in here. You’ll get lost.”

“But where’s Mommy?” Eric asked.

“Mommy’s not here,” Sarah said. “We have to stay with Uncle Luke now. He’ll take care of us.”

“I’m hungry,” Eric said.

“ONN says the peacemen lost contact with the verticar around the supermall level,” Daphne said. “They are going to search there. They’re evacuating the mall now.”

“Nice of them to let us know,” Dunn said. “That gives us a few more minutes.” He paced the room, looking for anything useful. What was on that rack over there?

“There’s a passageway that leads from here to the old Zolotoi room. From there you can get to a crosscar shaft to take us out of this sector,” Daphne said. “The door is at your eleven o’clock. It might be locked or stuck or something. I have no way of knowing.”

The Zolotoi generator would be an obsolete leftover from the second expansion. Dunn didn’t see how it would be useful to him. What he really needed was a new appearance for Eric and Sarah. A middle-aged man traveling with the daughter of a Martian senator was just too obvious. They had to look like something or someone else.

“I’m not ready to leave yet,” Dunn told Daphne.

“No problem, Charlie,” Daphne said cheerfully. “I’ve got your back.”

Dunn was inspecting a wall rack neatly hung with tools and worker’s gear. Could anything here provide some sort of disguise?

There were measuring devices, some sort of cleaning apparatus, and an assortment of tools for attaching or building other items. The placement of these tools in this location made sense. The first step in expanding a bubble city was to tractor newer, more powerful Z generators into stationary orbit around the existing city. The new Zolotoi generators would provide the energy bending capabilities to retain atmosphere and generate gravity. The next step was to build the city structure out to encompass the generators. In the underbubble, that meant extending the complex of apartments, stores, and recreational facilities out to meet and then surround the new Z field generators. But to do that you would need — of course!

Somewhere here there must be an IDB. The workers would have used Inertial Damping Belts to build out the underbubble structures to the Z limit. IDBs allowed their wearers freedom from the effects of gravity and inertia. A worker could use an IDB to journey to a high point without worrying about falling. They would certainly allow a fugitive to escape up or down a vertishaft without a verticar. The latest IDBs were hands free and could be controlled simply by shifting one's angle relative to the belt. Their Z powered Inertial Damping fields could also be extended outward to include other objects being carried with the user, even other people.

Dunn inspected every wall and corner. There was nothing of any value in the closet. The lockers were mostly emptied out. There was a gray metal table, but there was nothing on it. There should be at least one IDB here and more likely several. He made a full sweep of the area and came back to where he began.

"There has to be an IDB around here somewhere," Dunn said to Daphne.

"An Inertial Damping Belt?" Daphne said. "You walked all the way around the room and I didn't see one."

Dunn turned around again as if by doing so an IDB might magically appear.

"Is there any place I didn't look?" Dunn asked.

"You were exceptionally thorough, Charles. You checked everywhere."

"I don't get it," Dunn said. "How could the workers on the Roth 2 Expansion travel three dimensionally?"

"That was twenty-nine years ago," Daphne said. "They used IDPs in those days. I saw a pile of them in the closet. They're on the top shelf."

Dunn ran the length of the room over to the closet, muttering under his breath.

"I heard that," Daphne said.

"What's the matter?" Sarah asked. She was startled by Dunn's sudden movement.

"I'll show you in a minute," Dunn answered. He reached up to the top shelf and brought down a genuine old-fashioned Inertial Damper Pack. Inertial dampers were first developed for spacecraft use. It took decades before they were miniaturized to the point where individuals could wear them on their backs. A few decades later and they were made into belts. Even the belts were getting smaller lately. He wondered what was next. Maybe wristbands and then rings. Maybe they would be implanted in people's heads, like Daphne was in his. He hoped he wouldn't see that day.

"Why didn't you tell me about these?" Dunn demanded.

"Hey Charlie, I'm good, but I'm not a mind reader," Daphne said.

Sometimes Dunn had to remind himself that Daphne was not the real thing. Not that he ever forgot.

Dunn examined the unfamiliar device. Another fine Bentrex product. He had never used one.

"Do you know how to test this thing?" Dunn asked Daphne.

"Of course, silly. The control system is on the belt. You see that little steel box on the left side? That's it. On the edge of it there's a lever that toggles back and forth. If you toggle it forward, the system will run diagnostics and if everything passes it will be ready for use."

Dunn pushed the little lever forward.

"Nothing's happening," Dunn said.

"Of course not," Daphne said. "It's out of power."

"What's that?" Sarah asked. She must have heard the rustling of the pack and the click of the start lever. It was easy to forget that Sarah couldn't see in the darkness around them.

"It's kind of like an IDB," Dunn told her. "But in the old days they didn't make them in belt form like we're used to now. It's like a big bulky backpack."

"Are we going to fly?" Eric asked.

"Yes," Dunn said. "We are."

"Daddy says IDBs are against the law," Sarah said.

"In most places they are," Dunn said. "They create an energy field that causes problems with some machinery. And sometimes people fly into skyways and get hit. But people are allowed to use them sometimes."

Sarah frowned. "Sounds dangerous."

Dunn said, "Don't worry, I'm going to take care of you. OK?"

"OK," Sarah said.

"I'm going to sit down on the floor so I can fix the IDB," Dunn said. "Would you like to sit next to me?"

Dunn felt her body stiffen.

"Just don't leave me."

"I'm not going anywhere," he said. "Look, I'm going to sit right here." He sat down. "Just sit next to me. Hold on to my arm so you know where I am."

Sarah slipped her arm around Dunn's elbow.

"Good," Dunn said. "Now you too, Eric. Sit right here. Don't go anywhere."

"OK, Uncle Luke," Eric said.

Dunn pulled out the three disruptor pistols and laid them side by side. He pulled the power source out of the first one and looked for the input slot on the IDB. He found it by lifting a protective cover on the bottom of the backpack. The interfaces matched. Standards for power transfer had been around for a long time, and the new disruptors packed a lot of power. He drained only two of the pistols into the IDP and brought the pack up to seventy-three percent charge. That should be enough.

"For a minute I thought you were going to totally disarm us!" Daphne said.

Dunn toggled the lever to the on position again. The system turned on with a faint hum. Lights flashed as it ran through its internal diagnostics. Finally a green light remained on. The machine still hummed, but after all it was a relic from the old days. The older machines were probably noisier. The new ones were completely silent.

Dunn dropped the IDP over his back, putting one arm through each strap and tightening the belt around his waist. He stood, scooping up the children in his arms at the same time.

"Are we leaving now?" Sarah asked.

She would be glad to get out of here. "Just a few more minutes," Dunn said. He had seen a metal slicer on a nearby rack. He took it down and checked its charge.

"There goes the last disruptor!" Daphne whined.

Dunn hid the three emptied disruptor pistols under the remaining IDPs on the top shelf of the closet. The metal slicer was fully charged now.

Dunn took another look around the room. There were many more tools that might be useful in unpredictable ways in unpredictable situations, but there was nothing here he could use to change his appearance and he did not wish to be burdened with useless items.

Eric squirmed restlessly in Dunn's grip, forcing Dunn's forearm against one of his tunic pockets. There was an unfamiliar bulge there. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out the female reporter's purse. He had forgotten about that. Perhaps the woman was carrying something that would affect her appearance.

"I'm going to set you down on this table for a minute," Dunn said to Sarah and Eric. He spilled the contents of the purse onto the tabletop. A vial of pills rolled off the edge. He caught it before it hit the floor and lifted it to inspect it. It was a prescription for low fat high muscle nanobots. The fashionable way to stay in shape these days if you could afford it. The tiny little robots would convert fat to muscle. When fat content dropped below a prescribed level, the robots would degrade and dissolve. When fat content rose again, you

could just take another pill. The prescription was keyed to the reporter's genetic code as a means of copyright protection. Dunn didn't need a pill for this anyway. He set the vial aside.

There was a box of safety tissues. Dunn tucked it into his pocket. The children might need them later.

Two chocolate energy bars with a concentrated manna filling. Dunn's mouth watered. He slipped one into a pocket. "You still hungry, Eric?"

"Yes!" the boy said.

Dunn broke the bar in two and gave half to each child. "This should help you for now."

"Mm!" Eric said.

"Thank you, Uncle Luke," Sarah said.

A small pistol caught Dunn's eye. It was a Gannon 99. It delivered a potent and precise charge but it was mostly used for close range. It went into an inner pocket.

"Better than nothing," Daphne said.

Dunn opened a cosmetics box and explored the mysteries within. The lip paint and face coloring might be useful.

"That skin tightener might help you with your worry wrinkles," Daphne said.

"Very funny," Dunn told her. "Do you see anything in here that will provide us with a useful disguise?"

"Some of that stuff might work if you were really creative," Daphne said. "But why don't you ask your little friend? I'm sure she can help you."

"I smell makeup," Sarah said. "Me and my cousins play with it sometimes."

"Mom told me never touch it," Eric said.

"I don't want the bad men to take you away again, Sarah," Dunn said. "I was hoping we could disguise ourselves."

"Oh, I've got a better idea than that!" Sarah said. "I've got an RPG ring!" She held up her hand to show him. The Role Playing Game ring was on her index finger.

"See what I mean?" Daphne said.

"May I take a look at this?" Dunn asked.

"Sure," Sarah said. She took the thick little ring off her finger and handed it to Dunn. The toy was all dressed up in bright colors and reflective facets that would attract any child. The DreamToy trademark smiled at Dunn from the ring's one and only button. He pressed it, and the ring's Holographic Interface shimmered in front of him.

"She's got the latest and greatest," Daphne said.

"The HI is really easy," Sarah said. "Let me put the ring back on and I'll show you."

Dunn handed it over.

Sarah gestured into the HI and a beautiful young woman appeared. She had striking blue hair and piercing blue eyes. She also had fins and a tail. Sarah made another gesture and suddenly Sarah was no longer there. Dunn was looking at a mermaid instead.

"Hey!" Eric said. "Lulu the mermaid!"

"So you saw the streamie too," Sarah said. Her voice was soft and lilting.

"It looks like fun," Dunn said. He reached over to touch her. His hand passed right through the illusion. Despite the voice and appearance and sudden strong smell of the ocean, the mermaid still felt like Sarah. "What other roles can you play with this ring?"

The mermaid gestured within the HI to show Dunn representations of a troll, a fairy godmother, a giant, and several different animals and fish.

"It's just that the mermaid is my favorite," she said.

"Mine too," said Eric.

Interesting choice for a Martian child. "Do you have any role that looks ordinary?" Dunn asked. "Something that might not attract attention."

Sarah frowned. "Some of my friends downloaded their avatars to my ring so I could play with them on the ship coming out here. Want to see them?"

"Excellent," Dunn said.

Sarah showed him the image of a red haired boy with freckles.

He had impossibly large muscles and a bushy mustache. She giggled. "That's Ralph. He's funny."

Ralph had a creative streak. "How about someone else?" Dunn asked.

"Here's George," Sarah said. George wore a ninja uniform and carried a staff.

Dunn sighed. This wasn't going to be easy.

"How about someone else?" Dunn asked again. "Someone with normal clothes. Someone who won't stand out in a crowd."

Sarah was silent for a moment. She slowly stretched her hand toward the HI and waved a new figure into existence. A tall, elegant woman stood in the room with them. She wore a deep red manna colored coat and ruby jeweled shoes, the fashionable clothing of the Mars elite. Her silent soft smile spoke of love and longing. Sarah silently cried. "Mommy."

Dunn recognized the woman from Alliance Park. "She's beautiful."

"That's your mommy?" Eric asked.

"Are we through playing show and tell now?" Daphne asked.

"Could you play her role, Sarah?" Dunn asked gently. "Just for a little while? It's just until we get past the spaceport."

"OK," Sarah said.

"Thank you. Thank you very much. You can turn the ring off now. We won't need it for a little while. I'll let you know when." There were less visible roles than the senator's wife, but Dunn was not inclined to suggest them now.

"OK," Sarah said. She pushed the button that toggled the ring on and off. Her mother's image disappeared. Night vision not withstanding, the room seemed much darker.

"ONN is reporting that the peacemen are going to return the verticars to normal operations," Daphne said. "We don't want to be in that shaft when they start back up again."

"Eric," Dunn said. "Let me touch up the area around your eyes with this makeup."

"You?" Daphne said.

"No!" Eric said. "Mommy told me to stay away from it."

"But I could help," Sarah said.

"No!" Eric repeated.

"You don't have time for this," Daphne said. "If you're in the vertishaft when they power it back up you and the dirt spurts could end up decorating the outer wall of a verticar."

"Don't worry about it, Eric," Dunn said. "We have to get going now." There wasn't even time for Dunn to change to his last spare face.

"Can I finish my snack first?" Eric asked.

"Finish it on the way," Dunn said. He picked up the boy and cradled him in his arm. "Come on, Sarah. You too." He cradled both children in the same arm for a moment and flicked on the IDP.

Daphne said, "They found your smashed verticar at the bottom of the shaft, but they didn't find your remains in it or anywhere near it. Thought you might like to know."

"What's the fastest way out of here?" Dunn asked Daphne.

"Don't you want me to teach you how to operate the IDP first?" Daphne asked.

"I found the little joystick that controls the movements," Dunn said. He gently levitated upward, then steered toward the hole he had blasted in the room's door. Sarah gasped and clutched at his clothing. Eric dropped his energy bar.

"You're going to be OK," Dunn said. "But hang on tight anyway." They floated out the door and into the cool space of the vertishaft.

"The interplanetary spaceport is on the far side of the bubble," Daphne said. "It will take you hours to IDP there."

"I need something local anyway," Dunn said. "What's closest?"

"You're already ascending," Daphne said.

Of course he was. All the spaceports ringed the dome at ground level. "I'm looking to take a crosscar," Dunn said.

"There is a nearby spaceport, but it's not interplanetary," Daphne said. "Just some tour ships for closeups of Jupiter and the moons and shuttles to the other Jovian cities."



"I'll take it," Dunn said.

"Your most direct route is Crossshaft 3. You'll exit from the crossshaft just under the spaceport. But first you have to get to the crossshaft. You have one hundred and twelve levels to go. What are you waiting for? Accelerate!"

Dunn leaned forward on the stick. His upward velocity increased, but he felt stationary. The glowing white letters that labeled each level blurred and blended past him and the rushing air became so fierce he thought he might lose the children. He pressed them tightly to his chest with one arm while he guided the IDP with the other hand.

"Nice ride!" Daphne exclaimed. "Time to slow down now."

Dunn eased off the throttle.

"No, I mean really," Daphne said. "Fire the retrorockets! Put on the brakes! Dig your heels in!"

Dunn brought himself to an immediate full stop. There was no inertia, no tearing force that threatened to send the children tumbling. The Inertial Damping Pack was doing its job.

"Where are we?" Dunn asked.

"That door leads to a maintenance level that runs beneath the crosscar line," Daphne said. "Didn't you bring a metal slicer?"

Dunn knew his cut would leave a trail. Peacemen would find it and some computer assisted investigator would know that he had passed through here and extrapolate his destination.

"What's directly above us?" Dunn asked, already setting the IDP to waft upward.

"Verticar waiting area," Daphne said. "But you'll have an audience if you try to slice through. They've been waiting for the verticars to be reactivated. They're backed up a hundred meters down the corridor."

That wouldn't do.

The rainbow lights came back on. The vertishaft had reactivated. Dunn was glad that the children were within the IDP field. Its protective field shielded them from the skin chills brought about by the vertishaft's Z forces.

"We don't have much time," Daphne said. "The verticars are running again."

Dunn reversed his direction, drifting slowly downward now.

"What's directly below us?" Dunn asked.

"An air vent," Daphne said. "Would you like to try it? It leads over a row of apartments and out into a recreational area. Tennis, anyone?"

The air vent was covered by a protective grill. He would have to cut anyway. It couldn't be helped. He reached into a tunic pocket and pulled out the metal slicer he had borrowed from the maintenance shed. He switched it on and approached the grill.

A small object flew past him and struck the far side of the vertishaft with a sharp crack loud enough to force an echo.

"What was that?" he asked Daphne. Something had crossed his field of vision, too fleeting for him to focus on it.

"A rock," Daphne said. "It wasn't going to hit you."

Dunn shrugged it off. He examined the grill closely. Maybe he could carry out some subtle slice that would allow him to put the grill back together once he had passed through. He tried to ascertain exactly how the grill was fastened to the surrounding steel wall.

"Take a look at your power gauge," Daphne said.

Dunn glanced down. The meter was in the red. It showed only five percent charge remaining. He had spent too long hovering in the vertishaft, wondering what to do. The time for careful inspection was over. There nothing left to do but slice. He extended the cutter toward the grill.

"Dodge left," Daphne said calmly.

Dunn jerked himself sideways just in time to avoid being slammed by a verticar from above. He slowed his momentum and brought himself around to face the air vent again.

"I didn't even see that one coming!" Dunn said.

"Neither did I," Daphne said. "You have good ears."

"What was that?" Sarah asked drowsily. She was going to sleep in Dunn's arms. Eric was already there, saliva bubbling under quick rhythmic snores.



"Are you OK?" Dunn asked Sarah.

The girl did not answer him. She had nodded off.

"Well, is she?" Daphne asked.

"She's asleep," Dunn said. She looked so delicate. "They both are." How could they sleep through this? They must be really tired. Sarah had had a long day. When was her bedtime, anyway? The Martian day was fifty-three minutes longer than Earth normal. Sarah shouldn't be tired yet. "They're just children," Dunn said. "They need their supper before they go to bed."

"They'll manage," Daphne said.

Something hit Dunn on the head, startling him so much he almost dropped his slicing tool. It hit hard enough to give him a good thump. It bounced off him and was gone. He looked up.

Two more rocks hit him in the face.

"Daphne, what is going on—"

"Look out!" she said.

A verticar plunged down past him on his left, generating enough wind to knock him aside. Its accelerating rush left him spinning in its wake. He careened into the far side of the vertishaft. His shoulder slammed into the wall. The slicing tool slipped away without even a sound. The shock to his shoulder had numbed his whole arm. The tool flew from his hand and was lost within the rainbow colored energy fluctuations. He gasped, and painfully brought his aching arm up to maintain his desperate grip on the children.

"That was close," Daphne commented.

Dunn did not feel off balance, but the walls spun out of control. It took him a few minutes to orient himself and regain his equilibrium.

"I lost the tool," Dunn said.

"Yes. Now what?" Daphne asked.

Dunn glanced at the power gauge once more. The meter was at three percent.

"What's happening?" Sarah asked. The near miss with the verticar had startled her out of her sleep.

"We'll still in the vertishaft," Dunn said.

"OK," Sarah said. She smiled and snuggled into his chest.

Dunn let her go back to her dreams. He should have listened to Daphne. The girl would have been better off with the Rothans. Both children would have.

A verticar rushed up from below. It ran along the far side of the shaft. It was too distant to do them damage, but the noise woke Sarah up again.

"The lights are pretty, Uncle Luke," she said.

"Yes," Dunn agreed. The rainbow glow did have a certain beauty about it. As far as last sights go, it wasn't too bad. The power meter was down to about two percent.

"Ow!" Dunn said. He was being pelted by more rocks from above.

"Ow!" Sarah said. She had been struck as well. "What was that?"

More rocks piled down on them as they hung suspended in the rainbow. Dunn oriented the IDP so that he was nearly horizontal, his back shielding Sarah from the source of the falling stones. He searched frantically for a handhold, or a small hole. A ventilation shaft that wasn't grilled. A vent large enough to at least save the children.

Nothing. The vertishaft walls were smooth. The power gauge show less than one percent power left. Another verticar approached, but Dunn saw it coming. He dodged in time.

"Daphne," Dunn said.

"Better make it quick," Daphne said. "I'm about to self destruct."

The Accord permadoc would survive Dunn's fall to the bottom of the shaft. The children would not. Daphne's response to Dunn's body death would be to flash herself to null. Special Intelligence would not risk an enemy salvage operation on her. He would have to brief the Department now. He did not want his last words to be the panicked utterances of a man in free fall to certain death. Best to get it over with.

"Get ready to record transmission," Dunn said.

A translucent golden lightning bolt flared at the lower left corner of his vision.

"It's Ethan," Daphne said.

The Department chief had sent him a message. He would not have time to listen to it.

"Ignore it," Dunn said. "Record transmission now."

Another cluster of rocks rained down on them from above, striking the pack and the back of Dunn's neck.

## CHAPTER SIX

# He...

He did not know his own name. He was not stupid and he was not forgetful. He could remember many things. He did not know his name, but he remembered the day the cold man died.

The cold man was not really cold, but he was not warm. He did not smile and he had no hair on his head. He had a name. It was sometimes Sir but usually Boss.

Boss always traveled with three or four other men. They were cold too. They rarely spoke to him directly.

"Make sure no one sees him," the cold man would say.

"I fed him this morning," one of the other cold men would say.

"Finally he can go to the bathroom alone," another cold man once said.

"Why do you even bother?" a cold man asked. "You know his life span is only half normal anyway."

Boss traveled a lot. He never left him behind. He always traveled with other cold men. They carried guns and sometimes shot people with them. The other cold men helped him. He looked forward to that, because then they would speak to him directly.

"You see?" Boss would say. "You just aim and push the button."

"Sometimes they try to run," said one of the other cold men. "But you are faster."

"Come on, he's only four Earth years," said the bald man. "He's not faster yet."

"They have an accelerated childhood," said a cold man. "He looks like he's ten. It won't be long now."

Sometimes people shot at the cold men. They were other cold men. He became used to the sound of weapons. He was comfortable with their smell.

The cold man had a big home on Mars. There were many mountains around the home and it was in shadow a lot of the time. He knew the house was near the equator, in the Southern Highlands. He knew this because once the cold man had some guests who didn't know where they were. He didn't know why the guests were blindfolded. Finally Boss told the men they were on Mars. Then Boss gave him a gun, and said to shoot them. He wanted to make Boss happy, so he aimed the pistol at the men and pushed the button. He watched the blindfolded men die. It was easy.

They were going to meet other men and buy guns from them. They were going to trade gleam for the guns. Gleam was a yellow powder. It came from a factory under the ground. He visited the factory and saw the people who made the gleam from the long red plants. The cold man warned him never to touch gleam. The cold man said it would make his eyes light up, like they were gleaming. It would not be good for him.

The meeting was not on a planet or a city. It was a rendezvous between two ships in the shadows behind giant asteroids. But something went wrong at the meeting. The men became very angry with each other. They pointed their pistols at each other and pushed the buttons. Then they were all dead. He was alone on the ship for a long time. There was a lot of food on the ship, enough for the trip back to Mars. There were also some boxes of gleam, but he remembered the cold man's words. He did not touch the gleam.

Another ship came, and he was very scared. Some people boarded his ship. He hid in the cargo hold. The people searched the ship, but he changed hiding places. They did not find him. The people who searched the ship looked a lot like him, but he did not trust them. Even though they had the same dark scrawling birthmark inside their ears. He was curious about that, but he said nothing to the men.

One of the tall men piloted the ship for many days to a shining city that hung in space. The tall man parked it and left. Later some

men came aboard and removed many crates of gleam from the cold man's ship.

Then he was alone. He had eaten most of the food by this time. The bald man always fed him twice a day, but many days had passed since the bald man died. He decided to leave the ship and look for food.

He did not want anyone to see him leave. He watched from the windows. There were times when there was a lot of activity around the ship. People and equipment would be everywhere. He had never seen so many people at once. And there would be times when there wasn't much activity. He waited for night, but it never came. He guessed there was no night in this city. But he knew a secret way out of the ship. The cold man had shown him. So he left when there weren't many people around. Nobody saw him leave, or maybe he was just too fast for them.

He ran very far, but he did not know where he was going. He didn't worry much about that. He would know food when he saw it, and he would take it. The important thing now was to hide.

So he hid behind buildings, in parking combs, among the bushes in the glistening green gardens of the upperbubble. He ate some of the plants in the gardens. They were not good.

People tended to chase him out of places that he thought were safe. He wasn't bothering anybody. The people were too slow to catch him, or too clumsy. He found his way to the underbubble. He liked the underbubble, with its air vents and maintenance rooms. There was also night in the underbubble. If he was impatient, he could make the corridors dark by throwing rocks at the luminescence. Then no one could see him. But he could see them.

He had no name that he knew of, but people called him things. He didn't always understand what they called him, but he understood the way they said it. He decided not to keep any of those names. He would find his own.

Sometimes he wandered the underbubble supermalls. The upperbubble supermalls might be nicer, but he would not go back up there again. By now he knew a lot of hiding places in the underbubble.

He was happy in the underbubble, and even had warm friends. There was a restaurant owner who sometimes gave him food. The man had black skin. He would whisper, "Come around the back." He would show up in back of the black man's restaurant. "I could get arrested for this," the black man would say, and then he would give him warm food in a reddish bag. The bag would keep the food warm for a long time. And it didn't even feel hot. He collected the bags for a while, then he got bored with them and threw them into a garbage vent. The man would give him pastries and hamburgers made of Martian manna. There was always enough food in the bags to last him for a week. Sometimes the man's eyes grew wet when he took the food. He did not understand why.

He was able to find new clothes, too. It was easy. He found some parks where people swam in water, or played games with balls. People changed their clothes a lot. He could take whatever he wanted. He didn't want much, but he was growing and his old clothes wouldn't fit him any more.

He had learned to carry stones or pieces of metal in his pockets. Sometimes it was useful to throw things at people or at lights. He found metal chains that he could break in the playground. The links were useful for throwing. Someone always came and repaired the swings, so his supply never ran out.

In one of the maintenance rooms, he made a bed out of some old clothes. He didn't sleep very much, but it was nice to be in place where he would not be disturbed. He kept a pile of chain links and stones there. He did not have any other possessions. He did not think he needed anything else.

Some children told him that his clothes were all wrong. It was when he was playing in a park. There were nice places to play in the underbubble, but he was careful about when he played there. It was best to play at night when the lights went away. Some soft lights remained, but during this time usually no one would bother him. The parks in the upperbubble were bigger and smelled nicer, but up there the lights never slept.

He had just slid down a long and twisty slide and was now walk-

ing backwards up to the top in order to repeat the same maneuver. He heard three other children enter the play area. He stopped, listening.

"So you think you can beat me running?" a boy said.

"It's too dark," said a girl. "Let's come back tomorrow."

"You're a coward," the boy said.

"She's right, Bruno," said another boy. "We shouldn't be out this late."

"You shut up, Ricky," Bruno said. "Or maybe you wanna try to beat me?"

He stood poised on the edge of the slide, ready to dart into the darkness. They moved closer, apparently unaware of him. He was not surprised. Most people did not see well when the lights were dimmed.

He dropped down off the slide and moved closer to the three children. He was curious. Maybe they had something he could steal. He took a closer look at them.

"Hey," Bruno yelled. "What are you doing here?"

He had gotten too close. One of the kids saw him.

"Shut up, Bruno," the girl said. "He's not hurting anything."

"You don't know what he's doing," Ricky said.

"Yeah, Hilda," said Bruno. "For once your brother's making sense."

"Hello," he said. He didn't know what else to say. They weren't carrying any packages or bags, so they probably had nothing worth stealing.

Bruno pulled out a flashlight and shone it in his face. "Look at those clothes. They're way too big for you, and the styles don't match. You don't wear sports shorts with a formal tunic top!"

"Yeah, and what about those colors?" Ricky said. "It hurts my eyes just to look at you."

Hilda smiled sadly at him. "I'm sorry but they're right. Your clothes are all wrong. And – I'm sorry, but you smell real bad, too."

Was that important?

"So what's your name?" Bruno asked. "And what are you doing here so late?"

"I live here," he told them. "I live all over the underbubble."

"Come on," Hilda said. "You must live in one of the apartments down here."

"No," he said. "I just live anywhere."

"Where do you sleep?" Ricky asked.

He shrugged. "There are places."

"We live around here too," Bruno said, looking at closely at his face. "I don't recognize you. What's your name?"

"Where do you go to take a bath?" Hilda asked.

His last bath had been on the cold man's spaceship.

"It's been a long time," he admitted.

"I thought so," Hilda said. Her nose got wrinkly.

"Where did you get those clothes?" Ricky asked. "Don't you think it's time to get some new ones?"

"I found them," he said.

Ricky stepped closer and looked at him more carefully. He squinted and then jumped a little bit.

He had seen this reaction before. It happened whenever someone noticed the strange birthmarks in his ears.

Ricky grabbed Hilda's hand. "Look at his ears," Ricky whispered.

"He's stolen code," Bruno breathed.

They probably thought he couldn't hear them, but he heard every word. Lots of people made that mistake.

The three backed away from him. He sensed their sudden fear. They turned and rushed for the nearest exit. He had no desire to follow them, but he watched them run with interest. The winner was Bruno.

He stayed away from that park after that. It didn't matter. There were many others.

He did not care about clothes, but he thought it was important to have a name. Some people called him frankie, but he thought that was not good. He didn't want to be called Bruno, or Hilda, or Ricky. Maybe he would call himself Boss, in honor of the cold man. He missed the cold man sometimes. Not often.

Sometimes he would lie on his bed in the maintenance room and hear the whoosh of verticars as they rushed by. He knew there was a vertishaft right outside the room. He had taken the verticars up and down and he had a good sense of direction. There was a door on one side of the room that faced into the vertishaft, but he had never opened it. There was a small slot in the door that he could peek through to watch the verticars pass. It was difficult to slide the cover open, but it became easier. He liked to watch the rainbow colors in the vertishaft, and the ripples the verticars made when they sped through them. But he could not watch for long, because the rainbow light made his nose tingle.

One afternoon he was lying on his clothes. He was not really asleep. He was waiting for the night, so he could go outside. There was a strange sudden silence. The constant whoosh of passing verticars died out. He was curious about that. Nothing was happening, which meant something was happening. He wanted to find out what.

He crept silently to the door that led out to the vertishaft. The silence around him was very strong, and he did not want to break it. He was used to not making noise. He reached the door and waited a few minutes, just listening. He was making sure that no one was sneaking up on him.

Silently he pulled the slot open. He was glad he had opened it many times before. By now he knew how to open it without making noise.

The first thing he noticed was that the rainbow colored light was gone. This had never happened before. He peered through the narrow hole and saw a shadow in the shaft, floating in space. Someone was out there. Looking for him?

He considered running, but he did not want to leave his private room. He thought it would be easy to hit the shadowy figure and make it fall down and away from him. He picked up a handful of stones and chain links from his pile of things to throw. He paused for a moment. The narrow slot in front of him would limit his aim. He would try anyway.

The first stone whizzed right by the floating man and smacked

the opposite wall of the vertishaft. The man looked around in surprise.

The rainbow reappeared. There was more light to see with now, but its constant movement made it difficult to focus on the man in the shaft.

But he would try. He raised a stone to toss through the slot.

A verticar dropped down past him from a higher level. It almost hit the man. He went spinning around in space.

He withdrew from the opening for a minute, startled. When he came back, the man was right side up again. The man was floating over to the wall closest to him. He noticed that the man was wearing some sort of pack on his back. He wondered what was in it.

It didn't matter. The man was getting too close. He leaned over and tossed out a rock that smacked the man on the head.

The man reeled, disoriented. He looked weak now. This would be a good time to strengthen the attack.

He ran back to his pile of throwing stuff and picked up two big handfuls of rocks and chain links. He started throwing the debris down the vertishaft. It was easy. The materials he threw showered over the shadow. The man oriented himself at a funny angle. He wondered why the man didn't just go away. Why did he stay there and endure all this? He must be really stupid.

Or maybe not that stupid. The man was rising now, approaching him. He must have figured out the source of the stones. He realized that by throwing so many stones at the same time, he had given away his position.

He grabbed another handful of debris. There was no reason to keep quiet any longer. He was ready for this strange floating man.

The man drifted up toward the window and peered inside. He looked straight at him with a steady, still gaze. He was another cold man.

"Hi," the man said. His voice sounded strained, as if he were forcing himself to be friendly. Why would anyone want to be friendly to him?

"What do you want?" he said suspiciously, his hands clenched

around a pile of stones. He was thinking about how he could take the man's backpack.

"Can you open the door?" the floating man asked.

"No," he answered, even though there was no other way he could get the backpack. He did not want to share his hiding place.

"Oh, I see," the man said sadly. "You probably don't know how."

"I know how, but I'm not going to open it for you," he said.

"Well..." the man said. "Would you open it for Lulu the mermaid?"

"Who?" he asked. "I don't know anyone named Lulu. What's a mermaid?"

The man dropped from sight, but it was only for an instant. He sprang into view once again, and this time he was holding a shining girl in his arms. She had brilliant blue hair, but she didn't have any legs. She had a funny smell.

"Would you open the door for Lulu?" the man asked.

"Please open the door," Lulu said. Her voice was soft and musical. "It's cold out here."

"Who are you?" he asked. He was curious about her. He thrust his fist through the slot to touch her.

"No, you can't touch me!" Lulu said, backing away.

"Then you must not be real," he said. He was not interested in sharing his shelter with this strange being.

Another verticar rushed down and threw the man off balance. He wondered if the floating man would come back. He waited a moment, but nothing happened. He turned away. He would have to replenish his pile of stones and chain links.

"Hey!" said the man. He was back. This time he was carrying a big ugly monster in his arms.

"Let me in!" said the monster.

He shrank back from the door.

Then he came back. "What are you?" he asked.

"I'm a troll," the creature said.

He stepped forward. "You stink. I'm not afraid of you."



"So why don't you let us in?" the man asked.

He crossed his arms. "I just don't want to." No way he was sharing his hideout with that thing.

The man dropped down again. He heard a conversation. There were two voices. He recognized the man's voice, but not the other one.

He was getting bored. He would have gone outside, but it was not dark yet. He didn't know if the man would be back, and wasn't sure if he cared.

"Hey," said a little girl. "Please let us in."

He turned back to the door.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"My name's Sarah," the little girl said. "What's yours?"

"I ... don't have a name."

"Nice to meet you." She didn't make fun of him. "I'm really thirsty. Do you have anything to drink?"

He shrugged. "I don't," he said. "Who is that man with you?"

"He's my Uncle Luke," Sarah said. "He saved me from a bad man who tried to shoot me. The bad man had a gun, but Uncle Luke shot him."

He knew about guns.

"You really don't have a name?" Uncle Luke said.

"No," he said. "And I don't want to be called Uncle Luke or Sarah."

The little girl laughed. "I know lots of good names. Want me to help you pick one?"

He suddenly became very interested. "Yes. I want a name, but it has to be a good one."

"I can help you pick a good one," she said. "Will you let us in, so we can choose a name for you?"

"Well..." he said. "OK." He would open the door for them, and they would help him choose a name. After that, he would take a look at the backpack.

It was the first time he had opened this door, but he was strong and after some pulling the door squealed open.

The man hovered his way into the room with them. He carried the little girl in his arms as if she were a precious cargo of gleam. He liked that. He saw that the man also carried a small boy. The boy was asleep.

The three of them got partway into the room and then flopped right on the floor!

When they got up, Uncle Luke was shaking. And it wasn't even cold in there.

The girl was stretching. She looked like she had been asleep.

"What were you doing out there?" he asked them.

"My Uncle Luke saved me from the peacemen," Sarah said. "An investigator was going to shoot me!" Her wide green eyes reflected her astonishment.

"What's a peaceman?" he asked.

Uncle Luke gave him a strange look. He did not understand it. "They are tall men who sometimes chase people."

Maybe Uncle Luke would be useful. Uncle Luke could shoot the peacemen who sometimes chased him.

"But they shot Eden," Sarah said sadly.

"Who is Eden?" he asked. He wouldn't use that name either.

"Eric's mother," Sarah said.

The little boy was awake now. He was sitting in a corner of the maintenance room. He was crying. He looked lost.

"Eden was a friend," Uncle Luke said. "Thanks for letting us in."

"OK," he said.

Uncle Luke looked around the room. He had sharp eyes that didn't miss anything. Uncle Luke looked at the pile of debris in the corner.

"I used up most of my pile on you," he said to Uncle Luke.

"Sorry about that," Uncle Luke said.

"I mostly use it to make the corridors dark."

"I see," Uncle Luke said.

He knew that Uncle Luke had spotted the marks on his ears. But Uncle Luke did not run away and he did not try to chase him.



"What's in the backpack?" he asked.

Uncle Luke seemed surprised. "This?" he asked. He undid it and handed it to him. "It's an old machine. It doesn't work any more. You can have it if you want."

He took the pack from Uncle Luke's hand and examined it. "It will make a nice pillow," he said.

"Yes," Uncle Luke agreed.

"Do you live here?" Sarah asked.

"Yes," he said. "This is my hiding place. No one else has ever come here."

"It's not bad," Sarah said.

"What about my name?" he demanded.

"First you have to tell us a story," Sarah said. "Tell us a story about yourself. Then we can decide on a name for you."

"OK," he said. He thought about it. While he was thinking, they all sat down on the floor.

"Here," Uncle Luke said. He had something in his hand. He broke it into three parts.

Sarah grabbed them from Uncle Luke and passed one to him. He bit into it. It was good. Sarah gave a piece to Eric, who clutched it and put it in his mouth.

"You can have this piece, Uncle Luke," Sarah said.

He smiled at her. "I'm not hungry. You eat it."

Sarah frowned, but she did not argue. She ate the chocolate.

"What's your story?" Uncle Luke asked him. "How did you get here?"

He told them.

"I'm from Mars," he said. "From the Southern Highlands. I went with Boss to some asteroids. We met another ship, but Boss got shot. Everybody died, and then someone came and flew the ship here. I escaped, and this is where I live now."

"Wow," Sarah said. "I'm from Mars, too."

He felt a sudden, surprising affection for her.

"Do you sell gleam?" he asked.

She looked puzzled.

"No, she doesn't," Uncle Luke said. "I have a house on Mars, too."

Suddenly he was homesick.

"I want to go back to Mars," he said.

"I'm going back," she said. "Want to come with us?"

"OK," he said.

"Can he come with us, Uncle Luke?" Sarah asked.

"Yes," Uncle Luke said.

"Your story is like Rangor's," Sarah said.

Rangor?

"Didn't you see the streamie?" she asked.

The what? He gave her blank look.

"It's called 'Rangor, King of the Cave People,'" she said.

"I haven't seen it either," Uncle Luke said. Like the other cold men, he didn't talk much. He leaned back. "Tell us about it."

"Rangor is in a ship that is attacked by pirates," Sarah said. "The pirates shoot everybody on the ship. But the people on the ship shoot back. Everybody dies except Rangor. He stays alive by hiding from them."

That sounded familiar.

"But Rangor is just a little boy. He eats all the food on the ship and doesn't know where to find more. But there is a planet nearby and the ship lands on it."

She was telling his story. Was he Rangor?

"Rangor leaves the ship, but there are monsters on the planet. They chase him, even though he isn't bothering them. But there are lots of caves on the planet. He hides in them, but there are already people in the caves. They chase him, but he hides from them, too."

The story was not exactly like his, but he was curious to know what happened next.

"One day he finds a group of Cave People in trouble, and he rescues them. He is faster and stronger than the cave people, because he comes from a high gravity planet. So they all admire him."

He liked Rangor. He wanted to be Rangor.

"He helps the Cave People battle the monsters. He conquers the monsters, and he becomes the King of the Cave People."

Rangor. He tried on the name mentally. He was smiling.  
 “Why are you smiling?” Sarah asked.  
 “My name is Rangor,” he said.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

## Pablo and Penelope

The Liberty model excursion ship rode an invisible carpet of energy into its electromagnetic nest. Its smooth silvery hull gasped sparkling condensation as it passed through the gleaming alien barrier between dark emptiness and bright atmosphere. The oval space native floundered without a fight into the talons of the flowing forces that dropped it into its berth. The Rothport docks wrapped up to the ship to receive its disembarking passengers. The passenger ship *Orquidea* had arrived.

Inside the newly tamed monster, customers crowded for departure on the plush red carpet that lined the curving central promenade deck. The crew eased into the familiar routine that the two youngest had known their whole lives.

“Hurry up, you kids,” Josefina Velazquez hissed.

Pablo and Penelope scurried into their usual places beside Mom and Dad as the hatch irised open. They stood with their backs to the central blue wall and fell into an alternating gender sequence of man-woman-boy-girl, just the way Dad told them to, without remembering exactly when Dad had told them. The twins didn’t think it made sense to stand attentively and wave good-bye to each and every disembarking customer, but Mom and Dad insisted. They were even under standing orders to smile!

“Good-bye, sir,” Pablo said. He was fourteen years old. He self-consciously patted down the wrinkles of his white and blue TravelEase uniform, even though the uniform routinely corrected its own wrinkles.

“Good-bye, sir,” Penelope said. She smiled at the well-dressed

tourist as he left with his family, hoping that her dark hair and pale makeup were all in place. She would hear about it from her mother later if they weren't.

"Good-bye, Penny," said the tourist's son, a freckle faced nobody whose name Penelope didn't remember. But she did remember telling him her name was Penelope, not Penny. She waved politely to him as he exited the access hatch.

"Have a nice afternoon, ma'am," said Francisco Velazquez. The Red Spot tour was only an overnigher. Did their father really think any of these tourists would remember the *Orquidea* later on? But Mom and Dad insisted on this after every run, no matter who the passengers were or where their travels took them.

"Good-bye, ma'am, and sir, and good-bye to you, too," Josefina said. "Thank you for choosing the *Orquidea*." Sometimes Mom overdid it. Even Dad thought so.

"Horrible news, don't you think?" said one of the passengers. Pablo had served him and his wife a Jovian gin. He guessed they were honeymooners, maybe from the Ganymede mines or hydroponics fields, or the Callisto undersea farms. The stocky man had a burn scar under his left eye and he didn't look like an executive. The scar would have been very simple to fix, but maybe the man just didn't like Martian medicines. Lots of people out here felt that way.

"You mean that explosion?" Mom said. Her dark eyes narrowed in concern. The news had streamed in while they were on the return leg of their journey. "Yes. I hope the rest of your stay on Roth will be peaceful."

Finally the last of the paying customers waddled out under the weight of their buffet lunches.

"OK, kids," Mom called, clapping her hands to get their attention. "Let's get this place cleaned up. TravelEase has us booked for another tour this evening."

Penelope was already walking away. She was tired of being the perfect child, serving the passengers their drinks and cleaning up the inevitable spills. She was looking forward to a little free time on Roth.

"Penelope," Dad called.

Too late. Next time she would be faster.

"OK," Penelope said reluctantly. She looked at Pablo. "I'll start right here, with the promenade."

Pablo said wearily, "I'll take the observation deck." Cleaning up after passengers was not his idea of a good time either.

"After you, son," Dad said. He gestured at the fuzzy blue wall that lined the interior of the elliptical promenade. A hidden door slid open, revealing a bright corridor that led to the galley, to the bridge, to the drive room, and other private areas of the ship where the passengers ordinarily did not go.

Pablo entered the narrow corridor and gestured open the shiny metal door to his right. This was not the only way in to the galley, but it was the one he preferred. There was another entrance on the promenade level, half way between Elevators 3 and 4, for the convenience of fussy guests and picky port inspectors who had nothing better to do than waste the crew's time.

Pablo grabbed three trays, piling them one on top of the other. He steered them through the galley, passing the rows of freezers and heaters and stacks of stored foods. He exited the galley on its inner side, near the center of the ship where Elevator 0 ran. The central elevator was for crew only.

"Open up," Pablo said to the elevator. The curved door slid back and he entered. "Top deck."

Elevator 0 brought Pablo to the exact center of the domed observation lounge and left him there as its cylindrical gray walls separated and retracted into the soft carpet around it. Pablo stepped off the dull green circular base of the elevator. Dark carpeting immediately crawled in over the hard elevator floor to provide continuous space black carpet across the deck. A broken circle of tiny crimson lights glowed softly around Pablo's feet to mark the elevator entrance point. The crimson turned to white as the elevator vanished completely, maintaining the elevator entrance point but indicating that its immediate return was not expected. The integrity of the passengers' view of their surroundings came before anything else, and that meant maintaining an unobstructed line of sight above waist level.

Pablo stepped over the circle of marker lights without giving them too much thought. He was surrounded by a circle of curved buffet tables, but he pushed through one of the gaps between them and nudged his trays toward the fifty dining tables that spread out around him. Fortunately, only about thirty tables needed his attention. Pablo started on the outside, with the lounge chairs and tables closest to the viewing dome. He loaded his top tray with dishes and glasses and utensils. When the tray was full, he let the ship's Digital Person send it over to the nearest smartwaiter entrapoint. The smartwaiter entrances were distributed at regular intervals in the thick black underwall that ran beneath the observation dome viewglass below waist level. The ship's Digital Person would decide which smartwaiter entrance to use based on an algorithm that computed passenger density, tray payload, and tray proximity to each entrapoint. Resilient smooth blackness pulled away from a nearby smartwaiter entrance as the tray approached. The tray deposited its contents into the circular gap in the underwall. The tableware entered the shipwide smartwaiter system and was transported off into a galley subsystem that would wash, dry, and organize it. By the time the first tray came back, Pablo was finishing off his third tray. He repeated the cycle a few more times.

Blinking red lights in the center of the dome signaled the return of the crew elevator. It could only be his sister.

"I beat you," Penelope said. "You haven't even done the buffet tables yet."

Pablo had worked his way around about twenty tables. "Of course you beat me. You took the easy section."

Penelope summoned a returning tray and loaded the buffet tableware onto it. As it floated off toward the nearest smartwaiter access point, Penelope toggled on her HI and summoned the cleaners. The little machines whirled out across the carpet with scouring brushes extended. Their irradiating green and orange disinfectant lights made them look alive. Pablo stepped over one as it whizzed underfoot. A herd of cleaners had reached the far wall and was climbing up across the clear expanse of viewglass that domed the observation deck.

"You finish up here," Penelope said. "I'm going to go check the berths."

"We still have time for a swim if we hurry," Pablo said.

Penelope headed off deck, moving quickly back toward Elevator 0. "I want to go to the Beatty's outlet," she called back over her shoulder. JK Beatty was a Roth based clothing developer who had just come out with a new dynogarb line, Crystalline Cool.

"Why can't you shop the streams like everybody else?" Pablo called back after her. But he already knew why. Streamnet ordering and speedy physical delivery was the norm, but their schedule was fluid and postal deliveries could not be expected to catch up to them.

Penelope did not bother to answer her brother. Both had seen and smelled the new commercials, but Pablo should know by now that there was nothing like going directly to the store floor for the personal touch and feel.

Pablo sent the last trayful into the smartwaiter system and toggled his control bracelet out of its default locked state. He pushed the toggle that activated his HI and navigated through the symbols to lock the chairs in place around the tables. The chairs moved toward their respective tables and found their assigned positions. When he was little, Pablo used to enjoy watching the chairs bump into each other as they slid across the broad black carpet to their respective destinations. Now it was just boring.

A golden lightning bolt flashed over his control band. Pablo took the call.

"Are you finished up there yet?" Penelope asked.

"I'm heading down to the passenger berths now," Pablo said. "Do you need help with first class?" He knew Penelope always started from the bow side, where the first class cabins occupied the prime viewing space where the *Orquidea's* oval narrowed.

"It's not that bad," Penelope answered him. She paused for a moment to look out the panoramic viewing window in the master bedroom. She certainly didn't get this kind of view from her little room!

"OK," Pablo said. "First class is all yours if you want it." The first class cabins generally took longer because they were bigger. On the other hand, there were fewer of them. "I'm going aft." He would meet his sister somewhere in the middle

Penelope watched as a fat green cable snaked its way into the *Orquidea's* side on its way to the fuel cell framework. Dad had decided to top off the fuel cells' charge. Usually Dad just swapped empty fuel cells for full ones. It was faster than recharging. But these one-night Red Spot tours didn't require much power. The fuel cells would not be empty enough to make a swap worthwhile.

"You could start opening all the doors," Penelope said.

Penelope had let the little cleaners loose in the passageways, so Pablo needed to open all the berth doors to give the devices access to the guest quarters. Passenger quarters doors were subject to special restrictions; by law they could not be opened remotely except in emergencies where the passenger inside was incapacitated. Pablo moved quickly down the hallway, opening each door with a gesture and locking it in place so the cleaning machines could get in.

The little cleaners rolled into the rooms and up and down all the walls and ceilings. They sputtered and hissed as they cleaned air-vents and mirrors and plumbing and communicated with each other about their progress. As soon as the sweep of the ship's two berthing levels was complete, they would stack themselves neatly in their maintenance closet and go back to sleep.

Pablo entered the first cabin aft and got to work redoing the bed. He sent the old linen down the smartwaiter duct, which would sort it out and send it to the appropriate destination for cleaning. He sent obvious garbage down the same chute. The smartwaiter would know what to do with it.

Pablo pulled new linens out of a closet and tossed them onto the bed. The linens were smart enough to arrange themselves neatly. Pablo did the same with the bathroom towels and moved on to the next room.

The two left their audio streamways open, but they didn't talk much. Both went about their duties as robotically as the cleaning machines. They operated off memorized checklists that varied for first-class, second-class, and third-class cabins. Finally they finished with their work. Only thirty-eight of the fifty cabins had been booked for this trip, so it wasn't as bad as it might have been. Slightly out

of breath from their haste, they met by a refreshment machine and sipped sodas together.

"You ready?" Pablo asked.

"Yes, but I told you I'm not going swimming today," Penelope said.

"I don't want to go alone," Pablo said. They didn't know anybody on Roth. "Will you go with me tomorrow, when we're back here?"

"OK," Penelope said.

Pablo knew he could count on her word. "Then I'll go Beatty's with you."

"I'll call Dad and let him know," Penelope said. She conjured up her Holographic Interface from her control bracelet.

Pablo raised his eyebrows as he always did. Penelope had customized her HI with pinks and perfumes and other girly stuff.

"Stop making fun of me," Penelope said.

Pablo only shrugged. "I didn't say anything."

Their father's angular face and bushy black eyebrows popped up in front of them. Penelope had opened a full streamway to him. They could see he was on the bridge. He was doing what he always did between flights, the never-ending systems checks and navigational calibrations. The twins knew their dad was happiest when he was in space, or when he was preparing to go there.

"Hola niños," Dad said. "¿Ya terminaron con los cuartos?" Hi kids, are you finished with the rooms already?

Mom and Dad liked to speak Spanish with them, to keep them in practice, but not in front of the customers. They said it was impolite.

"Sí, Pápi," they both said together. Yes, Dad.

"¿Ya nos podemos ir?" Penelope asked. Can we leave now?

Dad continued in Spanish. "Your mother and I want to talk to you first. She's supervising the loading right now. When all the supplies check out, we'll meet you in the family quarters."

Their disappointment must have been obvious. Surely they were not going to get another lecture on the dangers of spaceports in foreign destinations.

"I'm sorry," Dad said gently. "I know you worked really fast and our window here is short. Mom will only be a few more minutes. See you down there?"

"OK," Pablo said.

Penelope was speechless. She waved away her father's connection.

"Well," Pablo said.

"I am not my father or my grandfather," Penelope said. "I cannot live my whole life on the *Orquidea*!"

It was their favorite thing to say when they were denied shore leave.

"Come on, let's go," Pablo said. "We want to be there when Mom gets done." Pablo wasn't too upset, because they weren't going swimming anyway. And he knew his sister well enough to expect that she would get over her disappointment before long.

A private door was hidden in the interior walls of both residential decks. Penelope waved open the one on this level and led the way down the corridor.

"Elevator," she said. Elevator 0 was waiting for them when they reached the center of the deck. "Deck 5." It was the lowest deck.

They walked portside through the narrow corridor until they came to the crew's quarters. The drive room and loading docks were situated aft of them.

"Are we being punished?" Penelope wondered aloud. "I thought we were supposed to be their greatest asset."

"They just say that to get us to serve the customers their drinks and clean up their stupid messes," Pablo said.

Penelope stopped in front of the crew's quarters and gestured the door open. They stepped through, and the hatch sealed shut behind them.

Pablo followed his sister across the small living room. Their bedrooms were side by side. They turned and looked at each other.

"Now what?" they both said at the same time.

Pablo shrugged. "I guess we'll have to wait and see."

"I hope we don't have to wait too long," Penelope said.

"The agency has us scheduled for departure at 1800 hours," Pablo said. "It's just after 1400 now." Pablo holod the time from his control bracelet so Penelope could see it.

"We have to be back an hour before departure, so we have less than three hours," Penelope said.

They were used to making these kinds of estimates. They had done so at many other spaceports around Jupiter and throughout the Belt.

They gestured their doors open and passed through them to their respective rooms. Each one gestured the glowing room HI into existence. These were much more powerful than the HIs that sprang from their control bracelets. They used their colorful Holographic Interfaces to open audiostreams into each other's quarters.

Penelope gestured toward her Mset and filled her room with music. She tossed off her prim and proper TravelEase uniform and put on a comfortable street tunic with an eye catching dragon design. The dragon shuffled its feet and breathed fire at random intervals. It could also be configured to breathe holographic fire whenever boys from her age group got within a certain distance. Penelope began to dance to her music.

"Not that splash stuff again," Pablo said. "Can't you put something else on?"

"I like splash music," Penelope said. "It's the only thing on this ship that doesn't bore me into a tailspin."

"Can't you at least put on a decent group? Comet Droppings has to be the massiest band out there."

Penelope had the band on the Mset and was dancing in the media streams. She was surrounded by a trio of trim teenagers with sound activated dynogarbs, molten lava that pulsed in time with the music. One sang and played the kinetar while the other two sang backup, one working a base kinetar and the other pounding on his multiboards. "They don't look so massy to me," she said, giggling. "Especially Ned Trynk!" She smiled at the band's leader, but he was not interactive. He ignored her and continued his song. "Besides, I haven't heard 'The Anomaly' all day long!"



"You are an anomaly," Pablo said. "But I don't think they're singing about you."

Penelope gestured the volume even higher and shouted the words to the hit song:

"I was just a kid when I learned this natural rule  
 "I learned it in my science class when I was still in school  
 "The Second Law of Thermodynamics unequivocally states  
 "We're all just marking time as the universe deteriorates  
 "But as everything around us succumbs to entropy and decay  
 "It beats me babe how you manage to look prettier every day.  
 "As planets' orbits fade, and molecules lose cohesion  
 "Your beauty grows by quantum leaps that defy all reason  
 "As our ever-expanding universe dissipates and dies  
 "Your charm shines forth with megaton force that stupefies my

eyes

"You sport a supernova smile and aurora-soft hair  
 "Your heart holds the passion of a rising solar flare  
 "With a body that burns hotter than a star's searing core  
 "You're an exciting anomaly in a universe on a slow stroll to death's door.

"Your good looks multiply daily in an exponential explosion  
 "Catalyzing reactions that are steamy, hot and smoking  
 "Proportional responses to our accelerating affinity  
 "In an ongoing equation that reaches to infinity."

"I know what you're doing," Pablo said, as "The Anomaly" ended and the next song launched.

Penelope edged over to one of the gyrating teenagers. "What's that?"

"You'd better keep your distance," Pablo said.

"Too bad you can't touch them," Penelope said.

"You're hopeless."

"You don't have to listen if you don't want to," Penelope said.

Each knew the other would never shut off their mutual audio streamway.

"I don't which is worse, you or that massy splash music," Pablo said.

Pablo was silent for a while, but Penelope heard the sharp crack of blaster fire over her music. The sound repeated itself several times.

"Shooting dinosaurs again?" she called out.

"Hunting," he corrected her, "and then shooting." He sounded out of breath.

"Oh, I forgot," Penelope said.

"This is sport, not target practice," Pablo said.

"It's the Dreamland dinosaur game, you mean."

"Yeah, so? Haven't you seen the commercials? I'm honing reflexes that will be beneficial in my later development."

"Whenever that will be," Penelope said, spinning around the room with the Comet Droppings.

"There goes old T-Rex again!" Pablo said. He blasted away with two guns.

"Come on out to the living room, dinosaur hunter," Mom said, interposing her own audio streamway. "And you too, music lover."

Pablo tossed his holographic blaster set onto his bed. Penelope gestured her Mset into silence.

"We're on our way," they said together. Their doors slid open at the same time.

Their parents sat next to each other on the long tan sofa. They leaned forward when the twins stood obediently in front of them.

Dad said, "I'm sorry to tell you this, but we've decided against any shore leave today." His voice was firm, but they were used to that.

"Why not?" Pablo asked. His good times were collapsing in front of him. How often did they get a chance to leave the ship? Even if it was just to roam a stupid supermall?

"It's not your fault," Mom said. "It's because of that explosion we saw over the newsstreams. We don't think it's safe to go out."

"But why?" Penelope protested. "Roth City is one of our safer destinations. The TravelEase agency rates it A+." Her afternoon was self-destructing right before her eyes.

"Do they know who did it yet?" Pablo asked.



"No," Dad answered. "At least I haven't heard."

"But it hasn't happened again, right?" Penelope asked. "It was just a one-time thing. It's over now." She was not going to let this go without a fight.

"Well, the Mset hasn't reported any other incidents," Dad said. "But that doesn't mean it won't happen again."

"So maybe it won't," Penelope said. "I promise, if it happens again, we'll come straight back." She had to get off this prison of a ship, even if only for a few hours. Her face reddened, pale makeup notwithstanding.

"Also, there seems to be a problem with the peacemen," Mom said. "They all had to be recalled for some reason."

"Yes, they are all getting fitness checks," Dad said.

"You mean we can't go out because of a problem with the peace-men?" Pablo asked.

"There's no law enforcement in the streets," Dad said. "I don't want you two out in that."

"You're a dictator!" Penelope shouted suddenly. She couldn't hold it back any longer. "You keep us all locked up on this ship, even Mom. You know she wants to have another baby, and you tell her no because there's no room and no resources. I can't even have a pet here! Not even a harmless little pink lizard!"

Mom's face flushed red. "That's none of your business, Penelope." Her hand reached over to grasp her husband's. "Believe me when I tell you I'm very happy on the *Orquidea*. I am happy just to be with your father and with you kids."

"Try to understand," Dad said. "We want to keep you here, where it's safe."

"I know you are disappointed," Mom said. "Do you want ice cream?"

"We're not kids any more, Mom," Penelope said. "Ice cream won't fix everything for us."

"We've downloaded the new Mark Sadoff streamie," Dad said. "You want to watch it with us? We can play it in either English or Spanish."

"Dad, you're the only one who likes that Mark Sadoff macho action hero stuff," Penelope said.

"Hey, that's not true," Pablo said. But Penelope shot him a look that stopped all further speech.

They headed back to their rooms. Their doors slid shut behind them.

Penelope was no longer in the mood for the Comet Droppings. She put on Embryo of a Dream instead. The soft sweet music of the first song, Spread Petals, streamed into both bedrooms.

Like a flower, your petals spread open  
To reveal your flavor and freshness  
But you lie exposed to the careless feet  
Of those who would sample your fragrance  
And trample your beauty in their passing  
Leaving sunshine buried in bitterness.  
A flower that shines like a thousand stars  
Should be savored by nothing less.

Pablo was no longer in the mood to hunt dinosaurs. Instead he holoed up the underwater Sheraton on Callisto. Callisto was one of Jupiter's major moons. Internal magma activity provided free heat for its many underground lakes. Pablo lay on his bed and watched the multicolored fish drift by. He didn't know what factory had produced the fish and he didn't care. Artificial orange and yellow lights shone down on him from above.

"What are we supposed to do now?" Penelope said.

"I don't know," Pablo answered.

"Maybe we can sneak out," Penelope said.

"Not that again," Pablo said.

"Yeah, but maybe there really is a way," Penelope said.

"We would have thought of it by now," Pablo said. "We've talked about it forever."

"Just because we haven't figured it out yet..."

"And even if we do get out, what then? This is Roth City. It isn't like Bettina or Themis or any of those other rocks off the ecliptic plane in the unrulid Belt. The security here actually works. They really do check for parental authorization."

"We cross that gulf when we come to it. You know the *Orquidea* has all kinds of secrets. I don't think Dad has told us everything yet."

"You mean like the safe room and all that wartime stuff from when Grandpa was a kid here? I think we found all the secret hiding places."

"Dad said it was wartime stuff, but I think grandpa was a pirate."

"I know your theory," Pablo said. "But what's the difference? It just depends on which side won."

"Grandpa must have had some secret escape exit, just in case the *Orquidea* got tracted in by another ship."

"We would have found it," Pablo said. He closed his eyes. The slow moving holographic fish outside his softly lit holographic window were putting him to sleep.

"Are you sure we looked everywhere?" Penelope asked.

"Yep," Pablo said.

"But how can you be sure?"

"They would have told us, anyway. They want us to be able to take care of ourselves in case something happens to them. They showed us all that other stuff, remember?"

"I think we should look some more."

"I'm gonna take a nap," Pablo said.

"You are so lazy!"

"That music of yours is putting me to sleep."

"So you don't want to help me look for the secret exit?"

"Don't make me turn off our audiostream," Pablo murmured.

Penelope sighed. "Don't worry about it."

She cut the music and set her Mset to a newsstream. She muted the audio so as not to disturb her brother and activated text streaming. She watched multiple newsstreams of the blast and the peaceman recall, and cursed the terrorists behind the whole thing. But the news just repeated itself over and over with boring analysts who pretended to offer new information but really just rehashed the obvious. Penelope went onto the streams and looked longingly at the new Beatty

clothing line again. She checked to see if any of her friends were on line, but either they were offline, occupied, or too far away for decent communications. She finally gave up and tuned to an edustream from Roth City. They were running a program on pirates in the unclaimed territories. Finally she waved the Mset off and closed her eyes...

She was awakened by the recorded sound of her father's voice, echoing around the ship. "All aboard!"

She was late. Her father must have felt sorry for her and let her sleep. She should be in the greeting line, welcoming the passengers onto the *Orquidea*. The old man really did have a nice element in him.

Penelope tossed off her tunic and threw on her shipboard uniform, combing her shiny black hair as her bedroom door slid open. She stumbled into her shoes as she opened a commstream to Pablo. "Welcome aboard," she heard. "Welcome to the *Orquidea*. My name is Pablo. Let me know if I can help you with anything at all while you're on board the *Orquidea*. Thank you for choosing the *Orquidea*."

She should be there. She rushed out of crew quarters and down the corridor. The elevator took forever, but she finally arrived on Deck 3, the promenade level. She scrambled out and scurried toward the hidden door, slipping neatly into line right next to Pablo.

"Welcome aboard," she said. "My name is Penelope."

"Hola, Penelope," Mom whispered. Hi, Penelope. Mom went off to guide the last of the passengers up to the observation deck. Most of them liked to watch the takeoff from there. Their luggage would have been loaded and dispersed to their rooms already.

"Not many customers tonight," said Pablo, to no one in particular.

"TravelEase called me," Dad said. "A lot of passengers cancelled because of the terrorist attack." He was trying to hide it, but Dad was really upset. "Just because a bunch of lunatics decides to blow up the House of Governors is no reason to take it out on me."

Penelope knew that feeling pretty well.

"What about the financial critical mass?" Penelope asked. "Are we going to break even?"

"No," Dad said. He did not comment on Penelope's late arrival.

"But we have to make the trip. We have an obligation to the clients who stuck with us. The insurance company will make up the difference, but that just means higher rates later."

Pablo glanced at the time. "Just a few minutes before takeoff, Dad. Want me to close the hatch?"

Dad sighed. "I guess..."

Dad's control bracelet flashed golden. He glanced down at it. "It's the agency," he said. "Excuse me." He brought up his HI and put it into dark mode.

Dad's head disappeared into a wavy black cloud, from which no sound or light could escape. The cloud also swallowed up the HI and whatever image it was streaming. Only Dad could see and hear the commstream now. Dad could see out, but no one else could see inside the cloud.

"Private call," Pablo commented.

"Yep. Trying to shield us from the bad news, I guess," Penelope said.

Both children sniffed the air simultaneously, then caught each other doing it. They smiled. Dark mode didn't work for smells. The technology wasn't that advanced yet. If smells were transmitted, they would seep out of the cloud. But they didn't smell anything meaningful.

"So are you awake now?" Pablo asked.

"Shut up," Penelope said affectionately.

The darkness cleared up as Dad terminated the call. Dad's frown cleared up as well.

"Don't close that hatch yet, Pablo," he said. "The agency just called with a last minute customer. Four of them! A man and a woman with their niece and nephew. They booked a first-class cabin, and they're on their way right now."

The twins knew the first-class cabins had a higher profit margin.

"Does that mean..." Penelope began.

"Yes," Dad said, smiling. "We've reached our financial critical

mass. We've made our break-even point. We won't turn much of a profit, but we'll survive another day."

The twins knew Dad was happy. For him, it wasn't about profit. It was only about being in space.

CHAPTER EIGHT

## Charles Dunn

“You see?” Daphne said. “One of the regional spaceports, just like you wanted. This is it.”

The small spaceport was nearly empty. There was no luggage rolling in the luggage lanes to the intake vents. The footsteps of the few people who lined up at the boarding gates echoed hollowly against the marble floors and stone ceiling. Despite having changed his face again, Dunn would have preferred the anonymity of a crowd. This would have to do.

Dunn had stepped out first, to survey the spaceport and to guide the others. He motioned them out of the crosscar. “Go ahead, Sarah,” he said curtly. “Step outside. You too, Eric. Rangor!” The synthe-gen clung timidly to the crosscar door. “It’s OK.” Eric ran from the crosscar to the nearest slidewalk. “Eric, wait for the rest of us!” Dunn called. Eric stopped, hands on hips. “Everybody stick together!” Dunn scolded them.

Finally they were all out. The crosscar closed its doors and scooted off along the crossshaft toward its next destination.

Sarah stood next to Dunn and smiled. The RPG software compensated for the height difference. Instead of looking up at him, as the real Sarah must be doing, the holographic portrayal of Sarah’s mother smiled right into his eyes. She was a very beautiful woman.

“You’re a good girl, Sarah,” Dunn said to the hologram of Marlene Belkin, the senator’s wife.

Rangor was rubbing at his ears.

“No, don’t do that!” Dunn exclaimed. He was wiping away the makeup that Sarah had so carefully applied. “Remember your disguise?”

Rangor stopped. "It itches."

Dunn motioned for the three children to follow him.

"Now what?" Daphne asked.

"You know what," Dunn said. "We find a ship to take us to the Robert A. White research station. At least we can unload one of them there. Maybe we'll get lucky and Eric's father will take them all off our hands."

"Look around you," Daphne said. Dunn had been doing just that since the moment the crosscar arrived. "Do you see any flights to a research station that the general public never heard of and couldn't care less about?"

"Of course not," Dunn said. He was scanning the holo-ads.

"Are you going to hire a ship?" Daphne asked. "I can set it up for you, but it takes a few hours to arrange that, and the charter ships are at a different spaceport —"

"No," Dunn said.

Eric was trying to touch a holo-ad for a Dreamland spaceship toy. It was a scale model of a Hercules battle cruiser and it was supposed to provide hours of educational entertainment on those long spaceflights. Eric regarded the holo-ad with undisguised desire. He looked pleadingly at Dunn.

"He wants the Hercules ship," Sarah said.

"No," Dunn said. "We don't have time for toys."

Eric's face reddened and his lower lip quivered. He reached up for Sarah's hand.

"No, don't touch her!" Dunn cried in alarm. Physical contact would quite literally penetrate Sarah's light-thin disguise. Dunn picked up the toddler to prevent him from advancing toward Sarah. Eric was crying.

"OK, OK," Dunn said. He waved at the holo-ad. It created a duplicate copy of itself that led Dunn over to a wall machine.

"You didn't need to do that," Daphne said. "I could have led you to the sales machine."

"Not now," Dunn told her silently.

Dunn gestured a dark HI into existence to keep his financial

transaction private. He selected the slim Hercules ship and emerged from the cloud with the toy in his hand. "Here." He handed the toy to Eric. A name like Hercules should have implied a more muscular ship, but Dunn knew the Jovian battle cruiser was designed to present a minimal target. Its name was derived from its distinctive H shape.

The little boy's face lit up with joy. He grabbed the toy and squirmed out of Dunn's grasp. He landed on the floor and started making flying motions with the little Hercules ship. He was content now. Dunn realized that the real appeal of the toy was not based on its educational value, but on keeping the child occupied and out of his parents' hair.

"Are you through playing around?" Daphne asked.

"Yes," Dunn said. Sarah still stood beside him, Rangor hid behind him, and Eric was finally under control. He led the group onward, through the continuous onslaught of floating holo-ads.

"There," Dunn said. He stepped in front of one of the holo-signs. It was a representation of Jupiter, with the famous Great Red Spot prominently displayed. Moving text flashed information about tour times and prices. Dunn gestured into the floating logo of the TravelEase agency and activated the audio.

"Looking for a great tour of the Great Red Spot? Take a Great Red Spot Tour! Are we talking about a Great Red Spot or a Great Tour? Take an overnighter with us and you will see that it is both!"

"That is an extremely goofy ad," Daphne commented.

"Contact the TravelEase agency for details," the holo-ad continued. "TravelEase. We speak the language of travel."

"Goofy is perfect," Dunn said. "No one will look for us there. Besides, do you smell that?" The ship's gourmet buffet permeated the holo-ad. "I've got three kids with me who need to be fed."

"But the ship just goes out and comes right back," Daphne said. "It doesn't make any stops. How are you going to get Eric from the tour ship to the research station?"

"We'll cross that gulf when we come to it."

The kids were looking at him intently.

"Are we going to go on a spaceship?" Eric asked.

"Yes. We are going to find your Daddy," Dunn said.

"What about Mommy?" Eric asked.

Dunn paused. "Daddy will explain."

"Are we going back to Mars now?" Rangor asked.

"We have to take another little trip first," Dunn said. "Now let's get moving. We don't have much time."

Dunn waved at the holo-ad for the Great Red Spot Tour. It split into two. The new copy led them to an outgoing slidewalk.

"I could lead you there if you would let me go visual," Daphne said sourly.

"Make the reservations," Dunn said to Daphne. "Sarah will go as my wife, Victoria. Eric and Rangor should go as our nephews." Both boys still showed the irritating tendency to call him "Uncle Luke".

"You're in luck," Daphne said. "Plenty of available space on the ship. But you had better hurry. Their departure is scheduled in just a few minutes."

"Follow me," Dunn said to the children. He did not wait for the slidewalk to carry him, but started off at a brisk pace along it. Rangor did not seem to mind.

Eric and Sarah struggled to keep up. They were falling behind. Dunn was forced to slow down. "Come on," he said.

The floating holo-ad stopped in front of the Great Red Spot Tours exit ramp. Dunn waved it away and gathered the children together. He looked down at the two expectant faces and imagined Sarah's face being just as eager as the others.

"Listen up," Dunn said. "We're going to play a game. Sarah is your Aunt Victoria. Do you hear that, Sarah? Both of you boys are our nephews. Any questions?"

Sarah raised her hand, a childish gesture for a Martian senator's wife.

"What?" Dunn asked.

"Are you still our Uncle Luke?" Sarah asked.

"Yes. Now let's go."

The entrance ramp took them up to the ship's open hatch. Dunn

stepped through the wide oval opening on to a plush red carpet. He beckoned to the others to do the same.

"Welcome aboard, sir," said a dark haired man in a captain's uniform. "My name is Francisco Velazquez, and I am delighted to be your captain."

"Welcome aboard, ma'am," said a boy in a neat white and blue uniform to Sarah. He had black hair and green eyes. "My name is Pablo."

"Welcome aboard the *Orquidea*, boys," said a girl with similar features. She had shoulder length black hair and pale makeup and the same green eyes as her brother. Dunn was sure that she and the boy were twins. "My name is Penelope." Both children were afflicted with the throes of adolescence. "My mother has gone to get your room keys."

They all wore formal ship uniforms sporting the fat armchair logo of the TravelEase corporation. It was supposed to signal comfort and relaxation. This was an obvious family operation, contracted to an international travel agency. The agency made the bookings and the profit, while the family did the work and took most of the risk.

"Do you have any luggage?" Francisco Velazquez asked.

"This was kind of an impulse," Dunn said. "All our luggage is still in the hotel."

"You can get toiletries and other items from the ship's store," Penelope said politely.

Nice girl. Good attitude.

"Thank you," Sarah said, looking and sounding absolutely elegant as the image of her mother.

"We're about to take off," the captain said. "Would you like to visit the observation dome?"

Not really.

"Yes!" Eric squealed.

Oh, all right.

"Sure," Dunn said.

Rangor just looked confused.

"I've signaled my wife, Josefina," Captain Velazquez said. "She

has gone to get your room keys. If you head down that corridor, you'll run right into her. And she'll also point you toward the observation deck."

The kids followed after Dunn around the plush promenade. They were barely out of sight of the captain when they came across an elevator pressed into the deep blue elliptical interior wall of the ship. Dunn spotted Josefina almost immediately. She was easy to distinguish.

"Mr. Robinson? I'm Josefina." The white and blue TravelEase uniform made that obvious. "Here are two room keys, one for you and your wife." Dunn took both keys from Josefina. Sarah could not be seen handling anything. "Right this way," the TravelEase contractor said. She smiled and motioned toward the elevator. The door was already open. "This is Elevator I. There are four elevators placed equally apart around the *Orquidea* for your convenience. They are all accessible from the observation dome and from the residential decks."

They got off Elevator I on the third floor above. It was labeled Deck I on the elevator indicator pad. The elevator walls vanished into the deep black carpet as they stepped out onto the broad observation deck. A circle of subdued crimson lights spaced a few centimeters apart surrounded them. The lights shifted from red to white as the elevator disappeared behind them.

The elevator had deposited them slightly to the front of the dome's center. Eric squealed and made a dash toward the wide curved window. A waist-high black wall was embedded in the viewglass. It ran around the entire length of the dome and was topped by a black convenience rail. Eric dropped the toy Hercules on the carpet and attempted to pull himself up on the rail.

Sarah stayed by Dunn's side. Rangor stayed behind him.

"Let's have a seat," Dunn said. There were plenty of open tables. Dunn nodded to a few of the other guests as he chose a spot that was as far away from them as possible.

The docks fell away from the ship, and the *Orquidea* was released from her berth. The cruiser slid backward out of the spaceport. Less

seasoned travelers looked for a handle to grip, or a seatbelt to fasten. The *Orquidea's* inertial dampers made none of these necessary.

The lighting on the observation deck dimmed and the captain's voice streamed into the room, an obvious recording:

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for choosing the *Orquidea*. The *Orquidea* is a Liberty class cruiser built by the Sterling Sapphire Corporation, which is based in the Rocklands, a province of the December Consensus. *Orquidea* is the Spanish word for orchid, and can also be used as a woman's name. Though built in 2362, the *Orquidea* has undergone extensive refitting nine times in her lifetime, most recently three years ago in 2450 when her DP, Zolotoi drives, and inertial dampers were modernized. She sports fifty passenger berths, a ship's store where you can pick up souvenirs, toiletries and other sundry items, and a fine buffet which will be available in just a few minutes."

The brilliant bubble of Roth City dropped down and away from them. It seemed to fall off into empty darkness. Other spacecraft were visible as shining points of light in the distance, both coming and going.

"We are now leaving Rothport," the captain's recording continued.

The ship angled around until the fat gas giant Jupiter loomed directly ahead of them. Its green, white, and orange bands churned slowly in massive, unending torment. The rings of shining debris that surrounded it hovered in the black distance before them. The *Orquidea* headed straight for them.

Dunn glanced around the room. Most of the passengers were gravity welled into the spectacular sight like light into a black hole. He was not the only one traveling with children, although he probably had the strangest collection. No one was paying undue attention to him or his companions.

"You can see Jupiter's rings dead ahead of us," the captain continued. "We are going to take a trajectory north of the rings, relative to the planet. This has the obvious advantage of avoiding the rocks and debris that make up the rings, but also provides you with an un-



cluttered view of this, the largest object in our solar system. The scattered lights you see ahead belong to the Reckhart Mining Company stations working this part of Jupiter's rings."

Eric had tired of the view from the window and was looking around as if he were lost. He held his little Hercules cruiser in a death grip, as if it alone could save him from abandonment and desolation but was refusing to do so. A holographic Hercules appeared above Eric's head. The toy threw out holoiimages of itself when squeezed, mimicking a defense capability of the real Hercules.

"Jupiter rotates every ten hours. We will match its speed when we arrive at about 2130 hours. We will spend the night at the edge of the giant hurricane known as the Great Red Spot. Please let your room key know if you would like to be alerted when we arrive. Your room key can also guide you to our ship's store, and of course to your room. It can also answer any questions you might have about the ship, the tour, or the TravelEase agency. Enjoy the buffet and enjoy your Great Red Spot Tour."

Near the center of the room, a sudden brightness illuminated a long row of plates heaped with crowd-sized quantities of the local cuisine. The buffet table was surrounded by a long rectangle of cheery yellow lights that beamed up from the carpet around it. The two children who had greeted them, Pablo and Penelope, were stacking plates and silverware on a side table. They deftly dodged an onrush of hungry passengers.

"Over here, Eric!" Dunn yelled. It wouldn't do for the little boy to cry. Crying children attract attention.

Eric came running over and threw himself into Dunn's lap, laughing with relief. "There, there," Dunn said, forcing a stiff smile out of his new, harder, face. He lifted the child off the floor. "Rangor, could you move over, please?"

"OK." Rangor shifted to the next seat over. The lanky synthe-gen looked like he would have been more comfortable lying on his bed of rags. The poor boy had spent most of his life with the kind of people who flew just out of prodar range. The observation deck was filled to less than half occupancy, but Dunn doubted that Rangor had ever been around as many people as were here now.

Dunn set Eric down on the seat beside him. "Listen to me," Dunn said, transfixing the tyke with his eyes. "I'm going to bring us all back some food. I want you to stay right here. OK?"

"OK, Uncle Luke," Eric said.

"I mean it. Right here," Dunn said.

"Yes!" Eric said.

Hoping for the best, Dunn crossed the room to the buffet. He grabbed a tray and piled two plates with salads, fish, fruit, and meats. The salads looked interesting; they probably came from Callistoponics or someone using their patents for undersea farming in Callisto's lava heated underground oceans. Callistoponics did not export its undersea produce to the Inner System and so Dunn had never seen some of the vegetables. The fish undoubtedly came from the same source. The fruit was probably a Dreschler product. The company had a plant in Ganymede Acres, the capital of Ganymede. Dreschler's advertising agency never let you forget that not only was Ganymede the largest moon in the solar system, it was even larger than the planet Mercury. Dreschler could cut costs by using real gravity for growing crops. The savings were somewhat offset by the cost of exporting out of Ganymede's gravity well, but Dreschler could charge higher prices because people out here believed that food tasted better when grown in real gravity. Whether this was true or not, it was a great selling point for Dreschler's Ganymede operation. The spices and dressings may also have come from Ganymede. The meats were obvious Martian manna products, with the famous Martian flavor and nutritive value. They were the only items on the menu that couldn't be produced locally. Dunn filled the plates to overflowing. This was all he could carry; dessert would have to come later.

With a full tray, Dunn turned away from the buffet line and saw Pablo talking to Sarah.

"What's he doing?" Dunn asked Daphne.

"Looks like he's serving her a Jovian gin."

Dunn came close to stumbling over his own feet as he sped across the room balancing the tray and its contents. Fellow passengers scattered out of the way of his onrushing charge. He reached the table

and interrupted the conversation between Sarah and Pablo, pushing himself in between them and blocking their mutual eye contact.

"Sir?" Pablo said. The serving boy was obviously startled by the sudden movement.

"Thank you," Dunn said. "That will be all."

"But Uncle Luke," Eric said. "You didn't get any drinks!"

"You can start with this," Dunn said. "I'll go back for drinks."

"You only brought two plates, Uncle Luke," Sarah admonished him. The Martian lady smiled condescendingly.

Pablo raised his eyebrows. "Uncle Luke? But I thought —"

"She just calls me that in front of our nephews," Dunn said. "Don't worry about the drinks. I'll go back and get something for all of us."

Dunn set the tray down on the table and began to distribute the two plates. Eric ignored the food. He grabbed a fork from the tray and started playing with it. He bounced it off the table and picked it back up again.

"No!" Sarah said. "You'll hurt yourself!" She reached over and grabbed the fork out of Eric's hand.

The beautiful holographic forearm of Marlene Belkin reached for the fork. It kept on going. The fork disappeared into the illusion. Only the metal prongs were left visible, extending from the holographic forearm.

"Whoops," Sarah said.

Pablo's eyes widened, then he backed away. He left the tall frosty green glass of Jovian gin behind and moved quickly to another table, dispersing his trayful of drinks among the other passengers. Sarah looked after him wistfully.

"He was nice," Sarah said.

"He was not," Eric said. "He didn't give me anything to drink! He left that glass for you."

"You are too young to drink this," Sarah said.

"Don't touch that," Dunn said to Sarah.

Eric grabbed the fork back and began stuffing his face. "Can I have something to drink now?"

Dunn realized that Sarah would not be able to eat anything in public. The sight of the elegant Martian woman shoving food into her neck would not harmonize with their roles as tourists.

"Let's go to our rooms," Dunn said. "We can order from there."

"But the view is so nice here," Sarah said.

"Yes. Well. The room will have a view, too," Dunn said. "Let's go." He stood up, and Sarah did the same. "You can leave that there, Rangor," Dunn said. Rangor put down the plate. "I will order more for you."

Dunn looked at Pablo again. He was talking with his sister.

"What about mine?" Eric asked.

The sister glanced in their direction. She turned back to her brother, listening intently to what he had to say.

"Leave it," Dunn said. "Let's go."

Penelope looked at them again.

"Now, Eric," Dunn said.

Eric dropped the fork into his salad and pushed the plate away.

Dunn saw Sarah smile at the boy, who was now serving drinks to other Ipassengers. Pablo smiled back uncertainly. He knew there was a child underneath the disguise. He didn't know who or why.

"Can I lead you to your room?" Daphne pleaded. "It's really close. I would only be visible to you for a few minutes. Please? Won't you let me show you the way?"

"That's what the room keys are for," Dunn said. He fumbled in his tunic pouch and brought out one of the room keys. He pressed the button that lit the hologuide.

A whirling red spot jumped out of the key and suspended itself in the air in front of him. The logo apparently represented the ship's destination. "How may I help you?" the red spot politely asked.

"Room," Dunn said.

"Right this way," the red spot said, dancing in front of them and leading them to the closest broken circle of soft white lights. "I will summon Elevator 2 for you. Elevator 2 is currently on Deck 4. Thank you for patiently waiting."

Dunn surveyed the children as they waited for Elevator 2. Rangor stood unnaturally still in his accustomed position directly behind Dunn. Sarah said nothing but appeared relaxed, her arms at her sides and her chin up, the picture of the Martian upper class. Eric looked out the nearest section of viewglass, but he wasn't admiring Jupiter any more. He was studying himself in the reflected interior light of the room. He seemed fascinated by his cheeks and his tongue, and the intriguing combinations of expressions they could create together.

So far so good, Dunn thought. They just might make it to their room without any further mishaps. Never had a cover been blown so fast, but nothing bad had come of it. The ship kids were suspicious, but knew nothing and probably wouldn't tell anybody.

The circle of light on the carpet shifted from white to yellow to red. The elevator thrust upward with a soft chime. The door slid back and the floating red light beckoned them to follow after it.

"Come along, children," Dunn said. He was glad they had finally settled down.

Eric started to cry.

"What is it?" Sarah asked. "What's the matter, Eric?"

The kid continued to bawl.

"What is it?" Dunn demanded.

Eric raised his tear-streaked face to meet Dunn's gaze.

"Well?" Dunn said.

Eric spread his arms. Something was missing. "My spaceship," the boy said.

"Your toy!" Sarah exclaimed. "Where is it?"

"He left it on the table," Rangor told them, eyebrows raised in apparent surprise that no one had noticed this obvious fact.

"The elevator door must close in fifteen seconds," the lowly and insignificant red spot said.

"Hey Charlie," Daphne said. "Your pulse rate is increasing. So's your blood pressure. Thought you'd like to know."

"Go back and get it!" Dunn ordered the boy.

"I'll go with him," Sarah said.

"No, you will not go back there," Dunn said. Didn't she know she had already blown their cover into the next galaxy?

"But he can't go alone," Sarah said.

The Martian lady mockup was right.

"Rangor, you — Never mind." The synthegen did not look willing to venture back on his own. Even if he could be persuaded to go, he would almost certainly display a speed and agility that could only be attributed to his special design.

"Do you really need that silly toy?" Dunn asked Eric.

The little boy responded with a new outbreak of tears, louder and more anguished than before.

"OK," Dunn groaned. "Stop crying. We're all going. Everybody follow me."

Eric smiled immediately. He grabbed Dunn's hand and kissed it.

Dunn glared down at him. "Don't ever do that again."

Dunn turned his back on the elevator and the little red spot. He heard the elevator door slide shut behind him.

"I will vanish if I am not addressed in one minute," the puny red spot warned politely.

"Vanish now," Dunn said.

The scrawny red spot did exactly that.

"Look!" Sarah said.

But Dunn had already seen it. Another child had found Eric's toy and was playing with it. The husky little boy wore tight tourist dynogarbs sporting the dynamic bands and colors of Jupiter. The gas giant's multiple moons slowly orbited around his chest and waist, crawling over and under the folds in the garment. He was pushing Eric's toy through the air and making whooshing noises with his mouth. This was all wrong, as the real Hercules cruiser was not built to fly in an atmosphere and no ship makes whooshing noises or in fact any noise at all in the vacuum of space. An entire squadron of holographic Herculeases flashed around the boy's head as he squeezed the toy so hard Dunn thought he would damage it.

"No!" Eric cried. "Uncle Luke!"

Eric was upset, and Dunn was sure it had nothing to do with the other boy's false realism. Dunn changed course to intercept the child,

who was flying his prize away from the table where he had originally found it.

"Excuse me," Dunn called after the boy. The kid's hair bore a surprising resemblance to a sprouting bud of immature manna, right down to the characteristic splay and dirty yellow color.

"What?" the boy said defiantly. He glared at them with green eyes.

"That toy belongs to my nephew," Dunn said, drawing closer. "Could you give it back?"

Wet mucous dripped across Eric's upper lip. He wiped it with his palm and then clutched Dunn's hand. The toy thief was a few years older than Eric.

The green eyes narrowed and the toy pressed closer to the young breast. "No."

"Come on," Dunn said. "Please?" Dunn was begging, but what choice did he have?

"No!" the little dirt spurt said. "Go away!"

Rangor looked down on the little boy, his dark eyes narrowed into little beads. Dunn knew the young synthegeen could snatch the toy and disappear before any of them realized what happened. It was the way the pre-peaceman had lived for months now. It would be as natural to him as breathing.

Dunn caught Rangor's eyes with his own. He subtly shook his head. Rangor looked away.

Eric whimpered silently, chewing on his tunic sleeve. He looked up at Dunn with big wide brown eyes.

"Come on," Dunn said to the boy holding the toy. "Give it back. Can't you see how upset my nephew is?"

"Go away or I'll call my mommy!" the boy said. He held his ground.

"Listen to me," Dunn said. "If you don't —"

"Charlie," Daphne warned. "Those vital signs again..."

"So call her," Pablo said, appearing suddenly beside the boy.

"I really mean it," the boy said. "She'll yell at all of you!"

"Go ahead, call your mommy," Penelope said. She appeared

on the other side of the boy. "Call her, Robin Woodhouse from the Ceres Nation."

"Hey, you can't use psychology on me," the boy said. "'Cause I already failed that class."

"I would love to show your mom the security stream of you taking the toy off their table," Pablo said. "Just after you took a sip out of that glass of Jovian gin."

The little toy thief spun around now, clearly measuring the odds against him.

"But —" he said, in one last attempt to escape with the goods.

Penelope blocked his path. "Your mom will be back from the restroom any minute, Robin Woodhouse," she warned him. She held up her control band. "Your mother's name is Julia. Maybe I'll holo out that security stream of you drinking the gin and stealing the toy for all the passengers to enjoy."

"OK!" Robin shouted. He threw the toy at Penelope and sped away, presumably back to the table he shared with his mother.

Penelope snatched the toy out of the air and handed it to Eric. "Here."

"We apologize for any trouble," Pablo said mechanically.

"So do we," Dunn said, glad the whole ordeal was over.

Eric grabbed the toy and was checking it for damage.

"Most of our passengers are pretty nice," Penelope said. "This one was sort of an anomaly."

Pablo rolled his eyes at sister. "Not that again!" he said.

"What's wrong with you?" Penelope joked, playfully punching her brother in the shoulder.

"The Anomaly!" Sarah said. "Do you like Comet Droppings?"

"Comet Droppings?" Dunn silently asked Daphne. "Is that some kind of local dessert?"

"I was just a kid when I learned this natural rule," Penelope sang.

"I learned it in my science class when I was still in school," Sarah responded cheerfully.

"I love Ned Trynk," Penelope said dreamily.

"Me, too," Sarah sighed.

Both girls laughed at each other and then smiled.

"You're in RPG mode, aren't you," Penelope said quietly.

Sarah looked at Dunn.

"Let's at least take this out of auditory," Dunn said. What else was there to do?

Penelope touched her control bracelet to summon her personal HI. Dunn stepped back, shocked by the sudden sprouting of pinks and perfumes.

Pablo laughed. "See, I told you it was a girly HI," he said to his sister.

"Shut up," Penelope said. She waved and flickered within the HI. It vanished, leaving behind only a faint sweet scent.

"We're audio damped now," Penelope said. "So? What's with the disguise?"

"Please don't tell anyone," Sarah said.

"But why?" Penelope insisted.

"Penelope!" Pablo said sharply to his sister. "That's none of our business."

The kid was right about that.

"I want to make sure she's all right," Penelope said to her brother. "Is that really your Uncle Luke?" Penelope asked Sarah.

"He's Uncle Luke," Sarah said. Pablo studied her expression carefully. "He took care of me when my parents were killed. Then he brought me to his friend's house. But the peacemen came after her and she was shot. They were going to shoot me, too. And they were going to shoot Eric. But he rescued us from them. Now he wants to take Eric back to his father. And he wants to take me and Rangor back to Mars."

Mars might not be the best place for Rangor, but it would do as a destination for now.

"Rangor?" Pablo said. "Like the planet Netherworld?"

"I am Rangor," Rangor said.

"We helped with his name," Eric said, contentedly clutching his little spaceship.

"What's your real name?" Pablo asked Rangor.

"I am Rangor," Rangor said, turning away from Pablo's inquisitive stare. Dunn noted that it was past time to refresh the synthege's ear makeup.

Pablo took a step backward. He glanced briefly at his sister. "Yeah, all right," he said. "Nice to meet you, Rangor."

"But where's Eric's father?" asked Penelope.

"He's on the Roth University research station around Jupiter," Dunn said.

"Daddy's a scientist," Eric said proudly.

"You mean the Robert A. White station?" Pablo asked.

Dunn nodded. "Do you know it?"

"We've exchanged hails," Pablo said. "That's all."

"I want my Daddy," Eric sighed.

"Is there any way we could arrange that?" Dunn asked. "I would compensate you for it."

"I don't know," Penelope said. "It's not in our flight plan."

"Dad only cares about flight plans because they won't let him fly without one," Pablo said.

Penelope shot him a fierce look. "Can't you see I'm trying to negotiate here?"

"Sorry," Pablo grinned foolishly.

"Ten thousand joves," Dunn said. It was money well spent as far as he was concerned. "Half in advance, half when the kid meets up with his dad on the RA White." Dunn would deal with the accountants later.

"That will probably work," Penelope said, smiling.

"We have to take it to Dad first," Pablo said.

"Dad will have to locate the research station in its orbit and determine when we are closest to it," Penelope said.

"You can reach me in our room," Dunn said. "When we have a delivery time, I'll advance you the first half." He shook hands with both of the twins.

Sarah yawned. "Excuse me!"

"We're all very tired," Dunn said. "We're going to head for our quarters now."

Penelope summoned her HI again and chose to unmute. "Audio damping's off," she pronounced.

"Thank you for choosing TravelEase." Pablo winked.

Dunn fumbled for his key, pressed the HI button.

"How may I help you?" the little red ball asked again.

"Room," Dunn said.

"This way, please," said the glowing red ball.

The hologuide led them uneventfully to their room, where they convened around a broad round table from which Dunn ordered an evening meal for everyone. He did not bother asking what they wanted.

"Here," Dunn said when the smartwaiter arrived with their meals.

They ate in silence, admiring the panoramic view of Jupiter through the large curved viewglass that made up most of the room's outer wall. As Captain Velasquez had promised, they were approaching the planet from its north side, its rings splayed out around it. They were clearly targeted toward the famous Great Red Spot.

Sarah waved the Mset on and tuned to the ship's local stream-cast. The captain's voice streamed into the room.

"Ladies and gentlemen, Jupiter's famous Great Red Spot is now filling our forward view. The Great Red Spot is a giant hurricane nearly twice the size of Earth, which rotates every six days. We will circle it twice tonight, and then return to Rothport." The captain's voice went on with measurements and statistics that only a pilot could love.

Eric was already asleep. He laid his head on the table next to his plate and did not pick it up again. He still held his little Hercules ship toy. Sarah carried him to one of the bedrooms. "I'll sleep in here too," Sarah said, and lay down beside the little tot.

Rangor had stretched out on the couch. His eyes were closed and his breathing was rhythmic. One of the three bedrooms would go unused tonight.

Dunn waved off the Mset. An amber light flashed. Dunn answered it, and found himself looking at Captain Velasquez.

"My kids tell me you have a special request," the captain said.

"Yes, the Robert A. White," Dunn answered.

"I'm happy with the price," Captain Velasquez said. "I've contacted the RA White. Eric's father is very eager to see him again. Our optimum delivery time is 0700 hours."

The captain had done his due diligence. "That time is fine," Dunn said.

"We'll lifeboat the boy over there. The lifeboat will find its way back. The tour will continue smoothly."

Nice plan.

"Take note of my public banking code," the captain said, sub-streaming the information into the room.

"Noted," Dunn said.

"I'll meet you in the morning," the captain said. "I'll be at your door at 0630 hours to lead you down to the lifeboat section."

"See you then," Dunn said. He waved the connection away. Then he summoned a dark HI and deposited five thousand joves into the captain's bank account.

Dunn found some spare blankets in a closet and draped one over Rangor. The synthegen opened his eyes immediately.

"It's just a blanket," Dunn said. "To keep you warm while you sleep."

Rangor closed his eyes again.

Dunn went into the other bedroom. He found the washroom and entered it. Gentle illumination sprang up around the mirror and he stared at his current face. The eyes were a dark shade of gray. His cheeks and chin were squarecut. His forehead was broad, and thoughtful. This face would do for a while. He hoped.

"What's your plan now?" Daphne asked.

"To get some sleep," Dunn said.

"You've had another long day," Daphne said gently. "Take this time to relax."

"I will." Dunn wet his face and then dried it with a safety towel that hung at the side of the mirror. He disrobed and got into the bed. It was an unbelievably large bed, and excruciatingly comfortable. It



adjusted itself around his weight and pulsed his muscles into deep relaxation.

“Could you turn the lights out?” Dunn asked Daphne. He was beyond tired, and could not lift a hand even to gesture the light off.

The room darkened. Dunn stretched out on the bed. Every muscle in his body ached with fatigue. He closed his eyes and let the darkness swallow his vision. His breathing became more regular. The troubles he had confronted that day began to melt into obscurity.

“Now? Daphne asked softly. “Do you want to see me now?”

“Yes,” Dunn said, from behind closed eyelids.

## CHAPTER NINE

### Charles Dunn

The image materialized slowly and softly behind the darkness of his closed eyelids. An indistinct light glowed soft white from somewhere behind a large sofa of indeterminate shape and color. Wavy auburn hair dropped past her firm round shoulders, accenting eyes where green and gray and blue shone together so intimately that Dunn couldn't tell where one began and the other left off. A pert pretty nose just a notch wider than expected centered her smooth features and gave life to her breath. Thick pouty lips smiled shyly around perfect white teeth. A triple necklace of leather and curved colored seashells adorned the strong supple firmness of her neck and breasts. Her smooth pale skin held just a hint of flushed pink excitement. Delicate dainty hands fluttered over her delicious firm waist. Long, slimly muscled legs dangled nervously off the edge of the nebulous furniture.

“Finally,” Daphne said. She hesitated. “I like it when you look at me.”

“Could you ... put some clothes on,” Dunn said.

A green silk robe materialized next to Daphne's outstretched body, just out of her reach. She slowly got up to pick it up and put it on. She made sure to turn completely around as she donned the robe, so that Dunn would have a full view of her nude body from all angles. Dunn nearly stopped breathing as the subtle lighting glistened Daphne's tiny golden hairs and fair, blushing skin.

“Is that better?” Daphne asked.

“It's OK,” Dunn said. “It's ... very nice.” Not for the first time, Dunn wondered how a young woman with such fine, firm muscles and poised bearing could at the same time be so soft and yielding and delightful to touch.



"Why are you so sad?" Daphne asked, interrupting his dreams.

Because your name isn't Daphne, Dunn thought. It's Mariana Ximenes. And you're dead. You died more than half a century ago.

"Why don't you let me show myself to you more often?" Daphne asked, but the words broke on the edge of his sleep and dissolved quietly into his dreams. He fell, then drifted, into sleep.

The first time he saw Mariana Ximenes, she was crouched bleeding and half-naked on the dirt floor of her tiny makeshift shelter. The clumsy shack was thrown together with dried blighted branches and leaves from the endless surrounding swamp and topped with sun baked moss and mud. None of this did anything to keep out the scorching Florida heat or the greedy, foraging cockroaches.

"This is the one," Victor said as Dunn entered the hut. Victor was one of Father's lieutenants, tall and muscular, with quick eyes and a steady hand and a thin wooden riding stick that bore blood. His horse, tethered outside, had shown no signs of a beating.

Dunn leaned over to inspect the girl, and he knew where the blood came from. But who was she? Not one of the local swamp rats who made an art out of cheating the Miami clan from the manna that was rightfully theirs. He had never seen this girl before. Even her clothes were strange. Some merrily colored material made of molten rainbow. The torn cloth bore no feathers, no hairs, no scales, not even horse leather. Impossible. Her feet were bare, cut with nettle and swollen with insect bites.

A sudden strange warmth stirred in his breast as he looked her over. He wanted her. But not as a slave to his manna.

"Who is the boy?" Dunn asked. The sight of the sniveling toddler huddled against the girl made Dunn uneasy. Jealousy? If the boy was her son, he would kill them both now. No matter how he felt about the girl or how difficult it would be for him.

"Stay away from him," the girl cried. Tears mingled with the blood on her face. "He didn't do anything wrong." Her voice was as sweet as her gaze, and just as anguished. A coldness began to melt in Dunn's heart. A coldness he had not noticed before this moment.

"She says the boy is her brother," Joshua answered him. Another

of Father's lieutenants, Joshua was known for his love of a good time. He was eyeing the girl the way a coral snake eyes a plump cockroach.

Too bad. Joshua would go to his hut disappointed today.

"What is your name?" Dunn asked the girl.

"What does it matter?" she spat at him. "You have your precious manna now. Go on! Get out of here!"

True. Victor had already recovered the manna and entrusted it to the Miami horsemen outside for safekeeping. It was a good find, a nearly intact package that should have held ninety-nine meals, the three types of manna being equally represented. Eight-six meals remained, neatly wrapped in the tough red materials the gods always used. Even the ceremonial shrouding that guided the heavenly gift through the sky was still intact, bearing the golden words Betancourt Farms against the background of a dusky red leaf.

"It's not that simple," Dunn told her. "You stole from us. That cannot be forgiven. The gods took the souls of our ancestors, and they repay us with manna from the heavens. Every meal is holy. Every meal is precious."

"The gods?" she laughed bitterly. "Is that what you think?"

Dunn reddened. "Everyone knows this."

"Oh, really." The girl looked at the ground. "I only took it for my brother, Marcelo. He's just a child. He is too young to eat anything from this planet's polluted food chain."

"You traded two stew mannas and three root mannas for directions to a place called the Rockies. No one has heard of this place. The woman who took your manna lied to you, and reported you to the Miami clan. Her loyalty will be rewarded."

"With what?" the girl asked. "What is the loyalty of a liar worth on this miserable planet?"

"What is your name?" Dunn asked again.

The girl shook her head, flinging locks of dark golden hair over her bare shoulders. "Mariana Ximenes. Make sure everybody knows it."

"I will." Dunn turned to the lieutenants. "Take her," he ordered. "We'll bring her back to Miami for judgment. She rides with me."

The two men grabbed the girl and forced her to her feet.

"What about the boy?" Victor asked.

Dunn was tempted to leave the bawling brat behind. But anguish widened the girl's eyes. Dunn told himself that the girl would be less trouble if he brought along her brother as well. The boy couldn't be much older than three. How much trouble could he be?

"Take him, too," Dunn responded. "Joshua, bind him. He can ride with you."

A scowl momentarily marred Joshua's normally flaccid face. Dunn knew the lieutenant would have preferred a few moments alone with the girl. Little Marcelo was not as interesting. But the lieutenant would have to live with Dunn's decision.

Victor started to tie the girl's hands with a wet piece of swamp vine.

"No, Victor. Don't. She rides with me, unbound."

Victor shrugged his lean shoulders and half pulled, half dragged Mariana out of the hut. She looked at him, eyes blinking away the intensity of the Florida sun and the stares of the curious. She was obviously wondering why the special treatment. Dunn saw that she was smart enough not to ask, but not smart enough to figure it out. She would remain his willing prisoner as long as he had her brother. And riding unbound, she would be forced to grab onto Dunn for support. He would make sure of that.

"Up here," Dunn said, motioning to the girl. She climbed clumsily into the saddle behind him.

The others climbed onto their alligator skin saddles and they all pushed their horses into the rotting swampland. Dunn led the way homeward, across the white pussed vegetation and the decaying corpses of diseased fish and alligators. Swarms of insects scattered as they approached. As predicted, his prisoner grabbed him around the middle in just a few minutes. She was not used to riding horseback. Where was she from? He opened his mouth to ask her.

"How can you ever get used to this horrible stench?" she complained.

"It's not so bad," Dunn answered her.

He imagined she was wrinkling her nose behind his back. "It's horrible," she said.

"There are worse places," Dunn said. He knew this to be a fact. Father had told him about places so barren that no plants grew. They were lucky to have Miami.

"Worse places, you mean like the radioactive crater that used to be NYC? Or maybe you mean the Middle East? I watch the history streams. Some fool committed the ultimate suicide attack over there. Blew up his whole country just because he couldn't manage to smuggle a few nukes outside its borders. Sure, he took a few other nations down with him, but what's the point after you turn your own nation into radioactive desolation?"

Dunn could only grunt in response to this amazing utterance.

"You don't have any idea what I'm talking about, do you?" Mariana asked.

He felt her breath, soft and hot on his back.

"Of course you don't," Mariana said softly. She rested her head on his shoulder. That was more like it. She knew her life was in his hands.

"You had better not speak such nonsense to Father," Dunn warned her. "He is not as patient as I am." Father seemed to grow more irritable with age.

"Where are you taking us?" the girl asked.

"To Miami. To see Father. He will decide what to do with you."

"My brother is ill. He needs medical attention."

"Try to convince Father that you are innocent because of ignorance," Dunn whispered. "Tell him you're not from around here. It's true, isn't it? Tell him you never saw manna before and you didn't know it was ours."

"But it's not yours!" Mariana insisted. "The manna belongs to all the survivors of pollution and past wars. Didn't you learn about the Anderson Pact in school? You know, your survival for our survival. Embryos for manna..."

"You are speaking nonsense again," Dunn admonished her firmly. Was the girl untrainable, even on an empty stomach?

"OK," Mariana said meekly. Perhaps there was hope for her yet. Maybe they could even have children together.

Dunn relaxed as he steered through a break in the vegetation and around a pair of decaying brown flamingos. Joshua and Victor followed on either side of him, with ten of his father's army behind them. He was Charles Dunn, the firstborn son of William Dunn. He was nineteen years old and could have anything he wanted. The sun was bright and fresh upon his exposed skin. The smell of rotting poisons did not bother him at all.

"The manna is really not just for you, you know," Mariana murmured. "It's meant for everybody."

"Of course it is," Dunn replied. He glanced at Joshua. Mariana was facing in his direction, no doubt watching over her little brother. Joshua glanced back at him without expression. "Father distributes it justly. Sometimes I even help him."

"Yeah, sure," Mariana said. Her sweat mixed with his own and trickled down his bare back.

As always, the Miami clan traveled with their eyes to the heavens, constantly scanning for the shining blue and red smoke that indicated falling manna. Despite the claims of some fortunetellers, one never knew exactly when or where it would come down from the skies again. They listened, too, because the manna descended with a raucous whistling that announced its presence to all within earshot.

Mariana raised her head, watched him watching the sky. "Looking for gifts from the gods?" she asked him. Was there a mocking tone to her question?

"Why not?" Dunn responded. "It's still early afternoon. The sun is behind us. The manna should be easy to spot."

"And what will you do with it when you find it? Keep it to yourselves? My brother is hungry!"

"The manna will be distributed fairly," Dunn explained. "I told you. My father makes sure of that. No one is allowed to hoard it."

"So your father gets to decide who eats and who doesn't?"

"It is the only way," Dunn explained patiently. "My father says that before his system, people killed each other fighting over the

manna. Nursing mothers did not get their share, and their babies died because they were forced to eat the poisons from the land without the manna to neutralize them. The weak and the old starved unnecessarily. Do you think that's fair?"

The shadows gradually lengthened over the blight stricken swamp. They passed through an area of many old relics, remnants of the riches that the ancestors had forsaken in their rush to the stars. Dunn knew the old houses and vehicles had been picked over decades before he was born and he did not give them a second glance. The ancestors had sold their souls to the heavens so that their descendants might receive manna. Manna was the only treasure now.

The white froth around the mouth of Dunn's horse bubbled over onto its sleek gray neck. Dunn waited until they reached a patch of high ground.

"Meal break," Dunn called out. "Let's pull over here."

The group stopped and silently dismounted. At least their feet would remain dry. Mariana got down behind Dunn. She looked expectantly at her brother, but Joshua dismounted alone. Little Marcelo, arms and legs still bound, was left in the saddle. His eyes were closed. Dunn thought he might be asleep. The child was sweating, but so were they all.

Dunn glanced at Mariana out of the corner of his eye, then turned his back to her.

"The manna," he said.

One of the men pulled the recovered box of manna from a sack on the back of his horse and laid it at Dunn's feet. The man then backed off.

Dunn held the bag in the air, enjoying the feeling of expectation.

"Every meal is holy. Every meal is precious," he said.

"Every meal is holy. Every meal is precious," the men repeated.

They lined up in front of him, first Victor, then Joshua, then the others. To each man he distributed two cans, one of salad and one of stew. The root he kept for Father.

Each man opened a can of salad manna and fed it to his horse. The animals chewed greedily on the red holy food.

"So the horses get to eat, but my brother doesn't?"

"The horses have to eat. We need them for survival." Dunn opened his canteen and poured the contents into the now empty manna can. "They have to drink, too," he said. "Here, Gray, drink up." The water had been boiled, then strained with the manna ceremonial shroud. It was the safest way to prepare drinking water.

Mariana licked her lips as the horse drank. When was the last time she had drunk clean water? He admired her resolution in not begging him for it. How tough was she?

Slowly, Dunn brought the canteen to his lips. He paused for a moment and looked her in the eye. She turned away from him, her arms crossed in front of her. Dunn frowned and drank from his canteen. He threw the empty manna can onto the stinking earth. He knew that in a few days there would be no trace of it, but the grass would be a little greener where the can landed. Another gift from the gods to brighten the land of the Miami clan.

On finishing their ration of manna, the horses attacked the leaves and grasses that managed to make their way above ground in their temporary resting place. The animals also turned their attention to a few pockets of resting water that were then greedily sucked away by their thirst.

"Don't you worry about the contamination your animals are ingesting?" Mariana asked.

Dunn looked at the girl with pride. "Our animals know instinctively what many humans have to be taught," he said. "The manna counteracts the poisons, but works best when it is eaten first. Once the main meal is consumed, other foods can also be enjoyed."

Each man spread a horse skin blanket on the ground and broke open his can of stew manna. After a moment of thanks to the gods who dropped the manna from the sky and respectful inquiries after the well being of their ancestors, they ate from the cans with their fingers and their knives.

"There is no time for that now," Dunn told one of the men who was trying to light a fire with his flint and some dead leaves.

Mariana stood by Joshua's horse and huddled close to Marcelo.

No one offered them a place on a horse skin blanket and there was no other dry place to sit. Dunn saw them talking quietly together as he finished his meal. He did not understand their words.

The group mounted up once more and continued to head east. Dunn felt the silence as the shadows lengthened around them. Finally he decided to break it.

"I could not give you manna or water then," he told the girl. "They were watching."

The girl stiffened. "I didn't ask for anything."

"I do not want to see you go hungry," Dunn said quietly.

"But it's not up to you. Right."

"Father will decide what to do with you and your brother."

The girl did not answer him.

"What were you doing out here?" Dunn asked his prisoner. "So far away from everything."

"I told you already," Mariana said. "I'm looking for the Rockies. Are you sure you never heard of it?"

Dunn shook his head. His long dark hair rivaled Mariana's in length. "I know this area well," he said. "I never heard of any place called the Rockies."

"Maybe you know it by a different name?" Mariana suggested hopefully.

"Describe it to me," Dunn said. He was interested in this girl and her story.

"The Rockies are mountains," she began.

"Mountains?"

"A place where the land is very high. You can climb them and see for many kilometers around."

"Kilometers?"

"Miles. You can see for many miles."

"I've never heard of any place like that."

"They are not near any water."

"How could that be? There is water everywhere!"

"I mean coast. They are not near any coast."

"The Rockies must be very far away. Miami is right on the coast."

"Silly, Miami has been under twenty feet of water for the past two centuries. You just never noticed it. Or haven't you ever heard of global warming?"

"You're wrong," Dunn insisted. "Miami is on the coast ahead of us."

"Yeah, sure," Mariana said. "But have you ever been to the mountains?"

"No. I don't know of any mountains."

Mariana did not give up. "What about a spaceport? Any spaceport? Have you seen a place where people come down from the sky and then go back up again?"

"Come down from the sky? Like the manna?" What was she telling him? That she was one of the gods that sent the manna? Couldn't be. She would have no need to steal it if she were.

"Sort of like the manna," she said. "But the people don't drop in parachutes."

"Drop in what?"

Mariana dug her fingernails into his back. "Oh, never mind. You're such an Earth boy."

"Of course I am."

The horses marched steadily on, and the silence between them became longer and more awkward than before.

"How many miles of swamp could there be left in Florida?" Mariana asked. Was she talking to him?

"Don't worry," Dunn said. "Miami is not much farther. And the swamp will end where Miami begins. Because Miami is on the coast." He thought of lovely Miami, nestled comfortably against the brown backdrop of the Atlantic Ocean.

"It's very dark," Mariana said.

"The sun has set," Dunn pointed out. "And the clouds block the light from the moon and the stars."

"Aren't you afraid of what we might run into out here?"

"No. I told you that I know this area well."

"That wasn't what I meant."

"What? You mean monsters? Contrary to what the mothers tell their children, there are no evil creatures out here."

"So why are you all carrying spears?"

"These?" Dunn indicated the lance hooked to the side of his horse. "They are for the alligators. They can be a nuisance, but usually they try to avoid us."

"Of course, of course," Mariana said quietly. Was she talking to herself? "Nothing complex can even survive here. The pollutants snowball through the food chain and clobber whatever is at the top. That just leaves reptiles and fish and some birds... and of course the cockroaches..."

Strange murmurings, as of prayers learned in childhood. He listened for a while, then decided to interrupt.

"Lights," Dunn said, pointing majestically forward at the proud town of Miami. Behind a fence of concrete rubble, three guards stood by flaming torches. As the party approached and was recognized, one of the guards broke from the line and ran into the city. He would announce their coming to Father.

Mariana fell into speechlessness, slumping against him. He hoped she took comfort in his presence. But he could not protect her from Father.

The guards pushed open the town gates for Dunn and his party. A rusty round tire rim rolled away from them and collapsed in the dirt. Barely acknowledging the two watchmen, Dunn made straight for the center of town. He knew Father would be waiting for them there. He charged proudly through the hustling main street of Miami. Even at night it teemed with activity. The cooking pots brimmed with the sweet smell of simmering manna, effectively blocking the odor of decomposing fish from the ocean beyond. And the brewery...

"You guys brew alcohol from your manna?" Mariana asked incredulously.

"We are not stupid. We can do many things with it." Dunn was proud of his people and their accomplishments. "Look." He waved his arm at the several houses and stores around them. A dozen or so people waved back through the openings in their walls and roofs. "Do you see what we have built here?"

"Hmm," Mariana said. "What a dump."



Dunn frowned.

"It's not your fault," Mariana said hastily. "Our ancestors did this. Yours and mine both. It's not fair that you got stuck with it, while my great-grandparents' embryos were sent to the Outer System."

"I advise you to stop speaking such nonsense now," Dunn said to her. "Your only chance is for Father to take pity on you."

"Right. Then I'll stop taking pity on him."

Father stood as they arrived. His gray hair was wispiest these days, and the empty gaps in his smile were larger. His great muscle was turning to flab. Even a steady supply of manna could not keep a man fit into his late forties.

"Good work," Father said, opening his arms expansively. He sat back down on his alligator skins. He was surrounded by the other elders in the open area in the middle of the town. A hungry fire licked at the branches and moss fed to it by adolescent attendants. Father's five wives stood by to bring him water or manna or whatever else he commanded. Dunn's mother was not among them, having died long ago. "Come down from there and sit with us."

Dunn dismounted from Gray, and offered his arm to Mariana for support. She leaned heavily on him as she nearly fell from the horse. He held her to keep her from falling to the ground. Her fatigue and hunger were great.

"You're not supposed to smoke that stuff," Mariana whispered.

"Shhh," Dunn nudged her. "Father always smokes it."

"But it's wasteful," Mariana said, "and it's harmful, too. Root manna's not made for smoking. You need the pulmofriendly kind."

"What is she saying, Charles?" Father asked him, lifting his whisky tumbler to his mouth. The clearish pink liquid vanished from the glass.

Dunn helped his prisoner to a sitting position. "She is delirious from the swamp poisons. She needs food and rest."

"Joshua, who is that?" Father asked.

"A boy," Joshua said. "The girl says he is her brother."

"Then sit him next to her. Joshua, Victor, join us. Have you recovered the manna she stole?"

A horseman gestured toward his bag.

"Good. To the public stores with it and see that it is counted and placed under guard. The rest of you may leave." Father waved away the remainder of the Miami horsemen.

"You need a guard for public storage?" Mariana whispered. "Not so public, is it?"

Joshua set the boy down next to his sister. "Would you like me to untie him?"

"Did the little boy give you so much trouble?" Father joked.

Joshua gave Dunn a hard stare, then proceeded to remove the bonds from Marcelo's hands and feet.

"Thank you," Mariana said to Joshua. Joshua smiled back at her.

Dunn flushed. This was not the way things were supposed to work out.

Mariana put her arm around her brother. "Are you OK?"

Marcelo just nodded his head and collapsed against her.

Father turned toward Mariana. "Keeping the manna for yourself is a serious offense against us," he said, drawing deeply on the manna root. The interior of the red clay pipe lit up in response to his sucking action.

"Yes, sir," Mariana said quietly.

"You are not a Miamian," Father said.

"No, sir," Mariana said.

"Why did you keep the manna?" Father asked.

"For my brother," Mariana said. "He was sick."

Father nodded, exhaling red manna smoke from his nostrils. "A selfless act, then."

"I guess so," Mariana said.

"Where are you from?"

"From Brazil. It is a city in the Portuguese Floras."

"I have never heard of this place." Father looked at her speculatively. "Did you come here by yourself?"

"My whole family came. But my Mãe and my Pai... The storm took them. It was terrible."

"So you are alone."

"Yes."

Father took another drag on his pipe. "Don't worry, young girl. Your punishment will be mild." He smiled and shook his finger at her. "No manna for you tonight."

Mariana visibly relaxed, but the younger Dunn did not. He had seen this scene before.

"But you have stolen from us, and we can't let that happen again."

"But I wasn't stealing," Mariana protested. "The manna fell for my brother."

"Impossible," Father said. "Manna only falls for the Miami clan."

"But —"

"We will have to keep an eye on you," Father continued. "You will have to spend the night in public view of everyone."

"What do you mean?" Mariana asked.

Father nodded. "Victor, Joshua."

Impotent anger balled Charles Dunn's fists at his side as he saw his prisoner grabbed and grasped and shoved across the town center to the site where the town's five stocks were neatly lined up in a row. The white wooden racks were probably the best maintained features of the city. Mariana looked at Dunn helplessly as Joshua pushed down her head and arms and Victor slammed the wooden framework shut over her neck and wrists. She struggled uselessly against the immovable restraints, her face and hands red with the pressure of the surrounding punishing stock.

"Charles?" Mariana cried, as Victor closed the padlock that held the stockade closed. But even Father's firstborn could not influence this decision. Victor twisted the key inside the lock and tested his work. It held tight.

"Why is she calling to you?" Father asked him, accepting the key from Victor and sliding it into a pocket in his alligator skin robe. "Is something going on between you two?"

Dunn did not answer him, unable to take his eyes off Mariana.

The girl cried with pain and anger as the others laughed at her in the village square. Her head hung down from the imprisoning device and little children tugged at her delightful golden curls. Some of the women pulled at her unusual clothing and slapped her from the rear where her back and legs hung helplessly out behind her. Older children called to the women to get out of the way so that they could throw stones at her. The men merely laughed. They would do more, later, when the watchful eyes of their wives went heavy lidded with sleep.

This was the kind of justice Father preferred, where all could see and participate and learn.

"What about the boy?" Dunn asked his father. Little Marcelo watched wide eyed as the crowd poked at his sister.

"He is too young for any fun," Father said. "Leave him be for now. Feed him some manna if you want." Father winked. "Make sure the girl sees you taking care of her brother, little Charles." Father knew he hated being called little.

Dunn was tempted to leave the little boy where he was and run away from the whole scene. But even from across the plaza, Mariana's eyes followed him. Even when one of the women poured boiling hot manna soup on her naked back. Even when he finally turned away from her.



CHAPTER TEN

## Paula Betancourt

The UMR Defense Council members stood as she entered the strategy room. The dark red walls were so shiny she could see all their backsides. There were ten of them and only one of her, but she was the most powerful person in the solar system. Paula Betancourt sat at the head of the long rectangular table, a polished extravaganza of native Martian woods. Karin Lim, her long limbed minister of state, stood by his seat at her right hand. When she sat, they all sat. She took a moment to look around at the tired faces before she spoke. It was late. So why had they called this meeting?

“Talk to me, Miriam,” the Prime Minister said.

“Approximately three hours ago, in the Trask Koronis, two Trask Forces assault vessels locked onto a FedEx freighter carrying a shipment of Bentrex energy bending equipment to the Spanish Hildas,” responded Admiral Miriam Tanower.

Not Trask again.

“The FedEx freighter is a registered Jovian Alliance vessel,” Miriam continued in her unemotional tone of voice.

The Jovians would not take kindly to that. “Any casualties?” Betancourt asked.

“Unknown,” Miriam said. “Long range prodar suggests that the Trasks have boarded the FedEx vessel and currently have it under tow.” The admiral’s slender fingers arced the air over the flat shiny kinetic sensor embedded in the table before her. A pure black point of light opened up over the center of the room and expanded quickly into a large dark sphere brightly poked by starlight and containing three ships, one of which was the fat freighter. The other two were

small gray shapes, devoid of detail as one would expect a stealth ship to be. One of the gray ships had attached itself to the freighter. The other was flying a parallel course.

"Where are they taking the freighter?" Paula asked.

"Unknown at this time," Jacob Shaprut said. "We suspect their central military complex, MilCom. It was destroyed on the attack on Ida, but is now mostly rebuilt in Ida's moon, Dactyl."

"Has the Trask government issued any kind of explanation?" Karin asked.

Paula could guess at the Trask justification, and she was sure that Karin could too.

"The official Trask government explanation is that the Jovian vessel is a disguised spyship sent through their trade routes to assess Trask troop readiness and possibly to find an alternate trade route," Miriam responded.

"What else do we know?" Karin asked. He tossed the question to the team, but Paula expected Jacob Shaprut to answer it.

"We have organized a task force to look into it," Shaprut said. He barely moved a muscle as he spoke, small hands palms down on the conference table, one on either side of the flat kinetic sensor in front of him. Betancourt wondered if the Director of Intelligence was afraid to lift his hands from the table because of the puddles of sweat he might leave behind. His face looked even more wrinkled than usual. "Our analysts are tracking Trask ship movements through data gathered from spy satellites and eavesdropping on Trask encrypted communications..."

So how was this different from what they were supposed to do every day? Betancourt did not press the issue. "What about the Jovians? How are they taking it?"

"Too early to tell," Carol Taylor said. Dr. Taylor was Minister of Technology. She was also slightly bald; unusual because there were cheap and easy treatments for hair loss and there was no way she could not know about them. "Due to our relative positions around the sun, our people probably learned about the assault before the Jovians did. It will be hours before we know their response."

Betancourt guessed that, but she was looking for some indication that the Jovians might have known in advance. There was always the chance they had really provoked the incident.

"Look at this!" Jacob Shaprut said. He waved in the air above his flat kinetic sensor, finally agitated enough to lift his hands from the table.

A graphic display of Martian Stock Exchange activity shimmered to life beyond Jacob's fingertips. The predominant color was red. Stock prices on all five major Martian farming corporations were falling to levels not seen in many months. The Martian Agricultural Index was also falling. The Martian Agricultural Index represented not only the farming corporations, but their major suppliers and wholesalers. Jacob glared at Samuel Abroz, the Minister of Finance, as if he were personally responsible.

"Well, what do you expect?" Samuel said, raising his hands to indicate his helplessness. "The majority of trade to the Outer System passes through Trask. Unless you want to fly off the solar ecliptic, and magnify your transportation expenses tenfold. And even that is no guarantee of safety."

"Right," Betancourt said. She knew she had to give her people confidence. "Miriam, what is the current position of the Third Fleet?" The Space Force admiral had better know the answer to that question; there were only three fleets to keep track of.

Admiral Miriam Tanower stabbed the air over the polished kinetic sensor in front of her. The dismal Martian Stock Exchange hologram dissolved into a visual of the seven ships of the Third Fleet. The ship in the center was the *Olympus*, an X shaped command carrier surrounded on all sides by six smaller asterisks. "The Third Fleet is conducting weapons testing and training exercises twenty-two degrees off the main ecliptic, in one of the Hungarias clouds, commanded by Captain David Avni."

The Hungarias group was the closest of the Hirayama asteroid families to Mars. The Hungarias clouds were not really clouds; they were families of smaller asteroids that occupied near Mars orbit. The Third Fleet was at the edge of the territory claimed by the United

Mars Republic, blasting away at uninhabited asteroids there. The Hungarias were too far off the flat plane of the solar ecliptic to be useful as a trade route, but they were handy for target practice.

"I want them moving south," Betancourt said.

There was a pause.

"Let me clarify," Miriam said, turning her head away from the hologram and facing Paula directly. "You want me to send them outward?"

"Yes," Betancourt said. "But keep them off the ecliptic." She wanted them away from the inhabited flat plane of the solar system.

"We will be asked why," Karin Lim said.

"Yes," Miriam agreed. "I'll probably be the one doing the press conference."

"We have every right to send our fleets wherever we want," Betancourt said, "under the Ceres Convention."

The Ceres Nation was politically neutral territory in the Main Belt, the center of Belt banking and a willing host to difficult negotiations. Per the Ceres Convention, every nation had a right to defend itself from large masses that could potentially collide with it. This included the right to cross national borders in self-defense.

"But there are no asteroids headed our way," Miriam pointed out.

"So find one," Betancourt said. "Find many. Carol, I will leave that to you."

"Yes, Prime Minister," Carol Taylor said, scratching her little pink bald spot.

"How far outward do you want to send the Third?" Miriam asked, with scarcely a movement of her long dark eyelashes.

"Get them going at quarter-speed and keep them off the ecliptic. Have them continue their training exercises. Make sure they are well supplied with personnel, supplies, whatever they need."

"Yes, Prime Minister," Miriam said.

"All right," Betancourt said. "It's late. Anything else?"

Apparently not.

"See you tomorrow." Betancourt rose, and they all rose with

her. Karin accompanied her through tapestried corridors back to the Ruby Office.

Betancourt took a seat behind her desk and pulled out an unlabeled bottle of fine manna wine. It was only three years old, but the manna fruit that produced it did not need much aging. It was a variety developed by her father as a personal hobby. She doubted it would ever be on the market as a Betancourt Farms product. Some things were just not shared, or shared only with the right people.

"Pour you a glass?" Paula offered Karin.

The sprout nodded, and accepted the wineglass. He waited until Paula swallowed before he put the cup to his lips.

"Sit down," Paula said.

Karin took the chair closest to her desk. It was a Kaiset original, over a hundred years old, bordered in gold and velvet and regularly updated with the latest in comfort firmware. With Karin in it, it looked like a child's toy.

"Are you sure you don't want me to order you a new chair?" Betancourt asked. Karin looked so uncomfortable in that one, with his arms and legs sprawled out of it and his head angling above it.

"No, Prime Minister," Karin said. "I'm fine."

It was an old argument. Betancourt didn't like to see her Minister of State uncomfortable, but she knew he avoided special attention.

"All right," Betancourt said. She put the wineglass down. "Do you know if the UN operative is still in the Jovian Alliance?" Karin would know who she meant.

"Our agents have been instructed to report any sign of his movements. He attracted quite a bit of attention to himself when he shot a Roth investigator, but there has been no sign of him since."

"He has probably changed his face and gone into hiding," Betancourt said.

"The evidence is pretty strong that the Avni painting has been destroyed," Karin said.

"Yes, I know," Betancourt sighed. "A terrible loss."

"Yes."

Betancourt knew he was waiting for her to speak. He only acted like this with her. Anyone else would have been blasted by direct questions.

"So if the painting is destroyed, why am I interested in finding the agent who was supposed to get it back for us?" Betancourt asked.

Karin nodded his head.

"We think he managed to recover the MacLaine Accord permadoc," Betancourt said.

"And you want it?"

"Yes."

"We only think he has it because no one else has reported finding it," Karin said.

"You know Dunn. He has it."

"Probably."

"We can't take the chance that it will fall into the wrong hands," Betancourt said.

"What wrong hands?" Karin asked. "It's a sixty-seven year old treaty Trask made with the UN and then backed out of. I don't see the importance."

"It's an important Martian document," Betancourt said.

"It's a UN treaty," Karin said.

"Made on Martian soil," Betancourt said. "My grandfather brought Trask to the table, not some UN diplomat."

"He had to," Karin said. "He needed safe passage for those syntheogens he was rescuing."

"You mean smuggling?"

Karin smiled. "Sure."

"It was a bad policy idea. It started a war and it got him killed. That's over now," Betancourt said.

"Is that what this is about? Something to do with your grandfather's Synthegeen Escape Hatch movement? The movement still has a lot of sympathizers."

"It's not about that. We no longer smuggle syntheogens out of Outer Consortium space. Not good for our relations with the OC and they don't exactly thrive here when we let them loose. It's just about getting the Trask treaty back to us."

"It was you who informed the UN Senate that the treaty was concealed in the Avni painting," Karin said. "You never even explained how you knew the permadoc was hidden there."

What would Karin say if he knew that her father told her? Or if he knew the real motivation behind the Adva Avni Historical Foundation?

"A reliable informant who does not wish his identity revealed," Betancourt said.

"Of course. But we could have sent in our own operative."

"Too much. I don't want this traced back to Mars."

"Is it more important now?"

"Things have changed with this latest incident in Trask space. Dunn may have a difficult time getting through."

"He used to be one of ours. He is well trained."

"He didn't stay retired for long!"

"Does he know what's on the permadoc?"

The question surprised Betancourt. "It's the MacLaine Accord," she said. "He was briefed before he left."

"Then he doesn't know what's really on it."

"What do you mean?" Betancourt asked.

"There is more to this than you say."

"I'm sorry, Karin, I don't know what you mean."

"Why would you be afraid the permadoc would fall into Trask hands? It's a Trask treaty."

"That treaty belongs to us," Betancourt said.

"All right."

"I would like you to work with Shaprut. I want to be briefed on every hint of Dunn's movements."

"I will make sure Jacob knows that."

"Thank you, Karin. And thank you for your company." She really meant it, but Karin took it as a dismissal.

"Good night," Karin said as the door closed behind him and he left the Prime Minister of Mars alone among the artwork and splendor of the famous Ruby Office.

Betancourt would have liked to confide in him, but Karin would

not understand her motives. But there were times when even the most powerful person in the solar system needed someone to talk to. Someone who understood her. Someone who knew what she was going through. Someone she could lean on.

Betancourt activated her comm system with a wave.

"Daddy," she said. He hoped he wouldn't make her wait.

Philip Betancourt's welcome screen pulsed with neutral geometry and colors. There was no indication of the identity of the man she was calling. Betancourt waited patiently for her father to respond.

"Yes?" It was her father's voice, disguised like the welcome screen.

"Daddy, it's me," Betancourt said.

Her father's face faded onto the picture. He looked young and refreshed, with lean cheeks and a strong chin and a precision haircut with no strand of his sandy russet hair out of place. "Paula. It's late."

Betancourt was disappointed. The face was only an avatar.

"I'm sorry, Daddy."

"What is it?"

"There's trouble in the Belt again," Betancourt said.

"What kind of trouble?"

"The Trasks."

There was a pause.

"You can't let them anywhere near the permadoc," Daddy said.

"I know, Daddy," Betancourt said.

"You can't. Or we lose everything."

"Yes, Daddy."

"Good night."

"Good night, Daddy."

The comm set went dead and the most powerful person in the solar system was alone again.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### Charles Dunn

"Come with me," Dunn said to Marcelo. He held out his hand.

"What about Mariana?" the boy asked. He looked up at Dunn with big round dark eyes.

Mariana, locked into the wooden stocks, could not escape the pinching and slapping and stone throwing of the Miami women and children. There was nothing Dunn could do for her while his father and the others watched.

"Mariana will be OK," Dunn lied. "Are you hungry? I'll find you something to eat."

Marcelo put his hand in Dunn's. "OK."

"Don't look over there," Dunn told him. "Come on. Let's go this way."

Dunn left his horse tethered in the town center and started down the street with Marcelo. The public storage building was only a few blocks away. There would be guards at the entrance, but they would be chosen by his father. They would let him take anything he wanted.

Dunn peered through the torch lit darkness as he approached the building ahead and recognized Jorge Ramirez standing guard when the manna began to fall. It was a great and generous gift, whistling down amidst blue and red smoke, loud enough to cut through Mariana's screams for mercy. Many boxes of ninety-nine came down from the sky toward the village and around it. Some boxes would fall into the ocean, but the boats were always ready. Already eager young oarsmen were running toward their small craft to be the first to push into the rancid waters. Other boxes would fall beyond the village into

the darkness of the surrounding swamp. They were used to that. The bright smoke might burn out but the dogs were trained to track its remnants and they knew better than to miss their targets.

Dunn raised his gaze to the gods in thanks for their timing. The Miamians forgot about Mariana for the moment, as they ran screaming and clapping after the falling packages. They stampeded wildly past him, almost running over the boy in their haste.

"Your sister will get a short reprieve," Dunn said.

"What?" asked Marcelo.

"Stay with me," Dunn said. He held tightly to the boy's hand and continued walking toward the cement block building that held the public storage. The streets were nearly empty now, but Dunn knew that Jorge would not leave his post for any reason. The last guard to do so had spent the night in the public stocks. Dunn caught a glimpse of a brightly colored box falling through the air about a hundred yards to his left. Its ceremonial shroud was marked in colorful pictures, not in stylized logos like the others. His heart beat a little faster as he recognized the rare and beautiful gift. He looked around. Had anyone else noticed it? Between their new prisoner and the generous gifts now falling, the Miamians were distracted enough. What fell now was a special box, and it would be his.

"I'm going to carry you," Dunn told Marcelo excitedly, and snatched the boy up in his arms before he had a chance to reply.

Dunn ran for the box, and was waiting for it when it came down. It had bright red lettering on the side, and it said Adva Avni Elementary School Third Grade Class Project 240I. There was a picture of a group of children standing grouped together in a room with much bright furniture. The words "We love you!" were scrawled across the picture. Dunn opened the box and found sweet manna of many sizes and textures and colors. This was a rare treasure. Manna like this did not fall every day. When it did fall it meant good luck to its finder. Good luck to him. Of course he would still be obliged to share it. But everyone would know it was his find. And he got the first bite.

"This is a good luck box," Dunn explained to Marcelo. "Do you see?"

Marcelo took the sweet manna from Dunn's outstretched hand and struggled with the wrapping. "Can you help?"

"Here." Dunn discarded the wrapping into the dirt street.

"It's good," Marcelo said.

"This is a special box," Dunn said. "This is our lucky day."

"Mm."

"You get to make a wish on it." Of course wishes were only for children, but wasn't Marcelo a child?

Marcelo swallowed. "I wish my sister could have some."

Mariana. She would need more than sweet manna after this night.

"I'm feeling lucky," Dunn said.

The sweet manna was invigorating. Even Marcelo felt it, Dunn could tell. The boy stood a little straighter and his eyes were a little shinier. They ate some more.

"I will have to turn this in to the public stores now," Dunn told Marcelo. "I can't go walking around the streets with so much manna."

"But what about Mariana?"

"Here. Put these in your pockets. They're for her."

Dunn looked around guiltily. Was anyone watching? But the streets were empty. Most people had gone off to chase the falling manna outside of town.

It wasn't far to the public storage house.

"Jorge!" Dunn called. "Jorge, look!"

Jorge pulled his gaze away from the falling manna above. His eyes lit up his young face when he saw the colorful carton. "You found a good luck box!"

"Take some," Dunn said. It never hurt to have a guard as a friend.

Jorge reached in and grabbed a sweet manna, a quick smile of delight across his face. "Thanks, Charles," he said. "Have you made a wish yet?"

"Yes, but I can't tell you what it is." Dunn winked.

"Of course!"



"I'll leave the box with you," Dunn said.

"The others will be back soon. We will all enjoy it together."

"There may be more around. I'm going to continue the hunt."

"Why don't you refill your canteen while you're here?" Jorge invited him. He motioned Dunn over to the pot of boiling water. "Irma left to go join the manna hunt, but you can help yourself."

"Thanks," Dunn said, taking advantage of the offer.

"Every meal is holy," Jorge said.

"Every meal is precious," Dunn responded.

"Hope you find lots more sweet manna," Jorge said.

"I'll be back if I do." Dunn took Marcelo by the hand and led him away from the storage building. "Let's go," he said to the boy.

"Where are we going?" Marcelo asked.

"To grant your wish," Dunn said. A daring plan was forming in his mind. He would not only share the sweet manna with Mariana, in complete defiance of Father's orders, but he would also release her. He would release her, and he would guide her and her brother to the edge of town. Then they could resume their journey to the place called the Rockies and his life could get back to normal.

"Mariana," Dunn whispered.

The girl was slumped over the stock, too weak to even raise her head as they approached. Dunn raised his canteen to her dry, cracked lips.

"Drink," Dunn urged.

"Mari?" Marcelo whimpered.

No response. Dunn lifted her head, poured the water across her lips. He moistened them, and listened for her breathing. He had to still his own breathing to hear it. It was faint, but it was there.

"We have to get her out of these restraints," he told Marcelo. He fumbled at his belt for his knife. Father had the only key to the padlock, but he might be able to pry it off with his blade. Dunn scraped and sliced, but the wood was solid and immovable. "It's not going to work," he told Marcelo. "My blade will break before this lock comes loose."

"Is this what you need?"

Father's voice. He loomed before him, quietly appearing out of the darkness as a snake slithers out from under the mud. This was what the old timers spoke of when they told the tales of how Father had established his rule in Miami. This was the fear he put into the hearts of those who would betray him. He held the key in front of him, the tip of it protruding from his closed fist.

"Give it to me," Dunn said.

"I'm surprised at you," Father said. "A lifetime of obedience, and now this? Why? Why such sudden rebellion? Is it the golden curls, the innocent eyes, or what?"

"She's awake!" Marcelo cried. "She's drinking the water!"

The pert lips had lost their precious pout, but they would regain it.

"Give me the key, Father."

"Maybe it was the boy," Father mused. "You felt sorry for such a young child deprived of his sister. The way you lost your mother so many years ago."

"Not really," Dunn said. "I don't even remember my mother."

"Too bad. She was a beautiful woman. And I wasn't the only one who thought so."

Father would go on reminiscing all night if Dunn let him, but he would not release the key. Dunn launched himself at the older man, but Father stepped nimbly out of the way. Only one knee was left there, and that was raised with sudden force into Dunn's belly.

"You kids," Father said. "You've had life too easy. When I was your age..."

Dunn lunged again, and this time Father did not move from his path. He brought his right arm around in an openhanded roundhouse slap that brought blood to Dunn's lips. Dunn stopped, breathing hard, stunned.

"I'm glad we're having this little meeting," Father said. "I have neglected you for too long..."

Mariana was in front of him now, watching him intently with her big endless eyes, and he could not let her down. Dunn threw himself once more at Father, hoping for the dodging movement again. He



got it. He moved right along with Father and caught him in the mid-section. He shoved hard, intending to push the bigger man into the dirt and wrestle the key away from him there. Instead, Father stepped back and Dunn fell into him, banging his head into Father's thigh. Dunn knocked the bigger man off balance and Father's head slammed into the far edge of the stockade.

Right into Mariana's grasp. Her fingers reached out from the hole in the stock that held her wrist and clutched at Father's long, wispy hair and locked his head at waist level. Father twisted but he could not regain his balance and he could not break free. Dunn pummeled and pummelled him into unconsciousness. Long after the key fell from his open hand Dunn was still beating his father about the face and head.

"Charles," Mariana said. "Charles, they'll be back soon."

Dunn looked up, panting. Mariana. He had forgotten about her.

"The key," Mariana said. "Quickly. Please!"

Dunn grabbed the key. There was no going back for him now. He forced the key into the padlock and lifted the top restraint off of Mariana's shoulders.

"Oomph," she said.

"Come on," Dunn said.

"Moving kind of slow," Mariana said. "Hurts."

"We've got to get out of here now," Dunn said. "Marcelo, can you help me with her?"

"Here," Marcelo said. He held out one of the sweet mannas to his sister.

Mariana managed a smile. "Thanks," she said. "But I can't even reach it. My arms are so stiff..."

"Let me help you," Dunn said. He stepped behind the stockade with Mariana and put his arm around her.

"Ow," she winced.

"I'm sorry," Dunn said tenderly. "I didn't realize..."

"It's OK," Mariana gasped. "Help me."

With Dunn's help, the girl managed to straighten up.

"They'll be back soon," Dunn said.

"I was afraid of that," Mariana said.

"We have to go," Dunn said. "This way."

Mariana looked at down at Dunn's father, bloody and barely breathing in the dirt under the stockade. "No wonder Earth population keeps diminishing."

Dunn guided her slowly away from the town center. "Come on, Marcelo."

"Here," the toddler said.

Mariana took the sweet manna from her brother's hand and put it to her mouth. "Mmm," she said. "This ought to help."

"No more manna is falling," Dunn said. "Public storage will be busy with the counting."

"Then let's not go that way," Mariana said weakly.

"We won't. But they will be wondering where Father is."

"Where is this?" Mariana asked. "Where are you taking me now?"

"To the horses."

"You expect me to get back up on one of those things?"

"Just hang on. The horse does the hard part."

"I'll try."

"Now be quiet. I need to listen for the others."

Mariana leaned on him and he pushed her up into the saddle of Joshua's palomino. The lieutenant would miss his horse, his spear, and his canteen, but that could not be helped. He lifted Marcelo up after her and then got onto his own gray horse. He led them down a path away from the public storage house. Already his fellow villagers had started to gather there, bringing back with them the manna they had found.

On foot there was a dozen ways out of Miami; on horseback there was only one. "Open the gate," Dunn cried out as they approached. He counted on the authority of his voice to compel the guards to their stations.

The horses marched forward to the low growling and rumbling of rubbish being pushed aside. The guards were more diligent about

who they let enter than who they let leave. He waved to them cheerfully as he passed, then turned his back on the only home he had ever known.

There was a long journey ahead, to an uncertain destination. Dunn chose to travel north. He knew all the land to the south until it became ocean and he knew there were no mountains there. And he did not care for the west, with its alternating swamplands and rolling hills. He would follow the coast to the north and see where that led them.

They rode many miles that night. Dunn thought the toddler would cry and beg to be held, but Marcelo did not say a word. Perhaps he was too tired to move. Mariana also did not move, though she rode with her eyes closed and sometimes confused Joshua's horse with her ramblings. The moon lit their way sometimes, but Dunn was glad when the clouds blocked its light and they continued forward in darkness. The steady movement of their horses' hooves made little sound in the soft ground of the swamps.

They paralleled the coast but did not venture near it for a time. Dunn thought that any pursuit would most naturally follow the beaches. He remained near the water to guide himself northward, but did not venture onto the open area between the swamp and the waves.

When the first golden rays of sun lit the waters to the east, Dunn got a good look at Mariana's wounds. Her skin was red and raw around her neck and wrists where she had struggled against the wooden framework that bound her. The exposed skin of her back, once smooth and delicate and inviting to the touch, was now burned and bloodied in a dozen different places. Her fine full cheeks and mischievous smile were swollen and potentially scarred forever. Dunn brought his horse closer and waved off the insects that collected around her wounds. It was a futile gesture.

"Whoa," Dunn said to the horses. He brought them to a full stop and dismounted.

"What's going on?" Mariana asked painfully through cracked and swollen lips. She feebly raised her head, so that Dunn could see even better the bruising and inflammation on her face.

"We need to cover your wounds," Dunn said. "Unless you like being insect food."

"Shouldn't we keep moving? Won't they follow us?"

Probably. "We'll take care of you first," Dunn said. He took out his canteen and used the water sparingly to wash Mariana's injuries. He touched her in places that should have excited him, but instead only saddened him. He emptied his canteen over her wounds. He had no choice.

"Ow," Mariana said.

"Sorry."

"No, you are very gentle," Mariana said. "You surprise me."

"My people treated you badly."

"No argument from me."

"You are as clean as I can get you for the moment."

"Thank you."

"There is nothing I can do about the insects."

"Me neither."

Dunn reached over to Marcelo.

"What are you doing?" Mariana asked.

"I gave him some sweets to share with you." Dunn drew the sweet manna out of the sleeping boy's pocket and pulled away the packaging. "Not much of a breakfast, but it's something."

"Thanks." Mariana took the pastel from Dunn's hand. "Not bad."

Dunn fumbled with Joshua's horse.

"What are you looking for?" Mariana asked.

"This." He held up Joshua's canteen to show her. "Take some water."

Mariana sipped, then frowned. "There's not much in here. Save it for Marcelo."

Dunn took the canteen back, fastened it to his own saddle. He jumped back up onto Gray. "I've decided to head north."

But Mariana was asleep again.

Let her rest. He would lead them far away from Miami, and then they could discuss their destination.

Dunn looked up at the sky again. The day was clear, but there was no sign of falling manna. He left the swamp and led the horses to walk along the beach. There were fewer insects there and the breeze was cooler. Pursuit could spot them from farther away, but he would take that chance. Sometimes stray manna washed up on the beach. While the others slept, Dunn scanned sky and shore for any trace of the holy gifts.

Toward mid-afternoon, Marcelo woke up. Dunn did not notice at first. But he heard the crackle of a manna wrapper being peeled away and when he turned, he saw Marcelo upright in the saddle with a sweet manna in his mouth.

"Hi," Marcelo said.

"Hello."

"Are we going home now?"

"Don't know." Mariana never said that the Rockies were her home. "Where is your home?"

"You know," Marcelo said. "The Floras."

"The Floras? Where is that? I thought we were going to the Rockies."

"We live in the Floras," Marcelo said. "Not like here. One big ugly sun. Bleugh."

Dunn had always liked the sun.

Mariana laughed. "Marcelo, you shouldn't repeat things people say!"

So she was awake.

"Who said what?" Dunn asked.

"Sorry, that was me," Mariana answered.

"What did you say?"

"We're from the Portuguese Floras. It's one of the asteroid Hirayama families. There's a zillion stars in the sky, and all the space of the Kirkwood Gaps on either side. Here there is only big sun. But I was talking to Daddy..."

"Your father?"

"He's gone," Marcelo said. He looked like he was ready to cry.

"Pai went down with the ship," Mariana said.

"The big boat is gone too," Marcelo said.

"You came here on a boat?" Dunn asked.

"On the lifeboat," Marcelo said.

"We're just tourists," Mariana said. "We were never supposed to be here this long. We were never even supposed to meet the Earth people, or talk to them, or ... interfere with their lives at all. I'm sorry. Daddy just had to sail the Bermuda Triangle. He said he wanted to do it all his life. Mommy said it was too dangerous, but she came anyway. He took us all with him. But Mãe was right."

For a moment, the only sounds were the rushing of the waves and the soft clomp of the horses' hooves against the strip of sand that comprised the beach.

"Where is this Bermuda Triangle? In the sky?"

"No, Charles!" She glared at him through tear stricken eyes. "I'm sorry. We went sailing in the Atlantic Ocean, far enough away from the coast that you would never see us. But a storm came up unexpectedly. The meteorological and navigational satellites didn't give us any warning until it was too late. Mamãe and Papai wrapped us in life vests and fastened us into the lifeboat. But they never made it. The ocean took them away from us." She glared out to sea as if she would have her vengeance someday.

"The sea is dangerous," Dunn said. "It can change in an instant." He realized he was repeating something Father had told him.

"I know that! Global warming, nuclear wars, corrosive wastes — the whole planet's a trashcan! An unstable trash can!"

Dunn's cheeks flushed with the beginnings of anger. He did not understand everything she said but he sensed the tone of her insults. He had pummeled Father for this?

"I'm sorry," Mariana said again. Just in time. "It's not your fault. We never should have violated the quarantine." She looked at him with big green eyes where even the brightest rainbow could get lost. "I'm really grateful for your help. I'm sorry about your father."

"I no longer have a home," Dunn said.

"At least I have that, if we can find it."

"Are we going back to the Floras now?" Marcelo asked.

But Mariana was resting again, and did not answer her brother.

When the sun's light dimmed and the shadows lengthened, Dunn brought the horses to a stop.

"We'll rest here."

Dunn helped Mariana and Marcelo down from Joshua's horse. They stood by while he laid out Joshua's saddle and blanket on the firm sand of the darkening beach. They sat on it when he was done, and he offered them the last of the water from Joshua's canteen.

"I'm hungry," Marcelo said.

"There is no more manna," Mariana said.

"Maybe some will fall," Dunn said. "Or maybe some has fallen around here and no one has found it." It would not be unusual to come across an undiscovered box in the swamplands. "Some may have washed up on the beach. I will walk a little farther."

"No!" Mariana said. "Don't!"

Dunn stopped in his tracks. "There is no danger here."

Mariana shook her head, and winced. "Ouch. No, it's not that. It's just that we have a better chance of a manna drop if we stick together."

Mariana's suffering must have been extreme. Everyone knew there was no way to influence the manna gifts.

"The targeting systems look for human infrared signatures," Mariana explained, as if what she said made perfect sense.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you think the manna just drops randomly? What a waste that would be! More than ninety-five percent of the Earth's surface isn't even inhabited any more. The targeting satellites run algorithms that prioritize the drops according to human traffic patterns. You know, the concentrations and movements of groups of people. They also prioritize according to age." She smiled. "That means we stick by Marcelo. At his age, the kid is a manna magnet."

Dunn considered her words. "I'll stay if you really don't want me to go. But we are in trouble if no manna falls."

"It will fall," Mariana said confidently.

"And if it doesn't?"

"It will," Mariana said.

"If it doesn't, we will have to eat the horses. Their diet has been good. Their meat will be safe."

"Great, maybe after we eat the horses we should eat each other."

"Don't joke about that. It has happened."

They sat in silence for a while, as the sun set behind them. Dunn scanned the skies for manna. It was a habit all of his people formed at an early age.

Mariana glanced at the sky now and then, but she also looked at Dunn. "Still believe it comes from the gods?" she asked.

"Where else would it come from?"

"It comes from people," Mariana said. "Real people, just like you and me."

"People in the sky?" He didn't believe it.

"It's a crop, grown for food."

Dunn snorted. "Everyone knows you can't do that. Food from the ground will eventually kill you or make you sick or stupid."

"That's because the Earth is poisoned," Mariana said. "Our ancestors poisoned it with their greed and their wars."

"So then you can see why nobody would grow food here," Dunn said, pointing out the obvious for her.

"Manna is a food crop, but not from Earth," Mariana squinted into the sky, but she wasn't scanning for manna. "You can't see it tonight." She sounded disappointed. "It's too cloudy."

It looked like a normal night to Dunn. "What are you looking for?" he asked.

"Mars," she said. "It looks like a little red speck from here, but that's just because it's so far away. That's where the manna comes from."

"Is that where the old souls went? Where the gods took them when they traded themselves for manna?" Dunn asked.

Mariana brought her gaze back down to Earth, specifically on Dunn.

"I don't know anything about souls," she said. "But I can tell

you that during the second century of space exploration, people began to realize that there was a lot of work to do out there. It takes a lot of people to build new factories and cities and nations. But it was expensive to carry people from Earth and there was a lot of talk about getting a fair sampling of the human gene pool in space."

Dunn had no idea what she was saying, but for the moment was happy just to listen to the sound of her voice.

"At the same time, Earth was becoming a terrible, polluted, rancid, radioactive mess. People were dying everywhere. Some were killed immediately in stupid wars that we don't even remember now. Some were killed or made stupid by contaminants released in their environments."

Dunn dove into her deep, dawn colored eyes as she talked. He was glad to see that her face was not as swollen now. Or was that just the effect of the moonlight?

"So, you're right, Charles. Food from this planet is unsafe for human consumption, and most of the other life here doesn't benefit much from it either."

"So the food has to come from somewhere else," Dunn said.

Mariana smiled. "You got it. It's good to know you're not just brawn and good looks. Yes. A brilliant scientist and philosopher named Adva Avni invented a unique plant that packs more nutrition into a square centimeter than any other food known. And it tastes good! But the plant only grows on Mars. The people of Earth struck a deal with the emerging space nations. Earth would provide a gene pool. The emerging space nations would provide manna for three hundred years, the time estimated for Earth to recover its ecological balance. In the meanwhile, no new technology would be introduced on Earth. And the planet would remain under strict quarantine except for ten officially designated recreational areas."

She scowled.

"What's the matter?" Dunn asked.

"One of the recreational areas is the open Atlantic, where we... My father only wanted to sail the Bermuda Triangle. We weren't prepared for a hurricane..."

Mariana closed her eyes.

Dunn put his arm around her, and she leaned against him. They said nothing for a long time.

The manna fell in the morning. The wind caught it and sent it hurtling to the south of them, and dropped it into the ocean. Dunn ran along the beach and waited for it to wash ashore. He did not have to wait long.

"It's a pack of ninety-nine," he announced to Mariana and Marcelo when he rejoined them.

"Hooray!" Marcelo said.

"I'll bet your horses are glad," Mariana said. "They get to live another day."

"So do we," Dunn said.

After breakfast, Dunn filled his canteen with water from the swamp. He struck a fire with his flint and tossed his canteen into the flames. He let the water boil until the fire died down, then opened Joshua's canteen. He covered it with the shrouding from the fallen manna and strained the water through it.

"This should get us through the day," Dunn said.

They traveled north for the rest of the day, and on the next morning they turned west. If the Rockies were away from the coast, then that was the way they would travel. After two days of crossing the swamplands, they came to a different kind of terrain.

"These are just hills," Mariana explained. "You're used to Florida's flat coast. But these are not mountains. And they certainly aren't the Rockies!"

"There is good water here," Dunn said.

Marcelo was splashing and squealing in a running stream. The grass was green around this spot, and small animals climbed in the trees. Squirrels.

"Be careful, Marcelo," Mariana called. She turned to Dunn. "He's not used to being in the water."

"He'll be OK," Dunn said. "The water is clean."

"It's spring water," Mariana said. "It comes from deep under the ground."

"But look — you can even drink it!" Dunn held a cupped handful of the clear water under his chin.

"It's not bad," Mariana said. "Better than what you're used to."

"It's good!" Dunn said.

"Enjoy your drink," Mariana said. "I'm taking a bath."

"Not by yourself!"

Mariana laughed, and was suddenly shy. "Hey, I'm still kind of beat up from the party your people held for me."

Dunn stopped. "I'm sorry."

"It's OK. But ... Marcelo will take a nap soon. I'm sure of it."

"And then what?"

"You're a bright boy. You'll think of something."

She was right.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### Robin Woodhouse

Robin Woodhouse never passed a closet he wasn't curious about. The cleaning closet at the end of the cruise ship's corridor was no exception. What was in there? Anything to play with? A good place to hide? These questions generated the impulse that led Robin to pass his hand experimentally over the closet door sensor.

Nothing. The door didn't recognize him, didn't react at all. It was like he wasn't even a person. How was he supposed to get in there?

Robin walked slowly and thoughtfully along the soft red carpet. He was sleepy, but he could put that off until tomorrow. There were more interesting things to do on this ship than sleep. Mom didn't think so, but that was Mom's problem. She was in their room now, snoring away, with a hard day of shopping and sightseeing behind her. In a week or so she would forget all about him until next year, when Dad sent him back to her for her annual month with him.

Now there was something interesting. A drink machine. Robin liked the colorful floating signs around it. Ganymede Gus, the taste anchored in real gravity. Another fine Big Gany product. And look, Dr. Ponc, too. Robin tapped his wristband and brought up a dark HI. He told the machine to give him a Ganymede Gus. It wasn't as exciting as the Jovian gin he had sampled earlier, but he didn't plan to drink it anyway. He planned to spill it all over the nice clean red carpet.

The drink thumped down out of the machine. Robin caught it and pressed his index finger on the yellow spot on top, triggering the flexons that morphed the can top into a fat spout. He turned

the bottle upside down and spilled the dark green soda all over that nice pretty carpet. He walked a few footsteps just to make sure of a broader distribution. Then he dropped the can on the floor and ran quickly to the closet door. He stood there, waiting expectantly.

Robin braced himself when he heard the whirring noise start up from inside the closet. One of the cleaning machines had been activated. The rug's sensors would have informed the ship's Digital Person when the spill passed a certain threshold. The cleaning machines responded to the DP's commands and came to life to carry out their hard coded mission.

The closet door slid open and an elongated half dome rolled out onto the carpet. Robin was disappointed that it was only one. He had hoped to create a bigger mess.

Robin slipped inside the closet and took a quick look around before the door slid shut again and the lights went out. He knew he didn't have much time before the little cleaner came back and the door opened again. After that, he wouldn't be able to leave without setting off an alarm.

All right. Maybe this place was not that interesting after all. There wasn't much to play with here. This was boring. He leaned back against the wall to wait for the cleaner to return.

Robin considered where he would explore next. The ship wasn't as big as the passenger liner he and Mom had taken from Ceres. Maybe he would visit the galley. That's probably where they kept the good desserts. He sighed and shifted his position against the closet's interior wall. What was that? A click? The wall was moving, sliding aside! He jumped back just as the closet door opened for the little cleaner to return from its task. Sudden light from the hallway threw illumination into a narrow passageway beyond the sliding wall. He didn't see much, because the passageway took a sharp left turn almost immediately. Where did it lead?

The hallway door closed and the closet was dark again. He had missed his chance to sneak back out of the closet. But there were more important things to think about now.

Pulse racing at the exciting possibilities offered by this unex-

pected find, Robin stepped through the new opening in the closet wall. It snapped shut behind him, but he didn't care. A soft white light splashed on. Now this was interesting.

A breath of cool, musty air touched him. Obviously the air fresheners didn't work back here. At least not all the time.

Robin advanced down the narrow white corridor. There was another turn just up ahead. He had to know what was beyond it.

The scary shriek of the ship's emergency siren cut through his concentration. It was muffled in this passageway, but there was no mistaking the sound. Was it his fault? Had he set it off somehow? He was really in trouble now. He set off at a wild sprint down the hallway, looking for a place to hide. If Mom caught him back here, she would never buy him a Hercules warship toy.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

## Charles Dunn

Afterwards, Dunn lay on his back and reflected on the brightness of the sun, the blueness of the sky, the softness of the grass, and the music of Mariana's laughter. "I could lie here with you forever," Dunn told her.

They had left Marcelo asleep in the sunshine, and waded across the stream to a small grove of trees on the opposite side.

Mariana murmured and said something, but it got lost against the muscles of Dunn's chest.

The next morning, the manna fell again. Dunn and Mariana were back at their small camp with Marcelo when the wind dropped it into the clump of trees across the stream.

"Your turn to chase it," Dunn said to Mariana. "I hope you know how to climb."

"Oh, so that's how it is now?"

"If you want a hot meal."

"A hot meal sounds good to me!"

"Bring the manna back here and we'll have a fire going," Dunn said.

"We? I'll be climbing a tree, remember?"

"Marcelo, you want to come? I'm going to look for firewood."

"Yeah!" Marcelo said.

"You'll have to show me how to make a fire with that flint of yours soon," Mariana said.

"Sometime when we're both not so hungry."

Dunn took a moment to watch Mariana as she waded into the stream. She stood tall and straight, and no longer walked with pain

in every movement. Her swellings and bruises were gone, and only a few unsightly cuts remained on her face and arms. She had had a painful recovery, but she would make it. Dunn's gaze lingered over the wet curves of Mariana's lithe body as she climbed up on the opposite bank.

"Hey," Marcelo said. "Let's go!"

"Let me show you what to look for," Dunn said, and began to instruct young Marcelo in the fine art of searching for firewood.

The fire was burning in a small pit when Mariana returned with the box of ninety-nine. The box was labeled "Oshrit Agriculturals". Dunn recognized the picture of the girl goddess Oshrit. She was accompanied, as always, by her special icon. It was a yellow filled circle, outlined in black, and it contained three black dots in upside down triangle formation. A curved black line ran through the lower half of the circle.

"How was your climb?" Dunn asked.

"Not much of a view," Mariana said.

"No mountains?"

"I think they're still pretty far away."

Dunn served roasted root manna to Mariana and Marcelo.

"Mm," Marcelo said.

"You're not a bad cook," Mariana said.

"I really didn't have much to work with."

"Want me to help with the dishes?" Mariana asked.

"What do you mean? Just toss the packaging into the stream."

"That's what I meant!"

Dunn leaned back and closed his eyes. "It's nice here."

"Agreed. It really is beautiful."

"Wouldn't you like a rest, Mariana? We've been traveling for days. Are you in such a hurry to get to the Rockies?"

"Marcelo and I could use the rest." She touched his shoulder.

"And I would like to spend more time with you."

"I was thinking the same thing," Dunn answered.

Marcelo swallowed the last of his breakfast. "I'm sleepy."

Mariana and Dunn smiled at each other. The grove on the other side of the spring looked bright and inviting.

When they finished, Dunn ran his hand lovingly along Mariana's full cheeks and soft neck. "What happens when we find the Rockies? Will I lose you?"

Mariana grabbed his hand, pressed it against her chest. "I don't want to lose you, either."

"We don't have to go the Rockies," Dunn said. "We don't have to go anywhere. We could just stay here."

"Oh, Charles," Mariana said sadly. "I'm so happy here, with you, but I can't stay. My grandparents must be worried crazy about me and Marcelinho. And this is not where Marcelo should grow up. He has his whole life ahead of him."

Her face was close to his, close enough for him to feel the soft touch of her breath against his cheeks. "Tell me about the Rockies. Tell me what we will do when we get there."

"I really don't know anything about the Rockies. We never intended to go there. But there is a tourist resort there. It's supposed to be really high up, and practically impossible to reach on foot."

"If you don't know much about them, why do you want to go there? Why can't we just stay here?"

"Because I can get home from there. Ships come and go all the time. I can find one to take Marcelinho and me back home."

"A ship? In the mountains? Didn't you say it was far away from the coast?"

"It's not that kind of a ship, silly. It flies. It goes up. It goes up there." Mariana pointed straight up into the sky. "It goes home."

"Up?"

"I live up there, Charles. It's what I've been trying to tell you. I don't belong on this planet at all."

"Up there..."

"In the asteroid belt. Listen, see that big bright yellow thing up there? That's the sun."

"Yes, I know this."

"OK. The Earth circles around it. Did you know that?"

"I never thought about it."

"Well, it does. And so do a bunch of other planets. Like Mars,

where the manna comes from. And Mercury, and Venus, and Jupiter, and others. They all help pay for the manna, by the way.”

“There are people in the sky?”

“Don’t say it like that. To them, you’re the people in the sky.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Mariana stiffened. “Fine.”

Dunn did not like the silence. “Tell me more. Tell me about your home.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Dunn grabbed her head in both hands and kissed her. “I believe you. I believe anything you say.”

“You’d better.”

“I do.”

“All right.”

“Tell me about your home. I really want to know about it.”

“OK. You dumb dizz. I don’t even know why I’m talking to you.”

“Because I want to know.”

“I live in the Inner Belt. There’s a group of asteroids there called the Floras.”

“What are asteroids?”

“They’re like planets, like the Earth, but not as big. You cannot see them from here.”

“You can see other planets from here?”

“Sometimes, but they just look like little specks of light.”

“So they’re pretty far.”

“Yes. Home is very far away.”

“I’m glad you’re here.”

“Thanks. I’m glad you’re with us.”

“What’s it like in the Floras?”

“We live in a big city called Brazil. The city was originally named after a country on Earth.”

“Never heard of it.”

“It is far away from here, farther away than the Rockies even.”

A city in the sky named after a faraway country on Earth. It was a fairy tale, but Dunn did not want to upset her again. “Go on.”

“The city is like a big bubble, and we live on the inside. It started out on an asteroid and then expanded into the asteroid. It was a school for the children who were born from Earth embryos. But the asteroid was small, and eventually the city grew up around it.”

“In a bubble.”

“The asteroid is still at the center of the city, but now it is government offices and a museum. A place for people to go and learn about the past.”

“Where did the embryos come from? Did any come from Miami?”

“The embryos — my ancestors — came from Brazil. The Brazilians here on Earth made an agreement with the early explorers of the Floras. They would provide the embryos and pay for their shipping if the space nations would send them manna. And they also insisted that the children learn the Portuguese language, literature, and music. This way their culture would survive past the hard times on Earth and into outer space.”

“So you speak another language?”

“Portuguese. But we all have to learn English, too. It’s the primary language of the solar system.”

“Say something in Portuguese.”

“Eu te amo.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means that Marcelo will wake up soon...”

Two happy days later, Mariana was striking flint against stone, sending sparks into a pile of dried moss and firewood.

“Any luck yet?” Dunn called. He was soaking in the flowing waters of the stream with Marcelo.

“Just be patient,” Mariana said, sweat streaming down her forehead. “I’m getting there.”

“It’s nice and cool here in the water,” Dunn teased.

“Do you want a hot lunch or not?”

“At this rate it will be nightfall before you serve lunch.”

“Then you’ll just have to wait!”

Marcelo smiled and splashed water on Dunn. “Gotcha!”

Dunn splashed back, but Marcelo did not respond. "What's the matter?"

Marcelo's mouth hung open. He was staring at a spot behind Mariana.

Father.

Father had not healed as fast as Mariana. His eyes and mouth were still swollen from where Dunn had beaten him. He leaned heavily forward on his horse as if he were about to fall off. Fatigue oozed through every pore on his body.

"You!" Father accused, raising his spear and pointing it at Dunn.

Dunn stood up quickly, water dripping from his chest and arms. He was waist deep in the stream. "What are you doing here?" It was all he could think of to say.

"I came for my horse," Joshua said. He dismounted from the horse he was riding and eyed Mariana as if she were stolen sweet manna. "And maybe for something else."

Victor said nothing. He didn't even dismount. He simply stared at Dunn in expressionless disbelief.

Mariana looked around as if for something to cover herself, but found nothing. She dropped the flint and backed up toward the stream. A tiny fire had finally ignited in the little pit.

"Marcelo," Dunn said. "Over there. That way!" Dunn pointed to the other side of the stream. "Run! Now, as fast as you can!"

"But Mariana..."

"Go!" Dunn said.

Marcelo started to wade over to the opposite bank, then stopped. "It's too deep here."

"Get out of here," Dunn yelled at his father and the two lieutenants. "We left you. We're not bothering you any more. We don't want anything to do with you."

"I see the girl has corrupted you into her bad habits," Father said, nodding toward a half-consumed box of ninety-nine. "There is no going back for you now, my son."

"I don't want to go back!" Dunn said, his fists balled at his sides.

"But you have stolen this manna from all of us," Victor said. "It fell, and you didn't bring it into town. That cannot be forgiven."

Dunn was reminded of the words he spoke when he first met Mariana. Now he realized how foolish they must have sounded to her, and how helpless she must have felt in front of him.

"It's not just your manna," Dunn said. "It belongs to everyone."

"Of course it does," Father said gently. "But someone must collect it and distribute it fairly."

"Get back," Mariana said suddenly. "Get out of here, all of you." Her fire was burning nicely now. She leaped forward and grabbed a flaming stick out of the pit.

Joshua laughed. "Be careful with that, pretty girl. I don't want you to burn yourself too soon. Not when I've got all the heat you need ready and waiting for you."

"Take your horse," Dunn said. He was wading to shore. "She's right over there." The palomino was grazing on the green grass, oblivious to the discussion about her. "Take her and get out of here."

Father shook his head. "It's not that easy." He pushed himself off the side of his horse, landing solidly on the ground. "You think I've forgotten what you did to me? You think I can forget this?" He pointed to the bruises on his face with one hand. With the other, he held his spear in front of him.

Seeing this, Victor dismounted and drew his own spear. "I'm sorry about this. I really liked you."

"What about the others?" Dunn asked. He was slowly moving forward. "Only the three of you came?"

Father smirked. "Somebody has to guard the manna at home."

"Too many footprints muddy the trail," Victor said.

"Us three against you three," Father said. "I think we can guess how this will turn out."

"Yes," Joshua said. "We can guess." He stepped toward Mariana, his eyes leaving no guesswork as to his intentions toward her.

"Stay away from me," Mariana warned him, brandishing the flaming branch.

Joshua waved his spear. "Whose do you think is bigger?"

Dunn's spear was resting against a tree, alongside his saddle, canteen and knife. They were behind the bushes to Victor's right, too far away to do him any good.

"I'll just wait here a minute," Joshua said. "That little stick will burn down to your fingers in no time."

"Come on, Joshua," Dunn pleaded, stepping out of the stream. "Please, just take your horse and leave. Take the manna, too. Take whatever you want. Just leave us alone."

"That's disgusting, Charles," Victor said. He spat. "I never knew you were such a whiner." He leaned against a tree with his arms folded. "William, you obviously won't need my help." Victor sat down and rested his back against the trunk.

"You sniveling brat," Father said. "I came here to teach you a lesson, and that's what I'm going to do!" He ran toward Dunn, stepping between him and Mariana. He raised his spear to impale his son.

Mariana screamed and threw the burning stick at Father. It hit his torso and blazed into his leather clothing. Father spun around and his spear fell to the ground. Dunn wasn't sure if the sudden stench was the smell of burning clothing or of Father's burning skin.

Father yelled with rage and advanced on Mariana. The girl reached down into the pit again, but the fire had spread to all the firewood and there was nothing else to grab. Father was almost on top of her when Joshua slammed her in the side of the head with his spear. She fell, stunned, and lay gasping for breath on the ground. Father stopped.

"Take her," Father said to Joshua. "Do what you want with her, and then kill her. She is too much trouble to keep around."

Dunn lunged forward at Joshua, but a blow from Father's fist stopped him. Blood flowed from his lips. Dunn cried in rage as Father pummeled him again and again. "Does this remind you of anything?" Father screamed.

Dunn collapsed by the side of the stream, his face turned toward Mariana. The girl was struggling, Joshua on top of her, touching her in places meant only for him, in ways no man should ever touch any woman.

"No!" Dunn said. "Stop!"

Joshua looked at Dunn and smiled. "I'm beginning to understand why you ran away with her!"

"Stop!" Dunn yelled again, and then Father's foot slammed into his belly and he couldn't yell any more. He could only watch as Joshua overwhelmed Mariana's resistance, first stunning her with a blow to the head, and then pinning her arms at her sides. Joshua was no longer looking at Dunn but had all his attention on Mariana.

"Enjoying the view, Charles?" Father gloated.

Dunn watched helplessly as Joshua fell over, blood spurting from his back to gush all over Marcelo. The little boy brought the knife down again and again.

"Stay...away...from...my sister!" he cried.

Joshua rolled off Mariana to stare open eyed at the sun, gasping his last breath. Marcelo tossed the knife aside and collapsed on top of his sister. He cradled her head in his arms and pressed it against his chest. Mariana was still stirring.

"You little brat!" Father yelled. "Do you know what you've done?" He left Dunn lying on the ground and launched himself toward the boy. "Let go of her!" He slapped Marcelo in the face. The little boy slammed spinning into a nearby tree. "Wake up! I want you to see this!" Father crouched over Mariana.

Dunn struggled to his feet. "Get away from her!"

"You watch this too!" Father said. The big man jerked his elbow back and twisted forward, sending his fist straight into Mariana's face. The girl's neck snapped with the blow. Father laughed. "Not bad for an old man, eh?"

But Dunn was already on his feet, Father's discarded spear in his hands. He plunged it into the older man's back.

Father gasped up at him. "In the back?"

"Would you prefer a night in the public stock?" Dunn asked quietly.

Father faded away and Dunn stepped over the body. He bent to look at Mariana. Her neck was twisted in an impossible position. She was dead. Tears stung his eyes and nose as he touched her chest, hoping against all logic for a heartbeat. There was none.

"That leaves just you and me," Victor said.

Dunn snatched up Marcelo's bloodied knife. He recognized his own blade. Marcelo must have slipped around behind the bushes to retrieve the knife, then doubled back through the stream to come up behind Joshua. "I'm ready." Dunn confronted Victor with his father's spear, still dripping with Father's blood, and his own knife, red with Joshua's blood.

Victor raised his spear and advanced menacingly. He gestured in small round circles with his knife. A fierce scowl permeated his face.

Dunn did not flinch. He raised his red dripping weapons toward Victor and braced himself for the inevitable attack.

Victor paused. He looked around nervously. Without a word, he dropped his spear and ran toward his horse. He was in the saddle and away before Dunn realized what had happened.

"I may be a whiner," Dunn muttered, "but I didn't run from you."

Dunn's eyes fell once more to Mariana's pale face. She would never return to her home in the sky. His sadness dropped him to his knees beside her. He touched her hand. It was so unfair, to spend days in painful recovery from injuries inflicted in the public stock, and now this...

A rustling movement stirred the grass behind him. Dunn jumped upright, spear in one hand, blade in the other.

Marcelo. The little boy walked unsteadily toward him, his head swollen with an ugly bump from his crash into the tree.

"Marcelo," Dunn said. "She's gone."

The boy fell beside his sister and they both cried for a long, long time. The sun shone carelessly down as if nothing had ever happened. A gift from the gods drifted uselessly into the trees beside them. They did not budge from Mariana's side.

In the morning, Dunn carried Mariana across the creek and into the clump of trees beyond. He laid her down in the spot of shade they had shared together in laughter and passion. He caressed her face one more time while Marcelo held her hand. Then he tore at the earth with his knife and his hands to make her final resting place.

Little Marcelo helped him with his bare hands. They struck sand before they went too far. Through sweat and tears, they dug her hole by midday.

Gently, Dunn laid Mariana's body in the sandy soil. He could think of nothing to say that would express his grief. In silence, Dunn and Marcelo covered the body, packing the earth down tightly around her.

They spent the night around her grave. Neither had much to say to the other. They shared a dinner of manna root and stew, and fed the salad manna to the four horses. In the morning, Dunn used his knife to carve Mariana's initials in the tree overlooking her final resting place. He dug the MX deeply into the bark.

"Let's go, Marcelo." Dunn packed the remaining manna on one of the riderless horses. "We can't stay here." Would Victor bring back reinforcements, now that he knew where they were? Dunn wouldn't wait around to find out.

"Are we going home now?" Marcelo asked.

Dunn moved the horses out of the little grove and pointed them northwest. "I'm taking you to the Rockies so you can be with your people. It's what Mariana wanted more than anything else. I won't let her down."

They rode many days. At times Marcelo would get tired or cry. Dunn was patient with him. He would take Marcelo from his horse and nestle him into his own saddle. They would ride together and sometimes Dunn would sing songs that he only half remembered. Marcelo laughed when Dunn forgot the words and made up nonsense syllables to sing instead.

At night, they usually made a fire together. When Marcelo cried, Dunn comforted him. They did not sing very much at night. In the darkness, the memories crept up on them and they lost themselves in their reverie.

The land changed as they rode. The swamps disappeared behind them and sparse forests sprang up. The trees were not tall, and much of their bark was covered with an unhealthy gray. Some trees bore fruit, but it did not look good to eat. Marcelo bit into one of the



pinkish ones, and shouted in surprise when he found it infested with worms. He did not try that again.

Dunn provided Marcelo with a treat that night. They stopped early and he butchered Father's horse. He served the finest parts of it as dinner.

"How do you like it?" Dunn asked.

"This is good!" Marcelo's face glowed with enthusiasm. Perhaps it was the firelight.

"These horses were raised on manna. Their meat is good for you."

"But now we only have three."

"We don't need so many horses. We can't keep sharing our salad manna with them. Your people don't drop enough for all of us." Dunn no longer believed that the manna was a gift of the gods. He had accepted Mariana's story about people in the sky. That was why they were headed for the Rockies. The mountains must be tall enough to touch the sky.

"This is better than root manna," Marcelo said.

"I thought you might like the change."

They found many old signs of the ancestors. Most of the buildings and cars were overgrown with sickly vegetation. Human skeletons littered some places. Long black roads stretched for miles, but they were torn up and difficult for the horses to navigate. They mostly kept to the softer grass, except where the nettle and thorny plants made it impossible for them to push through.

The weather turned cold. It didn't happen all at once. At first the nights seemed colder. They slept closer to the fire. In time, they slept in each other's arms to keep warm. Dunn didn't mind the cold. He hardly felt it through the numbness left by Mariana's death. But he worried about Marcelo. He saw Mariana in him, and could not bear to see him suffer.

They were traveling through rough country now. It was not flat any more, but it was not mountainous either. Marcelo shivered in the wind.

Dunn found a cave and brought them to an early halt that day.

He killed the horse that Joshua rode to the springs and served a hot meat meal that night. Marcelo ate it with relish. Dunn could see that the boy was growing. He gotten taller since Dunn had first encountered him many weeks ago. He tried to imagine what kind of a man Marcelo would grow into if they never found the Rockies. Would Marcelo turn out to be someone that Mariana would be proud to call her brother?

"Tell me about your home, Marcelo. Tell me about the Floras." The name felt strange on Dunn's lips, as if it were a word reserved only for Mariana.

"There were a lot of people there. I don't know. I don't remember that much."

That was what Dunn feared most of all.

"We rode a spaceship to get here. I remember that. It took a long time. Earth was very far."

"What about your grandparents?" Mariana had mentioned grandparents. Maybe thinking about them would stir Marcelo's memory.

The boy smiled. "Grandma likes to watch the old *novelas* from Brazil. She says they are the best. She doesn't like the streamied versions either. She watches them flat!"

It was like talking to Mariana. The same nonsensical statements, the same fairy tale reality. It had to be a sign that the boy still remembered his home.

"Grandpa likes to play soccer with me and Mariana. He takes us to the park on the weekends. Daddy comes sometimes..." Marcelo frowned. Then he cried.

Dunn took the boy in his arms. He had not foreseen the grief his questions might cause. "It's OK, Marcelinho. It's OK."

Marcelo cried himself to sleep as the wind roared outside. The snow fell that night.

The morning sun sparkled upon a cold white blanket outside. Dunn had never seen snow before, had never imagined that such a thing existed. He fed the horses their salad manna and lifted Marcelo onto Gray. They rode together for the next few days, huddling against

each other for warmth. It snowed a few more times, but they persisted on. The manna found them wherever they went.

The land turned flat again. Had they missed the Rockies? There was no way to know. The flatlands went on for days. The trees disappeared. The grass became sparse. The days were hot and the nights were cold. The days were the worst.

"I'm thirsty," Marcelo said.

Water was rare here, and Dunn had to conserve it.

"OK." Dunn handed the boy his canteen. He had filled all four canteens some days earlier during a tremendous storm. The storm had erupted without any warning, but Dunn had reacted fast by opening the canteens. The storm vanished as quickly as it appeared. The water was foul, with flecks of yellow and brown, but they drank it anyway. There was no choice. They neutralized the illness with root manna.

Only one canteen still contained water. "Take it easy," Dunn said. "Don't drink it too fast."

Sweat dripped out of every pore of their bodies. The harsh sun beat down on them with a heat that weakened and a glare that blinded.

"Where are we going?"

"The Rockies, remember? I'm taking you home."

"Where's Mari?"

"I'm taking you home, Marcelo. To your grandmother and grandfather."

The water was gone.

Dunn saw mountains across the barren plain. Could those be the Rockies? But they were farther away than they looked. They traveled all day but the mountains seemed no closer.

"I'm thirsty," Marcelo said that night.

"I'm sorry. There is no more water."

Marcelo did not answer. Dunn lit a fire for warmth. He had not drunk water since the day before.

Dunn killed Joshua's palomino when the sun came up. He drained the blood into one of the canteens.

It wasn't as bad as he thought.

Dunn nudged Marcelo. The boy was still asleep. "Drink this."

Marcelo did not ask questions. He just drank from the canteen.

They went on now with only one horse left. It didn't matter much. They were used to riding together.

"Need more water," Marcelo said.

Dunn checked his canteen. The heat had coagulated the blood. The boy was better off with nothing.

"Tomorrow," Dunn said. "Tomorrow we'll find some."

They slept that night without a fire. Dunn did not have it in him to make one. He closed his eyes and saw Mariana standing over him. When the sun burst above the horizon, he did not get up. He dreamed of Mariana and he dreamed of water. He dreamed of a sunlit grove in Florida where a clean stream bubbled up from below the earth and squirrels played in the trees. He dreamed of laughter and passion and marveled at how neatly the two fit together. He dreamed of happiness and a bright future with a woman he cared about more than he cared about himself.

A low rumbling disturbed Dunn's dreams. Maybe it was thunder. Maybe it would rain. Maybe he could catch the water, if he could reach the canteens.

The rumbling stopped. There was a hissing sound.

"There they are!"

"Who's the other one?"

"It doesn't matter."

Dunn was hearing voices.

"They don't look good."

"Never mind that, Doc. Hurry. There's the boy over there."

"He's alive, but he's not moving."

"Is it him?"

"Don't you recognize him?"

"I haven't seen him in over a year! What does your machine say?"

"I'm checking."

"We don't have much time. Even the Senior Controller can't keep the window open forever, no matter how big his payoff."

"Identity verified. The DNA is a match."

"Good. Grab him and let's get out of here!"

"Just a few seconds more."

"What?"

"Reverse engineering the DNA. It's an authenticity check. Just to be sure. Give it a few seconds."

Dunn raised his head. Two men were standing over Marcelo. Lights dazzled in front of one of them. A rainbow danced above his wrist. Brilliant images hung in the air, and the man manipulated them with his hands. Like magic, the lights changed shape and color in response to the man's gestures.

"Hey," Dunn croaked. His throat was drier than it had ever been. "Stay away from him!"

"Ignore him," the other men said. He was tall and muscular. His clothing was dark blue with strange symbols. It flowed loosely around his body.

"I mean it. Stay away from Marcelo!" Dunn scratched in the dirt for something to throw.

"Lucas, he knows the kid's name!" said the man manipulating the shimmering colors.

"So what? He probably kidnapped him," Lucas said.

Dunn groped something in the dirt. It might have been a pebble or a rock or maybe it was a dead animal. He didn't know. He threw it at the tall one named Lucas.

"You dumb dizz," Lucas said. He reached into his robes and pulled out a dark slender object. The object had a red button on its underside. Lucas slipped his finger over the button and pointed the object at Dunn.

Dunn burst out laughing. It was so funny. He couldn't stop.

Lucas paused. "Can't you see I'm pointing a blaster in your face? There's nothing funny about that."

Dunn was still laughing. "I can't help it." He paused to take a breath. "Mariana called me the same thing."

"What?" said Lucas.

"He must have seen your niece, too," the other man said.

"Mariana called you a dumb dizz?" Lucas said, suddenly smiling.

"Yes. She said I was a dumb dizz!"

Lights flashed green in front of Doc. "Verified," Doc said. "It's him. I've got him." Doc bent over to pick up Marcelo.

Dunn stopped laughing. "Hey!" He tried to get to his feet, but fatigue knocked him on his face. "Hey, you stay away from him!"

Doc stood up with Marcelo in his arms. The boy was still asleep or maybe he was unconscious.

"Oh?" said Lucas. "And why should we stay away from him, you dumb dizz?"

The words weren't funny any more.

"I'm taking him to the Rockies," Dunn said.

"The Rockies?" Lucas said. "That tourist trap? Why?"

"Because Mariana said..." Dunn gasped for breath. "Mariana said he could go home from there."

Lucas lowered the slim dark object in his hand. "And where is home?"

"A bubble city named Brazil in the Floras where the people all speak a different language and their grandmother watches *novelas*..."

Lucas laughed. "Yeah, that's the place. You and Mariana got along pretty good."

"Yes. I'm taking care of her brother for her."

Lucas raised the object again. "So where is Mariana now?"

Dunn looked down. "She's gone. She's dead."

Lucas's face locked into a frozen glare. He gestured with the black object in his hand. "Come on. You're coming with us."

"Where? We have to get to the Rockies..."

"Never mind the Rockies. I'm taking Marcelo home. And you're going to tell me everything that happened to my niece. Now get up and get moving."

Dunn looked in the direction Lucas was pointing. A large egg shaped object sat there. Doc was heading there with Marcelo. That

was their home? Here? Dunn knew he had to follow. He entered into a place of smooth surfaces and sparkling lights, and as the Earth dropped away from him far, far below, he realized Mariana had been completely and absolutely right about him. He really was a dumb dizz.

Dunn dreamed of all the things he should have done differently. His regrets were broken by the shriek of the *Orquidea's* alarm. The cabin's interior lighting flashed red. His first thought was that he hadn't met Captain Velasquez in time to put Eric on the lifeboat to see his father. He tongued a molar to check the time. Only 0436. The appointment wasn't for another hour and a bit.

"Daphne, what's going on?"

"War," she said. "I didn't see any reason to wake you."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### Akemi Yamakawa

Lieutenant Akemi Yamakawa was just slipping under her blanket when the red emergency light flashed into the center of the small cabin that she and Rachel Grudziecki shared. Quarters aboard the *George Sulmers* were far from luxurious, but after a long day of practice maneuvers and navigational trickery her lonely little bunk was a thing to look forward to. As the crimson warning strobe intensified, Akemi turned in her bed to face the center of the room.

"Report to the ready area immediately," Captain Obasanjo said, streaming life-size into their quarters without an invitation. The red light vaporized around him as he stood stiff and still and repeated the order two more times. Then he was gone.

"What do you suppose that's all about?" Rachel asked, hazel eyes squinting in curiosity. The large muscled brunette stepped carelessly out of the tiny shower, water dripping all around her. The lightly perfumed liquid absorbed neatly into the cabin carpet.

"Who knows," Akemi said. She was mostly undressed, and Rachel was naked, but both knew the captain's streamed multicast was a one-way signal. Akemi climbed out of her cot and headed for her clothing compartment. "Who do you think he targeted?"

"Dunno," Rachel responded, drying herself quickly. "Must be just some officers. The ready area isn't big enough to hold everyone."

Both women got dressed and rushed to the ready area to join their companions. Akemi noted mostly pilots and security coordinators. They fell into line, and when Obasanjo strode into the room, the officers stood at attention before their captain.

Obasanjo was a muscular man with smooth black skin. He was

of medium height, which meant Akemi was forced to look up at him. Akemi was barely 1.6 meters tall, the minimum allowable height for a Jovian Force officer. Despite her petite stature, the tight ready area of the Hercules battle cruiser forced her shoulders against those of her peers. The unbroken row of gray uniforms stood like a permanent parade of immobile stone monuments.

"The situation is critical," Captain Obasanjo said. He paced along the line of officers and needed no audiostream to carry his deep voice. "Most of you have already heard that the Trasks attacked an unarmed Jovian freighter earlier today."

Akemi had heard some mention of it in a hysterical newsstream just a few minutes earlier as she was preparing to bunk for the night. The agitated announcer claimed that a FedEx freighter carrying shipments of Bentrax energy bending components to the Spanish Floras was hijacked in Trask territory in the Koronis section of the Belt. The Bentrax Corporation was a major employer in the Jovian Alliance, with three factory cities at Jupiter's major Lagrange points. There had been no videostreamage, however, and Akemi had little faith in media hyperbole.

"Trask forces say they are guarding their trade routes against Jovian Alliance spyships, but we say they are plundering and pirating again. Come on, people, FedEx is not in the spyship business. Jovian Alliance Intelligence tells us that the Trasks are taking advantage of the confusion around this morning's terrorist attack on the Roth City House of Governors. There is no direct evidence to link them to the tragedy, but Trask involvement is being seriously investigated. A Trask national who was working on Roth has already been killed in the investigation."

Everyone on the flight deck had seen the streamage of a Trask traitor shot by an alert Roth investigator. A reporter caught the whole thing live. The investigator was taking the Trask woman into custody for questioning when she tried to escape into the Roth City underbubble. The investigator had no choice but to shoot her. Then an enemy agent showed up and blasted both the investigator and the reporter. The man took two children hostage and escaped into a ver-

ticar. He was still at large, and the target of a Roth City wide pursuit. The horrifying story was being replayed over and over on ONN.

"In the meanwhile, retaliation has been ordered for the attack on the freighter," Obasanjo continued. "The order comes straight from Roth City." Obasanjo paused and glowered at his officers as if the pressure of his gaze could break apart the weak spots in the line. Akemi didn't like it when he looked at her like that. Even after two years in the Force, she still missed her long dark hair that was so much like her mother's. Her hair had been an unending source of praises and compliments from all her relatives when she was a child. She had sacrificed it when her parents died, to join the Jovian Force, to become a pilot and fly away from Ganymede and the Big Gany Corporation. Jovian Force regulations did not permit the ears to be covered.

"We are gathering forces to scout the Koronis, the area of the Belt where the freighter was attacked. Our mission encompasses a search and rescue operation for survivors and the elimination of any Trask ship that we reasonably believe to be involved in the attack. We will be there in six days. All leaves have been canceled."

Akemi had no plans anyway. The *George Sulmers* was patrolling the inner Jovian system and there was no stop that interested her more than being aboard the ship.

"Five days gives the Trasks plenty of time to scatter, so we're in for a long hunt. The OC does not support our operation but does not oppose it either. We won't be getting any help with this." The captain paused. "The Jovian Congress has invoked the Nelson Act to shore up our supply line."

The Nelson Act? Congress must be taking this very seriously. The Nelson Act gave the Force broad powers to commandeer civilian vessels in the event of a military emergency.

"Congress wants to take preventative measures. Trask trade routes go both ways. We don't want the Trasks hijacking shipments of Martian manna bound for the Jovian Alliance, and we don't want our technology exports impacted within the Belt."

Of course not. The alternative was to fly around the Belt, off the solar ecliptic, but that would consume more fuel and increase

transport times. The price of Martian manna and the medicines based on it was already as far out of Akemi's range as the next solar system was to the *George Sulmers*. Akemi wondered why the other Belt nations were not reacting. They were probably waiting to assess the Jovian response.

"The ship is on Code Yellow starting now. You know your rotations. End of briefing," Obasanjo spun on his heel and the exit opened up before him. He vanished through it before Akemi had time to blink.

"What do you think?" Rachel asked Akemi, towering over her. Though physically very different, the two women had formed a close friendship over the past year. The other officers were dispersing.

"I think we had better get up to the flight deck," Akemi said. She exited the ready room and started down the corridor to the elevator.

"Sounds like a bunch of hot gas to me," Rachel said, striding easily alongside her. "Pilots are supposed to get adequate sleep!"

"Don't worry about getting written up. Condition yellow overrides that."

"But it doesn't override the effect of gravity on my eyelids," Rachel said.

Akemi shrugged and waved the elevator door open. "We'll find out more when we take our stations and our DPs activate."

"Maybe we don't have to wait that long. Hey, Tom come on in." Rachel gestured the elevator open long enough for gangly Tom Chapman and a few of the other officers to fill up the elevator around them. The door closed and the elevator started smoothly upward.

"Thanks, Rachel," Tom said.

"What's the latest?" Rachel asked.

"Poor pilots," Tom teased. "Your Digital Persons are useless when you're away from the flight deck."

"That's just because of the regulations you security guys impose on us," Rachel said.

"They have to do that to protect the ship," Akemi said. "Otherwise an enemy could force us to fly the ships anywhere."

"That's right. We only trust you to fly when we can watch you on the flight deck," Tom said.

"So you like to watch," Rachel said. "Nothing wrong with that. Maybe you can tell us why they woke up their best pilots in the middle of the night?"

Akemi frowned at her roommate; self-promotion was not her style.

"Didn't you hear the captain?" Tom said. "They're invoking the Nelson Act."

"So?" Akemi said.

"There are four useful vessels in our area. We are closer than anyone else to them."

"Civilian vessels?" Akemi asked. "But who's going to pilot them?"

The elevator door slid open in silence. They had reached the flight deck.

"Oh," Akemi said.

"Welcome to the flight deck," the *George Sulmers* said inside her head in its cool professional tone. Akemi knew that Rachel was listening to the same voice and watching the same set of endographic instruments that suddenly colored up around her. The *George Sulmers* was in standard Code Yellow state, with tractor beams powered up, hell-bolt capacitors charged, needlers and vampires loaded, and all crew at their posts. Steve Marsh and Rick Gunawarden were the pilots on shift now. Akemi took a seat at her station, her endographic display complemented by the ship's more detailed holographic indicators.

Obasanjo holloed up in front of her in an internal image. "Lieutenant Yamakawa."

"Yes, sir," Akemi responded.

"I'm assigning you first. There's a Liberty model excursion ship in joviosynchronous orbit over the Great Red Spot right now. It's a TravelEase cruise ship, but its flight plan indicates minimal passengers."

"I'm not checked out on the Liberty class, sir."

"I'm downloading a translator to your DP. You can fly the Liberty with the Hercules control interface. The precision won't be as good and the weapons controls will be useless. It's just a tourist ship."



"Thank you, sir."

"Here are the coordinates." A tiny green oval flashed in front of Akemi, superimposed against a floating map of the Jovian system that only she could see. The map showed few atmospheric or ground details of Jupiter or its moons, but gravitational and electromagnetic flows were brightly illustrated. A net of navigational coordinates ensnared the entire system. The little green blip represented the civilian Liberty class. "You can see we're only a few hours away." A yellow blip nearby in the familiar Hercules H shape represented the *George Sulmers*. It had already changed course and was heading toward the Liberty.

"Since the ship isn't military, I assume we'll be needing it to haul cargo."

"Exactly. Force Security will board the ship and transfer the crew and passengers to the *George Sulmers*. We'll drop them at the base on Roth after we've commandeered the other three ships in the area. It will be tight, but our guests should be able to last the day with us. Two Force Security personnel have been assigned to you. You will board the ship with them."

"My destination?"

"Your DP will provide you with the rest of your orders," Obasanjo said, and vanished. The man was in a hurry.

Akemi glanced over at Rachel, who was suddenly involved in an inner dialogue. Akemi guessed that Rachel was receiving a similar briefing from Obasanjo.

"Lieutenant Yamakawa?" said the neutral voice of Akemi's personal DP. Military DPs always talked like that. They were intentionally designed to be boring.

"Go ahead, Dr. Ponik," Akemi responded, to signal that she was listening. She wondered how many other pilots gave their Digital Persons names based on the initials "DP". Dr. Ponik was a popular soft drink in the Outer System, one of Big Gany's biggest moneymakers. Akemi's parents had dedicated their lives to developing and growing the raw ingredients for Dr. Ponik. The accident that took them away from her occurred in a refinery dedicated to the drink.

The DP's programming was too dull to comment on Akemi's

choice of names. "The *George Sulmers* will dock with the Liberty class ship *Orquidea* in about four and a half hours." A vision of the *Orquidea* was superimposed on Akemi's surroundings. "The two ship's DPs are negotiating a rendezvous point and coordinating docking schematics."

"And the crew and passengers are just going to let me take the ship?" Nelson Act notwithstanding, this didn't feel right to her.

"You will be acting under legal orders. Two security agents will accompany you to ensure the crew's compliance."

It wasn't her own protection that concerned her.

"All right," Akemi said. "Where I am supposed to go with the ship?"

"Your destination is the Ananke training base." Ananke was one of Jupiter's outer moons, sometimes called J12. It wasn't much of rock, but its elliptical orbit made it an ideal place to train new pilots. Akemi knew it well. "The *Orquidea* will become part of a convoy that will ferry food, medical supplies, and personnel between the Jovian system and the Trask target zone."

Akemi pushed her chair back from the shining panels and hovering displays of the pilot's console. She stood up. "Anything else?"

"You should go to your quarters now and rest. Pilots need their sleep."

Akemi glanced over at Rachel, who still sat at her own station, immersed in her internal communications. Her roommate would probably be along in a few minutes.

The *George Sulmers* opened the elevator door for Akemi and killed Dr. Ponik's endographic displays. She got off the elevator at the living quarters level. The door to her cabin was still sliding shut behind her as she gestured her Mediaset's Holographic Interface into existence.

Akemi had a frequently used macro set up for ship searches. It was in the shape of a silvery glowing comet, complete with dynamically flowing tail. Akemi quickly accessed her macros and gestured into the stylized streaming shape. Although she felt nothing, the icon activated with a soft rumble and subtle brightening. She filled in the variables verbally: "Liberty class ship *Orquidea*."

The Mset responded with a room-sized image of the *Orquidea* dated less than a year earlier. It was the image taken by the Roth Port Authority when the *Orquidea* renewed its annual license to provide tourist services in the Jovian system. Akemi studied it closely, turning and probing it to note the pilot interface, drive types, and freight capacity. The *Orquidea* was a fine ship, the kind her mother had always dreamed of vacationing on but now never would.

Time was draining away but Akemi had to know more. "Current passenger list," she said to the Mset. She wanted to know the names of the people she was going to displace. How many of them, like her mother, had lived quiet lives of work and sacrifice? How many hard won, long deserved vacations was she about to disrupt?

Not so many. The number of names on the passenger list was surprisingly below the ship's capacity. Not too remarkable, given the day's events. Akemi poked further into the flight plan and suddenly realized that the *Orquidea* was booked only for an overnight trip. "What a waste of a great ship!" she said out loud.

The ship's outline blurred and the Mset said, "Please restate the command."

"Roll back one," Akemi said quickly, taking the Mset one command back. The *Orquidea* shifted into focus again.

Akemi looked over the passenger quarters. Very nice, very state of the art. The bright glisten of anticipation was impacted by the dark deposit of guilt. She was looking forward to flying the *Orquidea*, but she dreaded displacing its crew and passengers.

Akemi sighed and lay back on her cot, still fully uniformed. The Mset's automatic timer powered down the image after five minutes of disuse. Eyes closed, she heard Rachel enter slowly, moving quietly and considerably across the room to her own bunk.

The gentle vibration of her pillow awoke her. The *George Sulmers* and the *Orquidea* docked in miniature in the center of the room. Akemi got the message. She dashed down toward the docking locks and then halted.

That single file line of civilians in the tight corridor ahead of her must be the passengers whose place she was taking. Some carried their

bags; others led bags that rolled along beside them. All sported the puffy faces of the recently awakened. Force Security agents patrolled the line, giving directions but not answering questions. Akemi clung close to the clean bright bulkhead, avoiding unsteady eyes and questioning looks.

She could not avoid them completely. One woman looked right at her. Her brown green eyes probed out of a chubby round face adorned by dark streaked blonde hair. She wore a crimson tunic that reached all the way to the floor. She had probably just thrown it on.

"My little boy," the middle aged woman said nervously. "Have you seen him? He wasn't in our cabin..." The woman was barely taller than Akemi. She rubbed her hands together as if she were washing them.

"But I —" Akemi started.

The woman stopped, apparently surprised to get any answer at all. She looked at Akemi expectantly. Akemi hesitated, not knowing what to say. The rest of the line backed up behind the woman.

"Don't worry ma'am," one of the guards said. He wore the interlaced gold "S" insignia of Force Security on his collar. "We're gathering everyone in our ready area. You'll find him there, if you'll just move along. The line needs to keep moving."

Passengers were coming to a halt and looking around.

"Are we there yet?" a child said from somewhere down the corridor.

The woman ignored the child. She dropped her hands to her sides and said, "Are you sure my son will be there?"

"He's probably looking for you right now," the Force Security agent said.

"Oh!" the woman said. "Then I had better get moving!"

The woman scurried ahead, closing the gap between her and the rest of the line. The tired passengers behind her finally moved forward.

Akemi moved on as well, glad that was over with. She was reaching the end of the passenger line. The open entryway to the *Orquidea* was right in front of her. Another few footsteps and she would be there.

"Pilot?"

Akemi recoiled from the voice behind her. Was another passenger speaking to her? Accusing her? She spun around and looked up to see two young men in gray uniforms. They carried small needle nosed disruptor guns at their hips. She was relieved to see the shiny Forces Security emblem on their collars. They were her escort, come to see her safely aboard the hijacked ship. She caught her breath. The man who addressed her was a clean featured caucasian she had seen a few times around the *George Sulmers*, but never spoken to. His name glowed white against his gray uniform. Mike Farnam.

"Sorry if we startled you —"

"Is that all of the passengers?" Akemi asked.

Farnam shrugged. "We don't know," he said. "We're not the ones counting."

Akemi looked more closely at the man. It was another way of avoiding eye contact with the displaced travelers. She noted immaculately sculpted gray eyebrows and dark brown eyes. "Has there been any trouble?" she asked.

Farnam shrugged again. That must be his favorite gesture. "Not that we've heard," he said. "But our priority is with you, not with them."

The other man remained silent.

"Why would I need two Security personnel on an abandoned ship?" Akemi asked.

The other man spoke for the first time. He was a slightly blonder copy of Farnam. His white glowing name was Ben Lloyd. "The ship's not empty yet. The crew are still aboard. The Nelson Act allows them to leave last."

The end of the passenger line came and went. Akemi watched them turn a corner, and then they were gone, moving steadily forward on their slow march to the ready room.

"We also take care of you during the trip to Ananke," Farnam said. "You know, get you drinks or a sandwich or whatever you need."

"Another pilot would be more useful," Akemi said.

"Agreed," said Lloyd. "But we hear pilots are in short supply right now."

True enough.

They entered the *Orquidea* through the wide oval tourist hatch. Plush red carpet eased up tenderly under Akemi's dark hard military shoes. She fought back the smile, and the childish urge to toss off her regulation half boots and run barefoot through the lounge area. This kind of luxury was delightfully different from the cold spartan environment of the *George Sulmers*.

"Let's get to the flight deck," Akemi said, at the same time wondering about the view from the observation area. She knew her way around the ship well enough from her study of the specs; she would find the observation deck easily enough at a later time. She led her Force Security escort to the entrance area's inner wall, softly colored in heartbreakingly bright blue. The pilot's bridge had several entrances; this was the closest one, at a convenient distance from the entrance hatch. Akemi stopped in front of the door expectantly.

"What's going on?" Farnam asked.

"The door to the bridge is here," Akemi said, indicating the wall area directly in front of her.

"This is a door?" Lloyd asked.

"It's blended into the wall so it won't be obvious to the passengers," Akemi said impatiently. "Does the captain know we're here? He has to open it for us." Akemi did not yet have control of the ship's functions.

"I know you're here," said a man's cold voice, like a breath of methane gas from the planet below. "I knew the moment you entered my ship."

The door slowly — reluctantly? — dragged open. The three Jovian Force members stepped through it and into the bleak barren corridor beyond. The short steely walkway was not much different from the corridors aboard the *George Sulmers*, but after the opulence of the entrance area the sudden bareness seemed positively primitive.

"Follow the upward slope," instructed the captain's emotionless voice.

There was a door to the right, but Akemi knew that led to the galley. The two men followed her a short distance until the narrow passageway opened up onto the flight deck.

It seemed a small bridge for such a large ship. There were only three pilot stations, and one of those was dimmed out. The other two were bathed in status displays. Akemi did not completely understand Liberty class signaling, but she could see that air and water systems hovered in the pure white zone, and drive indicators gushed green with a full charge and optimal tuning. The ship was in fine condition. The navigational coordinates held no surprises for her; she knew where they were.

A man and woman in matching white and blue uniforms clung to their bags and to each other. The captain and his wife. The TravelEase emblem was displayed conspicuously on their left breasts. The woman was crying, and at the same time struggling not to.

Farnam stepped forward. "The 24th Congress of the Jovian Alliance has invoked the Nelson Act of 2376 on the occasion of —"

"Spare us the space dust," Josefina Velazquez said. "Can't you see we're cooperating?"

"Your Captain Obasanjo already gave us the speech," Francisco Velazquez said. His face was stonier than a mined out asteroid. "Right about the time he trapped us in his tractor beams and dragged us halfway across the sky."

"And your children?" Akemi asked. Imagine growing up on a spaceship! The freedom! It was what Akemi had longed for all her life. Instead she had grown up anchored in dirt, a near slave to Ganymede's corporate food industry. An industry which had claimed her parents. She had taken the only way out she knew.

"Our children have gone on ahead," Josefina Velazquez said, defiantly.

"Don't you people keep track of those things?" Captain Velazquez asked sarcastically. "Don't tell me you lost my kids."

"I'm sure they're fine," Farnam said.

Akemi remembered the blonde haired woman in the line of evacuating passengers and hoped that were true.

"All the *Orquidea's* passengers are being gathered in our ready area," Farnam continued. "You will all be dropped off on Roth later in the day."

"And then what?" Josefina Velazquez asked.

Farnam said, "The Nelson Act also provides for fair market compensation —"

"Right," Francisco Velazquez said. "TravelEase's lawyers will help you reach a number." He turned to his wife. "Vámonos de aquí, Joséfina."

"We're going to look for our children," Josefina Velazquez said.

"I'll be checking my bank account," said the former captain of the *Orquidea*, as he and his wife exited the flight bridge and started down the brightly polished corridor to the ship's hatch.

"Captain," Akemi called after him.

"Control is open," Velazquez said. "You better move fast. An unauthorized pilot might grab my ship." Then he was gone.

The two Force Security members spun to look at Akemi. She reddened and frantically clicked her upper right third molar to activate Dr. Ponice. He started up with an impulse into Akemi's VIII Cranial Nerve, sending the sensation of a faint little launch sound into both sides of her brain. Akemi knew it was a very popular startup signal among pilots.

"I am on the Liberty class ship, the *Orquidea*," Dr. Ponice said. The DP had direct access to her Wernicke's Area, the brain region that mediates auditory language. It was still defaulted to the *George Sulmers*, and so made the announcement of new whereabouts on activation. "Command is open." Pilot's DPs always checked command status.

"You are to take command of the Liberty class ship *Orquidea*," Akemi said. She articulated with her oral muscles and moved her jaw, but she did not vocalize. The Force Security men would not know what was happening. They looked at her with nervous expectancy.

"Command taken," Dr. Ponice said.

The familiar Hercules interface shot up around her, a product of Dr. Ponice's tampering with the occipital lobe of her brain.

"Lock it down," Akemi said. It was a routine security measure. "Command locked down."

Endographic DP pilot signals were supposed to integrate with external ship DP holography, but Akemi was flying the *Orquidea* with the same Hercules interface she used to pilot the *George Sulmers*. She sat in the powered down pilot's chair to examine the Endographic Interface provided by Dr. Ponik. The other pilot stations, fully lit and active and immersed in the *Orquidea's* native status and control signaling systems, would only confuse her.

"What's going on?" Farnam asked. He glanced about nervously as if expecting the ship to come to life on its own.

It must seem to him that she could not take command of the ship. They could not understand why she had chosen to sit in the only unlit chair.

"No worries," Akemi said. "I've locked down the command."

Farnam and Lloyd exchanged relieved glances.

"I'm going through preflight now. Just stand by."

Akemi closed her eyes so that she could focus better. She ran through life support diagnostics first, translating into the Hercules interface. She confirmed her earlier observation that atmosphere and pressure were ideal, and the water recycling process was pure. She shifted her attention to communication, propulsion and navigation systems. Everything there checked out as well. The ship traveled on a nearly full charge, enough to get them to the Ananke base and quite a bit further. Akemi took a look at security systems. There was nothing but empty vacuum where the weapons were supposed to be. She expected that, but it still made her uneasy. She couldn't find much in the way of protective shielding either, beyond what is standard for a ship traveling inside Jupiter's rings or crossing a rock ridden section of the Belt. Comm systems were unsophisticated and susceptible to eavesdrop. She would just keep her mouth shut. The *Orquidea* was a good ship, but she wouldn't slip out of a Trask tractor beam or dodge a hostile hellbolt.

"The ship looks fine," Akemi told the Force Security duo.

As long as she was checking the security systems anyway, Akemi

decided to have a look around for any possible remaining passengers. She had not forgotten the crying woman in the bright red tunic. That children sometimes wandered away from their parents was a fact of life. She didn't have time for a full visual scan of the ship, but an infrared inspection was more efficient anyway. It turned up nothing. She double checked with motion sensors, but still found nothing.

"The ship is secure," Akemi announced out loud.

The Force Security team relaxed.

"Should we stay in here?" Farnam asked, indicating the flight deck.

"It doesn't matter," Akemi said. She hesitated. She knew what she would do if she had the chance. "You might like to visit the observation dome on Deck I. Take any of the four elevators off the promenade."

"You don't need any help with anything?" Lloyd asked.

A comm light blinked with Captain Obasanjo's ID codes in Akemi's lower left field of vision.

"No, I don't need any help," Akemi told Lloyd. "The ship practically runs itself."

Farnam shrugged. "Is there anything we can get you?"

The comm light was still blinking.

Akemi was short on sleep and she was expecting a long day. "A soft drink," she said. "Please. Anything but Dr. Ponik. I have to get this call."

Both men nodded and moved away. Akemi tongued a molar in the upper right quadrant of her mouth and Captain Obasanjo superimposed his image on her vision.

"Lieutenant Yamakawa, what is your status?" the captain asked inside her head.

"I have command control of the *Orquidea*," Akemi said. "The preflight checks out. No passengers are left aboard."

"Good work. Ready to undock?" The captain was wasting no time.

"Yes, sir."

"Hatch closure in process on the *George Sulmers*."



"Hatch closure in process on the *Orquidea*."

A moment passed. Akemi's Endographic Interface showed the typical sequence of events accompanying hatch closure on a Hercules battle cruiser. She managed to glance at the Holographic Interface encompassing the other pilot's chair. The Liberty excursion ship ran through a similar sequence, though without the heavy battle armor.

"Hatch closure complete on the *Orquidea*," Akemi said. Her hatch had closed first, not because it was faster, but because it was smaller.

"Hatch closure complete on the *George Sulmers*. Dropping tractors on three."

Akemi prepped a miniscule repulsive field, just enough for a gentle push away from the battle ship. "*Orquidea* standing by."

"On my mark... one, two, three, *mark!*"

Akemi eased the field into existence with a gesture. She never took her eyes off the floating displays that showed the positions of the two ships relative to each other.

"Clear," Akemi and the captain said at the same time.

Akemi gestured a map into existence. The course to Ananke base was easy.

"We have a few other stops to make," Obasanjo said. "We'll catch up with you tomorrow."

"See you then, Captain," Akemi said. She let Obsanjo cut the connection while she laid in the *Orquidea's* new course. It was simply a matter of bringing the Jovian navigational beacons into the map, larger than life, and drawing a course relative to them and Ananke Base. The journey would take about ten hours.

Once the course was laid in and accepted by the *Orquidea*, there was little for Akemi to do. She got up from the pilot's chair and paced around the small flight deck a few times. Where was the Force Security team? She could really use that soft drink right about now. She wouldn't even complain much if they stuck her with a Dr. Ponc. A Ganymede Gus wouldn't be that bad either.

Akemi took another look at the proximity display. There was no luxurious observation window to look out of here; when you pilot

a ship this size, you depend wholly and entirely on your instruments. The *George Sulmers* had accelerated off the map's scale, in search of its remaining targets. Akemi did not know who they were, but already she felt sorry for them. The *Orquidea* moved slowly and steadily along its line of beacons toward Ananke. It might be nice to visit the training base again. Akemi could imagine the first year cadets peering into space with their bare eyes, wondering at the commotion as scores of ships gathered there for the long distance mission into the Trask territories, longing to be part of the crew that was going there. Hopefully the Trask mess would be settled by the time the cadets graduated, after their second year.

Akemi's stomach growled, bringing her thoughts back to her present situation. It was way past time for breakfast. A simple soft drink would not do at this point. She shoved at her upper right third molar and activated her endocomm system.

A green star flashed in the lower left portion of her vision, signaling that the system was ready. The tiny little sun throbbed restlessly as it waited for a connection. "Mike Farnam," Akemi said aloud.

There was no response. Strange. She should have seen an endogram of the person whose name she spoke, so that she could confirm the call's destination. The green star continued its agitated pulsation, suddenly becoming extremely annoying.

Akemi toggled her tooth and sent the little star into oblivion. She toggled it again and the star reappeared. It was still green, which meant the comm system was functioning normally.

"Mike Farnam," Akemi said again.

There was still no response. Akemi tapped the system off, almost biting her tongue in frustration. Something was wrong. As a pilot, her first thought was to check the stability of the ship. She was still on the bridge; her Hercules interface still lit up her event horizon. She could see that system integrity was solid. Navigation was right on course, without even the slightest perturbation. Akemi glanced at the lit pilot's chairs, their unfamiliar Liberty symbols floating tauntingly in the air around them. As far as Akemi could tell, everything checked out.



Akemi ran her tongue thoughtfully over her molars, considering the Palmer's notation she had memorized prior to her endoware placement surgery. Palmer's notation was a centuries old method of identifying each tooth, but there was no way she had pressed the wrong button. Akemi felt very alone without her comm system.

"Dr. Ponc," Akemi said. She was still on the bridge; her Hercules Endographic Interface still lit up her event horizon. Dr. Ponc would respond and she could make her call through him.

"Yes, Lieutenant Yamakawa?"

Akemi sighed with relief, despite the DP's droll demeanor.

"Place a call to Force Security agent Mike Farnam."

"The ship's directory is not responding."

Directory services were supposed to be transparent; call routing was supposed to occur without anyone being bothered by it.

"Is the directory on line?" Akemi asked, but she knew that it was. She was not a communications engineer but she was looking right at the Directory Intelligence system, through the Hercules interface into the *Orquidea's* communications systems. Directory Intelligence was composed of unseen agents that transferred location information throughout communications and navigational beacons scattered all over the solar system. A call this close in this part of space should have been placed in a fraction of a heartbeat. Speaking of which, they were coming on pretty fast now, along with a certain shortness of breath.

"Directory Intelligence responds positively to diagnostics," Dr. Ponc said.

Could something or someone be jamming her endoware? A comm system attack could make it impossible for her to communicate with the ship's directory, or anywhere else. But she would have seen some indication on the Liberty's holographic console. Jovian Force endoware used ultrafast frequency hopping and spread spectrum algorithms to hide its encryptions. It could be jammed, but it took a signal of obvious amplitude and frequency spread to do it. There was no sign of such a signal anywhere on the ship or anywhere near it.

Akemi picked up the pacing again. The ship's systems were fine

and navigation was functioning flawlessly. So why couldn't she make a call? She needed to let the Force Security team know about this! What was taking them so long to get back to her anyway?

It hit her faster than a flying photon. Something had happened to her two guards. Their long disappearance and her lack of comm function were related somehow.

Akemi paced herself dizzy around the flight deck. She never left the flight deck on her watch. She would have to leave now. She would have to find them, to help them, to rescue them perhaps...

She rechecked ship's security. Infrared and motion sensors were clean. Even the guards didn't show up. Which could mean they were no longer on the *Orquidea*, or could mean they were dead, their unmoving bodies cooling out of the human infrared range.

"I'm leaving the bridge," Akemi said.

"Understood," Dr. Ponc responded.

Akemi stepped into the corridor outside and pondered whether to turn left, right, or straight ahead. Left led to life support maintenance areas; straight ahead led to the ship's center and the crew elevator and the drive rooms beyond; right would take her to the galley and back the way she came in. Perhaps the guards had followed up on her suggestion to visit the observation deck. Akemi turned right.

She raced along the corridor and her Hercules interface raced right along with her. The endrographic representations of ship's functions continued signaling their silent stories even by the time she reached the corridor's entrance and set off for Elevator I.

"Dr. Ponc?" Akemi gasped.

"Yes, Lieutenant Yamakawa?"

"Why are you still active?"

"I did not receive an autosutdown signal on leaving the bridge."

This wouldn't have happened on the *George Sulmers*! On a Jovian Force ship, pilot-to-ship interfaces deactivated when the pilot left the bridge. The ship's DP sent them a command signal they could not ignore. Most civilian vessels followed this practice, but not all. Apparently the *Orquidea's* DP did not. Akemi could have instructed Dr.

Ponic to shut down, but she preferred his company to no company at all.

The elevator door opened up onto the observation deck. A circle of glowing red lights turned white around her as the elevator folded away. Akemi stepped forward quietly on to the darkened deck, shapeless shadows shivering just beyond her vision. A broad panorama of star sprinkled space shone through a clear dome of unbroken translucence.

"Farnam?" she whispered. "Lloyd?"

They did not answer her. For the moment that did not matter. Akemi was distracted by the bright vista beyond, but not because of its beauty. She did admire the sky, and didn't often get a good look at it outside of her instruments. But at the moment she was distracted because things weren't exactly where they were supposed to be.

"Dr. Ponic," she said, because she longed for a second opinion.

"Yes, Lieutenant Yamakawa?"

"Have you noted the position of Sirius?" Sirius was the brightest star in the sky, second to Sol; it was always a good idea to keep track of where the two stars were in relation to each other. "I mean the relative position, not the absolute."

"Sirius is negative eleven degrees by negative fifteen degrees off the radius vector of the *Orquidea's* stern."

"Then what is that?" Akemi said, pointing toward the window at the tiny diamond of white brilliance that burned boldly to starboard.

"The *Orquidea's* DP confirms my instrument reading. Sirius is negative eleven degrees by negative fifteen degrees off the radius vector of the ship's stern."

"There's nothing wrong with my vision," Akemi said out loud. "So you better tell the *Orquidea* to check her instruments. Run diagnostics. Again. Run diagnostics on the diagnostics! Tell me why we're moving at top speed straight out of Jupiter's gravity well and why Ananke Base is behind us and not in front of us."

"Running diagnostics," Dr. Ponic said.

"And tell me where Farnam and Lloyd are," Akemi snapped.

"They're in the brig," said a small voice from behind her.

Icy shock ripped through Akemi's veins. She twisted around so fast she almost sprained an ankle. A little boy stood beside her, gazing at her Jovian Force uniform with unabashed curiosity. He was drinking a Ganymede Gus.

Akemi opened her mouth. Nothing came out.

"They weren't very friendly," the little boy said. His eyes glinted green with reflected starlight. "They tried to steal the ship!" The child grimaced, obviously shocked by the idea.

"How did you get here?" Akemi asked at last.

"I came with my mom," the boy said. "But I think she left already."

Akemi took a closer look. Did he resemble the forlorn mother she had run into on the corridor of the *George Sulmers*? They both had the same dirty blond hair color...

"I mean, where have you been hiding?" Akemi asked.

"I wasn't hiding," the boy said scornfully. "You think I need to hide from you?"

"But then how —" Akemi started.

"I was just busy taking care of the ship, that's all," the boy said as if he owned the place.

The child looked about six years old.

"You were taking care of the ship?" Akemi asked. She jumped a little bit when her voice echoed back at her. This little pork pellet was in control of the *Orquidea*?

"Sure," he said, shrugging. "Why not?" He took another sip of his Ganymede Gus with obvious delight. Was he teasing her?

"Robin," called a dainty small girl from across the room. She was just bouncing off one of the far elevators. "You know you were supposed to wait for Uncle Luke."

Another one? Holy corioli. Where did she come from? And who was Uncle Luke?

"Aw, Sarah," Robin said. "I just wanted to see what she looks like."

"Who are you?" Akemi asked the girl.

The child turned toward her shyly. She had lovely dark eyes and a delightful nose. Her hair was streaked with red in the Martian fashion. "Sarah." There was something familiar about her.

"Do you have a gun?" Robin asked. "The other two men had guns. Uncle Luke wouldn't let me play with them."

"I don't have a gun," Akemi answered. "Pilots don't need them."

"That's good," Sarah said sweetly. "Then we won't have to hurt you."

"You're a pilot?" Robin asked. His eyes went wide in wonder.

"Where did you come from, Sarah?" Akemi asked, still trying to recall where she had seen her before. Certainly not aboard the *George Sulmers*.

"The brig. I was making sure your friends were all right."

"But this ship doesn't have a brig!" Akemi protested.

"Sure it does," Sarah said. "I never saw a brig before, but Uncle Luke said that's what it was."

"It's pretty small," Robin added. "I saw a bigger one on the passenger ship that brought me to Roth City from Ceres."

"Yeah, they probably threw you in it," Sarah said.

"Did not!" Robin said.

"Sure, for being such a brat," Sarah said.

"So they're OK? The two men who came with me? I want to see them," Akemi said.

"We better wait for Uncle Luke," Sarah said.

"How about you, Rangor?" Robin asked. "Did anyone ever throw you in a brig?"

Rangor? Akemi was determined not to be surprised any more. She turned to see who Robin was talking to.

"No," Rangor said in a smoothly modulated voice. "No brig."

The boy had mysteriously appeared at her side. He was taller than the others, and he looked older. He was leaner and at the same time more muscular. His eyes were dark and steady, and strangely vacant; his hair was straight and too long. His ears caught her attention, with those odd tattoos...

Akemi caught herself recoiling in surprise. Again. The boy was a peaceman. Or he would have been if he were left to develop properly. He should be in a Dreschler sponsored education station in the Outer Belt, not mingling with civilians on a luxury cruise ship. He was loose code; without the proper conditioning he could be dangerous. His presence here was definitely illegal. She would have to report it.

"What's the matter?" Sarah asked. She must have seen Akemi's shock. "He's our friend."

"He's a peaceman!" Akemi was whispering, even though the boy standing right next to her could pick out a whisper in a crowd of applause.

"He saved our lives," Sarah said. "Me and Uncle Luke and Eric. He saved us from the vertishaft."

There was no vertishaft on this ship, just an ordinary elevator. Just like there was no brig, and no passengers.

"There's a vertishaft on this ship?" Akemi asked.

"No, silly," Sarah said. "On Roth!"

"Uncle Luke sent me to find you," Rangor said to the other children. "To make sure you're all right."

"Who is Uncle Luke?" Akemi asked. Synthegens don't have uncles, she wanted to add.

"He's our uncle," Sarah said.

"Yeah," Robin agreed. "He takes care of us."

"So you're not still mad at him?" Sarah asked.

"Nah," Robin said. "It wasn't my Hercules anyway."

What Hercules? The *George Sulmers*?

Before Akemi could ask, an adolescent boy stepped off a silent elevator in the center of the dome. It was the crew elevator. "Hey guys," he called. "Are you hungry?"

How many were there?

"Pablo!" Robin said. "What are you doing here?"

"Serving breakfast if you want it."

"Yeah!" Robin said. "I'm starving."

"Shouldn't we wait for Uncle Luke?" Sarah asked.

"He's on his way," Pablo said.

Good. Akemi's hands went to her hips. She already knew what she would say to the man who used innocent children to steal her ship and lock away her fellow Jovian Force members.

A long table raised itself up out of a rectangle of square yellow lights. Pablo nudged a tray with plates and silverware over to it.

"But who's flying the ship?" Sarah asked.

Pablo glanced over at Akemi without looking at her. "Does she still think she is?"

All the children looked at Akemi with guilty expressions.

"No," Akemi said. "I know I'm not flying it." She had been tricked into piloting a simulation, probably designed to dupe hijackers and pirates. Uncle Luke would pay for his deception.

"We're sorry about that," Sarah said.

"No, we're not," Pablo snorted. "What do you guys want? There's cereal and bread and stuff. Nothing hot this morning. I've had a rough night."

"Do you have manna bread?" Robin asked.

"Lots of it," Pablo said.

"So who is flying the ship?" Akemi asked. Akemi hoped it wasn't another child.

"My twin sister," Pablo said, without looking up from the buffet table. He laid out the foodstuffs neatly and precisely, with obvious long practice.

"Oh," Akemi said.

"Don't worry," Sarah said. "They both grew up on this ship."

"Yeah," Robin said. "Isn't that golden?"

It was positively protonic. These were the children she had longed to meet, the ones that grew up with the freedom of space around them. Space sparkles! The captain and his wife had lied to her about their children going on ahead to the *George Sulmers*. She would have to report that too.

"The line starts here," Pablo said. "Serve yourselves."

Robin went first, grabbing fork, knife, and spoon, and piling his plate high.

Sarah smiled politely and gestured graciously toward Akemi. "Go ahead."

Rangor hung back, so Akemi returned Sarah's smile and advanced. Then she stopped, remembering her earlier desire for a soft drink.

"Anything to drink?" Akemi asked.

"I forgot," Pablo said. He touched his control bracelet to reveal a rather basic HI. He glared at Akemi and darkened it. In a moment, a smartwaiter access point opened up along the lower part of the dome wall. A tray of drinks floated up through it. Pablo powered down the HI and put the tray on the table. "Here you go."

Dr. Ponics. Great. Akemi thanked him and picked one up. She chose a mild breakfast for herself, but couldn't resist the manna bread. Who could? It was way out of her price range. She didn't like to take advantage. She just took a little piece.

Akemi followed Robin to a nearby table and sat with him. The little boy wasn't speaking, being wholly concentrated on his food. Akemi sipped her Dr. Ponic until Sarah sat down beside her.

"Where are we going?" Akemi asked Sarah.

"To Mars," Sarah said, almost sadly. "I want to go home."

Mars? The little planet was whizzing way ahead of Jupiter in its orbit; by this time it would be six or maybe even seven weeks away on a straight line trajectory. Maybe longer. Maybe you would never make it all because a straight line trajectory would take you through a half dozen no fly zones and who knows how many encounters with the hostile ships of unrecognized nations. On a luxury cruiser? Akemi wouldn't take the *George Sulmers* on that route.

"We're going to Mars?" Robin said, looking up from his plate for a moment. "Golden!"

"Yeah," Akemi said. She still had a duty to take this ship back from Uncle Luke. She would have to free Farnam and Lloyd first.

Robin turned his attention back to his plate.

"Have you ever been to Mars?" Sarah asked.

"No," Akemi said, biting into her manna bread. She let the taste splash through her and wash her away for a moment. It was so delight-

ful the tiny hairs on her arms stood up. She really needed to eat more manna more often. It was so nutritious, too!

If they really were going to Mars, it would be better to fly off the elliptic plane, away from the flat orientation of the solar system. No hiding places there; you could see an enemy advance from millions of miles away. They could see you too, but they were the ones with something to hide, not you. Too bad there were no refueling points that far out. The *Orquidea* was running on full fuel cells now, if the instruments hadn't lied about that as well, but she was only a midsize ship and she had a heavy life support overhead. Only large passenger ships and military vessels could fly the off ecliptic routes.

Rangor sat down beside Sarah and she gave him a brief smile. "Rangor's from Mars, too."

A synthegeen from Mars? Since when? The synthegeen trade was illegal in the Inner System, but baby synths were sometimes smuggled out of Dreschler and sold to black market manna runners and other criminals. There were rumors that they used them to enforce business deals in ugly ways... Akemi couldn't help but stare at the synthegeen, wondering at his past. Rangor ate quickly, urgently, his face devoid of expression.

"Don't you want a drink, Rangor?" Sarah asked.

You can have mine, Akemi thought.

"Here," Pablo said. He was coming their way. He snatched another soft drink from the buffet line as he passed and offered it to the synthegeen.

"Take it, Rangor," Sarah said.

"It's a drink," Sarah said to Rangor. "Just take it."

The synthegeen was staring at the green flecked can as if he did not know what to do with it. He had never opened a soft drink can?

"Look," Akemi said. She snatched the Dr. Ponik from Sarah. "You drink it. See?" She held the can up to Rangor's face. "You touch it here with your finger." Akemi pointed to the yellow dot on the top of the can. "Your finger activates the flexons built into the top. Here." Akemi reached for Rangor's hand.

He drew back from her, face wary.

"You want it or not?" Akemi reached for his hand again, grabbed it and pressed his index finger against the little bump. The yellow dot morphed up and out into a firm yellow spout. "Take it."

Rangor thoughtfully rubbed his hand where Akemi had touched him. He squinted at her for a moment, then slowly gripped the soda can, staring cautiously at the spout. Did he expect it to change back now?

Maybe she would show him later how that was done. Akemi sighed. "Just drink it. Or not. It's up to you."

Rangor regarded at Akemi with a look that chilled her and warmed her at the same time.

Akemi looked back at Sarah, but Sarah wasn't looking at her. She looked across the room, toward the elevator section where she had first come in. There was a huge, happy smile on her face, so brilliantly contagious that Akemi smiled too. Akemi eagerly followed the little girl's gaze across the wide room to the rising silvery cylinder.

"Uncle Luke!" Sarah cried. She leaped out of her chair so fast it would have fallen over backwards if its internal stabilizers had been out of alignment. Sarah ran soundlessly across the soft carpet to smack into a long, thin man just emerging from the elevator. He stepped out into the dark carpet and smiled uncertainly when he saw her, not exactly sure about what to do with her.

The smile melted from Akemi's lips like a popsicle on Mercury. So this was him. The famous Uncle Luke. The one who had defied the Nelson Act and Jovian Force orders. The one who had locked up Farnam and Lloyd. The one who had hijacked the *Orquidea* right out from under Akemi's command. He was a tall caucasian with square features that reminded Akemi of an ageless airless landscape. As the elevator vanished into the floor beneath him, he still faced away from their table. Akemi only saw his profile for an instant, just as he turned to greet Sarah, but that was enough to convince her of his malevolence.

Akemi blew out of her seat faster than a hellbolt out of its launch carriage. She stepped firmly toward the wretched war criminal, raising her hand in protest. She pointed directly at him, an accus-

ing finger outstretched so that there could be no mistaking the target of her wrath.

"Give me back my ship!" Akemi yelled, so that these innocent children could see who was in command here. "Release Farnam and Lloyd right this instant, and return control of the *Orquidea* to me in the name of the Jovian Alliance! Now!"

For a moment, Uncle Luke did not move. The sudden silence was thicker than Jupiter's inner atmosphere. Even Akemi's new friend Sarah was stunned, homing in on Akemi with surprise widened eyes. Then the silence was split with a high frequency, high intensity whine that crescendoed into a full howl and stopped, pausing just long enough for frantic oxygen replenishment, to provide the energy necessary to cycle the sonic wave onslaught again, and again, and again.

Uncle Luke turned toward Akemi, and she could see he was cradling a small child in his arm. The little boy was about two years old and red faced, shaking with terror and clutching a small slim Hercules toy in both hands.

A female copy of Pablo, accurate in every detail from uniform to age to size, stepped around from behind Uncle Luke. She put one hand on her hip.

"Stop it!" the girl said. "Can't you see you're making him cry?"

Uncle Luke looked over at a spot just behind Akemi and shook his head almost imperceptibly. Akemi turned for a quick look. Rangor was retreating back to his seat. He still held his Dr. Ponik in his hand. Suddenly the back of Akemi's neck felt like a colony of cold metal nanobots was crawling over it.

"Sarah, could you take him?" Uncle Luke said.

"Come here, Eric," Sarah said, reaching out for the boy. "It's all right. Don't cry." Sarah glanced guardedly at Akemi. "Come here, I'll take you away from the loud lady."

The toddler relaxed in Sarah's arms, still clutching the little Hercules toy. He squeezed it nervously, sending stuttering holomages of the mighty cruiser out in all directions. He did not look at Akemi.

"I'm sorry," Akemi called, but Sarah was already walking away.

The young girl in the TravelEase uniform fixed Akemi in her gaze. "Get this straight," she said. "You never had my ship and you never will. So don't unpack your bags, because you and your friends won't be here that long."

"What do you mean?" Akemi asked, but the girl turned her back on Akemi and marched off to join the others.

"Don't worry," said the man called Uncle Luke. He was not a handsome man, but from close up he did not look so evil either.

"What are going to do with us?" Akemi asked.

"Get rid of you. No, not like that. The three of you will be on a lifeboat soon enough."

A lifeboat? "To where?"

"We'll drop you back toward Jupiter when we're a little farther away. We'll put your beacon on a timer. One of the Jovian patrols should pick up your distress signal. By that time they will have to choose between rescuing you or going after us. I think you'll be fine."

The Jovian Force wouldn't let down one of their own.

"Hey Penelope," Pablo called to his sister. "I see you met our new friend."

"She's no friend of mine," Penelope responded.

"She helped me open the can," Rangor said, raising his Dr. Ponik. "It's good."

Akemi turned back to the table where she had been so happily eating with Sarah a few minutes before. Eric was in her place now.

"Are there any more?" Akemi asked Uncle Luke.

"Any more what?" Uncle Luke responded.

"Any more children on this ship?" Akemi said.

"No. At least I don't think so. I may be losing track by now..."

"How did you —"

"I have no idea."

"But you have a ship full of children! Where are you going?"

"The ship isn't full of anything. There's lots of capacity left."

"You know what I mean!"

"I can't tell you where we're going. Nothing personal. You know I can't risk you coming after us."



"Are you taking good care of the children?" Akemi demanded.

"Lucky for them they can take care of themselves. Were you eating breakfast?"

"I'm not hungry any more."

"We'll be in position shortly. Are you going to cause any trouble?"

"Maybe," Akemi said.

"Please don't."

"Why not? I'm the soldier and you're the criminal."

"I know you want to free your friends and take us all prisoner and then hijack the ship."

"Are my friends all right?"

"They don't like the brig much, but they'll be OK," said Uncle Luke.

"I want to see them."

"You'll see them on the lifeboat. As I said, we're nearly in position. Give me a few minutes to grab a manna bread. If you're not hungry, why don't you take a stroll around the dome? You're a pilot. You figure the stars into all your calculations, but you rarely get such a good look at them."

He left her there, standing alone by the viewglass, and walked off toward the buffet table.

The view was not as fascinating now as when she first arrived on this deck. She did not look at the stars, but as she paced her way around the observation dome she studied the reflections of the children in the curved viewglass and listened to their conversation.

"So who's flying the ship now?" Sarah asked, as she cut the food in Eric's plate. The reflection was not clear enough for Akemi to make out what the two year old was eating. She hoped it was something nutritious.

"The ship's DP can handle it," Penelope said.

"There's not much to do right now," Pablo explained to Sarah. "Once the course is calculated and the *Orquidea's* in flight, we usually just take care of the passengers."

Robin sat back and rubbed his tummy. For once the little pork pellet had nothing to say.

"Want a drink, Robin?" Rangor said. He picked one up from the buffet table and held it out in front of himself. "Look!" Rangor proudly opened the Dr. Ponice, touching the yellow dot with wide gestures and a great flourish as if he had invented the can himself. He glanced at Akemi's back as he did so. "She taught me." Rangor put the can down in front of Robin.

"Good," Sarah said, smiling as usual.

"Thanks," Robin said, lifting the can to his lips for a big slurp.

"Not exactly a Jovian gin, is it?" Penelope remarked.

For some reason Robin reddened.

"Never mind that," Pablo said. "It doesn't matter any more."

The man they called Uncle Luke didn't say much. He finished his meal and looked around intently at the children, and at Akemi, and at the whole room. His reflected image was indistinct; Akemi could not see his face closely, but he was not wearing a control bracelet so she suspected he carried an internal DP. Akemi wondered what they were talking about.

Akemi had not communicated with Dr. Ponice since she started talking to the children. The Hercules indicators still floated uselessly in the space around her. She tongued a molar and shut down the system. Cut off from her Jovian Force teammates, her DP, and the ship itself, she felt a loneliness that was blacker than the space between the stars. She envied the children their fast friendships. She was not sure what to think about Uncle Luke.

Finally the man stood up. "Rangor. Let's show her to the lifeboats."

Uncle Luke did not refer to Akemi by her name. Why not? It showed in clear white lettering on her shirt.

Rangor rose smoothly and in a moment was at Uncle Luke's side.

"How about you, Pablo?" Uncle Luke asked. "Want to keep us from getting lost in this ship of yours?"

Akemi could have guided him anywhere he wanted to go. Except maybe to the brig.

"I'll be with you in a minute," Pablo said. "I have to make sure this gets cleaned up."

"Go ahead, Pablo," Penelope said. "I'll take of this."

"You?" Pablo said. "But you hate this part."

"Yes," she laughed, "but I'm just going to supervise. Sarah and Robin are going to do all the work."

"What?" Robin exclaimed.

"You wanted to know what life is like on a spaceship," Penelope said. "Here's your chance to learn how to clean up after the passengers."

"She's right," Pablo said. "We do this every day."

"Usually twice a day," Penelope added. "Sometime three times a day."

Clean up after passengers! But what about the freedoms of growing up in space?

"Let's go, Lieutenant," Uncle Luke called to her, obviously recognizing the insignia of her rank.

Rangor waited for Akemi to pass him and brought up the rear. Pablo summoned Elevator 3. They went down three floors and got off. This was the lower guest level, Deck 4. They followed the emergency lifeboat signs to the crimson tinged doors at the end of the hallway. Pablo opened the doors with a gesture. A circle of darkened slim lifeboats rested in snug metal davits above them, padding the fattest portion of the *Orquidea*.

Pablo waved open a hatch and stood back.

"Get in," Uncle Luke said.

"But wait a minute," Akemi said. "What about —?"

"The lifeboat flight plan is already laid in," Pablo said. "I did it a few hours ago."

"That's not what I meant —" Akemi said.

"You won't be able to change anything," Pablo continued. "The controls are locked. It's a safety precaution for passengers who don't know what they're doing."

"Where's the synthegeen?" Akemi said.

"His name is Rangor," Pablo said, "and you're a waste of a good lifeboat. If it were up to me you would be breathing space dust right now."

"You can't mean that!" Akemi protested.

Pablo looked away from her and did not answer.

"Slide over," Uncle Luke said. "Your friends are here."

Farnam's gray head appeared in the hatchway.

"Are you all right?" Akemi exclaimed.

"I'm not hurt," Farnam said. Akemi looked at him carefully.

There were black and blue splotches on his wrists.

"What about Lloyd?" Akemi asked.

"I'm OK," Lloyd said. He was standing behind Farnam, rubbing his wrists. Rangor stood beside him, unmoving. "How are you, Pilot?" Lloyd asked.

"Everybody's fine," Uncle Luke said impatiently. "Get in. You don't have much of a window if you want to be rescued."

"We just learned that one of your hijacked ships is a few hours aft," Pablo said. "The ship won't get much farther without a refueling. We'll send you to meet it."

"What class ship is it?" Akemi asked.

"You pilots," Uncle Luke said. "Does it really matter?"

"The hijacker may be a friend of yours. Rachel something or other," Pablo said.

Rachel Grudziecki. Akemi couldn't pronounce it either. So Rachel had succeeded where she had failed. Akemi was glad for her roommate.

"Looks like somebody wants to say good bye to you," Uncle Luke said.

Sarah entered the lifeboat deck, Eric toddling along beside her. In one hand he still clutched the little Hercules model; in the other, he clung tightly to Sarah's hand. As Pablo slid the lifeboat hatch shut, Sarah lifted her free hand to wave good bye. She had forgiven Akemi for yelling at Uncle Luke and frightening Eric.

The *Orquidea's* protective Z field charged up and her shielding walls slid open to reveal naked space beyond. Akemi smiled back at Sarah through the lifeboat's tiny porthole, not sure if the little girl could see her. Behind Sarah, the synth hesitantly raised his hand. He was saying good bye to her too. It was a clumsy gesture, but Akemi was touched.

Just as the lifeboat fell away into space and the *Orquidea* began to recede into the distance, Akemi remembered where she had seen Sarah before. Earlier that day, on the ONN newsstream from Roth City. Sarah and Eric were the hostages taken by the enemy agent. The two children were the object of a major search all over Roth City! Was Uncle Luke the enemy agent? Burn it all to blazes! She would have to report that, too.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

## Dana Clewis

The morning wind pushed hard enough to throw up dust and ripple the long russet treelets that stretched endlessly over the erratic canyons of the Valles Marineris. The supple stalks bent to the blustery breeze, their full branches lined with jagged pink leaves that fluttered in its wake. Outstretched tendrils sprang from the purple veined leaves to shine like spun silver under the glinting Martian sun. The fuzzy tendril tips danced in the wind's kinetic energy, converting it into a chemical chain reaction that charged downward along the dark trunks into the deeply spread roots, catalyzing a gentle heat to coax the surrounding permafrost into releasing just enough water for immediate consumption. That was the way the manna plants were designed.

The wind might be harmless, even beneficial, but the accumulation of dust would eventually bury the fine fat fruit that hung ripe from the many wide branches. Fortunately, there were dustsuckers to take care of that. Unfortunately, the little dustsuckers were a nuisance. Dana slapped one of the furry round robots out of her way as she reached upward for the next plump manna fruit.

"Dana," her father called over an open streamway. "Be gentle with those things."

The spherical brown dustsucker hit the ground and rolled, thin black suction tubes waving in the air as it scouted for more dust to suck. It rolled with the wind, using simple locomotion technology adapted from the first unmanned probes to Mars. It bounced through a swarm of its fellows as it sought to increase its payload of dust.

"I think it will survive, Daddy," Dana said into the suit radio.

"Dana, are you playing with the dustsuckers again?" Emory teased. Emory was her big brother, a ruthless teaser if there ever was one.

"Let's not call it that," Dana said.

"So what do you call it then?" Henry asked in a neighborly tone, which was good because he really was her neighbor.

"I'm modifying my environment so I can work more efficiently." Dana wrapped her long fingers around the scaly manna fruit and twisted, separating it from its thick stem. She took a quick look at the sky and tossed the fruit high into the air. "Something you all should think about," Dana said to the fifteen other workers who worked sector H4 that morning. "Working more efficiently I mean."

One of the roaming reapers targeted Dana's thrown fruit and vectored its approach so that the manna landed gently in its padded blue interior. The reapers exuded cobalt illumination for maximum visibility against the orchard's dusky red background. The long deep basins rode a razor thin carpet of multicolored Z forces just above the manna treelets as they probed their surroundings for flying fruit.

"Did you even look to see if there was a reaper nearby before you threw that fruit?" Robert asked. Robert was another neighbor. They were all her neighbors, living one on top of the other in a hive of multifamily residences and equipment warehouses buried against an overhanging rocky ridge and built with its back to a solid basalt wall, cautiously constructed so as not to trespass on valuable manna producing land.

Dana looked up again, but she wasn't searching for reapers. "I've been doing this long enough to know when there's a reaper nearby." She stepped over another group of scurrying dustsuckers. "I don't have to look right at them every time."

"Just keep picking," Dad said. He was the team leader today, and way too serious for Dana's taste. "We still have a lot of ground to cover."

Dana sighed into the open comm channel, ensuring that the whole team knew of her exasperation. She got a chuckle from someone; she wasn't sure who. She checked the sky again, but what she

sought was not there. It hadn't been there in days. She feared it would never be there again.

If only she had an endocomm system. She could call Samuel and no one would know it. But they don't make a model for sprouts.

"All the dustsuckers are one hundred percent operational," Mom said. She must have been listening in from her post back at the hive. Mom was stationed in the operations center today, supervising automations for sector H4 while they did all the hard work.

"Thanks for checking, Nancy," Dad said.

Dana glanced once more to the sky, but the only flying objects were the rows of shining reapers that caught the tossed fruit and ferried it back to the huge open hold of the old green cargo flyer. Poor Emory. It was his turn to wash it.

Disappointed, Dana reached for more fruit, pulling it free of the stems that gave it sustenance and tossing it up into the air for the floating reapers to catch. It was tedious work, and she had done too much of it. Why couldn't the famous Adva Avni have invented a fruit that would pick itself? If she was really so smart, she should have designed the manna to separate itself from the stalks and magically fly to where it was needed most! Well, maybe she had. They would never know now, with the "Martian Moonscape" destroyed. Avni's final research, hidden inside the painting, would have been destroyed along with it.

So now they all had to go outside in bulbous gray pressure suits and wade among the endless rolling dustsuckers, crouching to get the fruit from the bottom and stretching to get the fruit from the top. How convenient of Adva Avni to design the manna treelets so that their maximum height rarely exceeded four meters. Average sprout height was about three meters and it wasn't too hard to reach the rest of the way. Ms. Avni had spared Oshrit Agriculturals a huge investment in ladders.

"I'm finished on this end," Henry Guire announced to everyone. What a show off. Henry was somewhere out of sight. Dana didn't even remember which end he took.

Apparently Daddy did. "Good for you, Henry. Come on back over here."

Henry raced back along the manna rows. He was obviously out of breath. A vaporous cloud alternately blurred and cleared the front of his helmet in time with his rapid respiration. He had worked himself hard to finish first, and Dana knew why.

"You can give Dana a hand," Daddy said.

Dana couldn't see his face, but she imagined Henry's eager smile. His brown eyes would sparkle under his thick sandy eyebrows and his joy would spread across his face from cheek to cheek. Mom said that Henry was a wonderful man, and she was not wrong, but he had not made a place for himself in Dana's heart. She checked the sky again.

"Hi, Dana," Henry said shyly. He attacked the treelet that Dana was working so that he stood shoulder to shoulder with her.

"Hi, Henry." Dana complimented herself on her greeting. Friendly, but not too inviting. She wondered if her parents were enjoying the little conversation, such as it was so far.

"Here, let me help you with that one —" Henry started.

"No, I can get it!" Dana grabbed the fruit first and tossed it high into the air. A reaper snatched it up immediately. Henry stared at Dana apologetically.

Oh, please. Dana looked up at the sky again. Her heart flew like a plucked manna fruit. There it was! A shiny black teardrop approached on a rainbow carpet of shimmering Zolotoi energies. Dana reached for her control belt and silenced her suit radio. She knew what the others would say and she wasn't interested in hearing it. She jumped up into the air. "Sam!" she yelled uselessly from within her pressure suit. She waved both arms to get his attention.

Sam hovered his little flyer about five meters off the ground, low enough to see the workers but just high enough to miss the tops of the highest plants. He had to be looking for her.

Dana raced off in Sam's direction, leaving her work team behind. She jumped as high as she could, high enough to be seen above the plants. High enough to get Sam's attention.

The little flyer changed course, aiming its swollen nose right at her. Dana spun around and took a quick look at her father, who stared motionlessly in her direction. Dad did not approve of her see-

ing a stump. Dana shrugged and said nothing. She would not get a warm welcome on her return, but she would cross that crater when she came to it.

The flyer dropped down among the plants without touching the ground. A few fruit were bruised, but so what? There was plenty of manna to go around.

Dana climbed up onto the driver's side runner and pressed her helmet against the glass. Sam was inside and suited up. The gauges and screens that dotted the dashboard in front of him bounced green and yellow nonsense images off the clear curvature of his faceplate. He leaned sideways and touched the glass with his helmet. "Sam!" Dana spoke without the radio, letting the glass carry the sound to Sam. "I'm so glad you came! Is everything OK?"

"Dana," Sam said with a huge happy smile. "Are you going to hang there, or are you going to get inside?"

Dana took a deep breath to steady her rushing heart. "But what about your father? I don't want you to get in trouble with him."

"Don't worry about him, Dana," Sam said. "Dad's away in Avni City right now."

Noam Belkin had left on another business trip! Dana hoped it was a long one. She nodded at Sam and leaped off the runner to race around the flyer, avoiding eye contact with her work team. She tapped at the door before opening it. It was a courtesy. The flyer was the lightweight sporty kind without the benefit of an airlock.

Sam motioned to her to come in. Dana could see that Sam was suited up, his silvery pressurized garment pushed tight against the surrounding thin atmosphere. He was expecting her, but it never hurt to check first.

Dana opened the door and slipped inside the tiny cabin. The black cushiony seat had not been modified to accommodate her special stature but Sam had thoughtfully pushed it back as far as it could go. Dana squeezed herself in and smiled at Sam. She subtly reached down between her seat and the door where Sam could not see. She found the dial that controlled the massage. The massaging routine looked for muscles in all the wrong places. It hurt her. Dana quietly switched it off.

Sam touched his helmet to hers. "Let's get some normal pressure in here." He tapped the fat green button on the center dashboard that activated the sealing and pressurization processes.

"Great," Dana said. She laid a gloved hand on Sam's suited arm. "Let's get out of here."

Sam smiled and brought up the flyer's Holographic Interface. With a gesture, the flyer slowly arced up into the air above the endless manna fields below. Dana's teammates shrank beneath her. They stared up at her but she was too far away to read their expressions. They looked like a bunch of gray ghosts on stilts. Dana left her radio turned off. She could imagine what they were saying. She hoped Sam wasn't listening to them.

A green indicator light flashed. Sam smiled and undid his helmet, revealing the conservative short cut of his auburn hair and his fine angular features. He tossed the helmet into the tiny back seat.

Dana undid her helmet and shook out her long red hair. "Ah, that feels better!" Dana hated being confined to the pressure suit. She placed her helmet in the back seat next to Sam's and looked at them thoughtfully for a moment.

"What are you looking at?" Sam asked.

"Nothing —" she started, but Sam pushed his lips desperately against hers, covering them in urgent wetness; his strong tongue pressed into her mouth, searching frantically for a sweetness it could only find in her, driven by a burning need that could only be quenched by her. Dana welcomed him in, her own tongue calling and coaxing and caressing, searching his mouth for the delicious tastes of masculinity and warmth. His strength excited her and she longed to make it a part of her. Inevitably they pulled at each other's pressure suits.

"I've waited too long for this," Sam said, his voice trembling and his face flushed.

"We both have," Dana said. She didn't realize how hard she was breathing until she spoke.

"But the flyer," Sam said.

"Let the DP take it," Dana said. She unzipped her pressure suit to reveal a dark thermal sweater and pants. The team was working

near the Martian equator; it was not unusual for water to melt at high noon. The thermal clothes kept her warm while the pressure suit kept her from exploding in the thin atmosphere. Dana pulled her socks off.

Sam launched the HI again and summoned up a map. It was a realtime image of the surrounding terrain, transmitted by satellite.

"Don't you even know your way around your own plantation?" Dana kidded. "Head for one of the dust stands."

"Which one?" Sam asked. "The last time we did that, we almost got buried!"

Dana giggled at the memory. The rolling dustsuckers collected their load and regurgitated it in specially designated areas known as dust stands. There the dustsuckers molded their little cargos into vast thick columns. The resulting rock was later used as building material, either by the plantation owners or sold to a construction company. Mars had an endless supply of dust; no one would miss it. The last time they were together, active little dustsuckers were building up and around them while they were... distracted.

"Let's look for a column that's already completed," Dana said.

"We could just stay up in the air," Sam said.

"You're the one who told me you liked to stay out of prodar range when you do it," Dana said.

Was that a blush? "Here," Sam said, pointing at the map. "What about here?"

Dana took her eyes off Sam's face long enough to follow his gaze to the map. "Yes," she said in a husky voice. "Good choice."

Sam dropped the flyer down onto the top of a broad brown column. There was no sign of dustsucker activity. Surveillance satellites could still tune in on them if anybody cared. With a small gesture, Sam tinted the windows. He liked his privacy. Sam turned toward Dana.

Dana had opened her sweater. Her breasts were pert and full, as only a sprout girl's breasts could be. They were the only advantages available to a low gravity girl and she was delighted to display them to him. Her long red tresses hung back over her shoulders. Dana hoped



that Sam remembered that her hair color was real. Months ago, she had told him it was not the fake red used by some Martian ladies. The inviting green eyes were real, too.

Sam reached out to touch her.

"Not with those gloves on!" Dana warned.

Sam took off his gloves, and kept on going. . .

Sex with a stump was a delicate affair. Most sprouts would not risk it. His normal gravity heritage had endowed him with tremendous strength. One quick movement could break her. But Sam knew this. He was gentle, and strong at the same time. The combination suited Dana just fine.

It was many minutes before either of them moved again. Dana wanted it to last forever.

"How long will your father be gone?"

Still lying on top of her, Sam managed to shrug. "I'm not really sure, Dana. It's not an ordinary business trip."

"No? What's going on then?"

Sam pushed himself up and away from her to sit on his side of the flyer. Dana could see that the mood was broken. "It's about my cousin. I think you met her once. Do you remember Sarah?"

"Sarah?" Dana's forehead wrinkled. "I think you mentioned her before. She lives in Avni City, right? How's she doing?"

"She's been visiting Roth," Sam said. "You might have seen something about her on the newsstreams. . ."

"I've been watching all the news about Roth," Dana said. "Just like you told me to." She closed her eyes. "I saw that the painting was destroyed last week. I thought that was why I haven't seen you in a while. . ."

"Dana, don't be silly," Sam said. "You know how my dad is. He dreams about returning to the Promised Land. Sometimes I think he hates Mars and everything to do with the manna plants. I couldn't get away before today."

"He thinks I'm only with you because I want my children to grow up in normal gravity," Dana said. "You think the same thing."

Sam bent forward and softly caressed her cheek. "I don't think that at all."

Sarah opened her eyes. "Now we know that will never happen. And I'm still with you."

"What do you mean?" Sam asked.

Dana sighed. "The painting's destroyed. Those other families must have gotten to it first. Betancourt and AgriTek and Rednaissance. They'll do anything to keep Earth off limits, just like you said."

"Dana —" Sam started.

"But what about your cousin?" Dana asked.

"If you were watching the newsstreams, then you saw her too," Sam said.

"Your cousin?" How was Dana supposed to remember one little girl? Wait a minute. She was visiting Roth? "I did see something about a little girl in the Outer System. Something about Trask terrorists?"

"That was Sarah."

"Oh, Sam," Dana said. "She's the one the terrorists took? The one whose parents died? She sent an emergency broadcast before she disappeared, right? What a brave little girl! She must be terrified!"

"No one knows this, Dana. You can't tell anyone," Sam said.

"What do you mean no one knows it? Everyone saw it on the Mset!" Dana said.

"I mean they don't know that Sarah's not with a terrorist. The man who took her was sent by the UN," Sam said.

"The UN has agents on Roth?" Dana asked.

"Hah! Even if I knew I couldn't tell you," Sam said.

"Silly. You tell me everything," Dana said. "So that means you really don't know."

"The man was sent by the United Nations to get the Avni package. The Betancourts were behind it. Apparently he ran into Sarah by accident."

"The Betancourts sent him?" Dana said. "Then he was the one who blew up the painting! And your cousin is with him?"

"He didn't blow up the painting," Sam said.

"He was sent by the Betancourts, right? One of the three fami-

lies that has convinced the whole solar system to keep Earth under quarantine.”

“The agent had no idea he was sent to retrieve Adva Avni’s final research,” Sam said.

“It doesn’t matter,” Dana said. “It’s destroyed anyway. So much for the great lady’s legacy.”

“The painting was destroyed,” Sam said, “but the Avni data wasn’t.”

“Come on! You said it was hidden in the back of the painting.”

“It was. In permadoc form. The agent recovered it intact. He’s on his way back to Mars right now.”

“He’s on his way back?”

“There’s still hope,” Sam said. “There’s still hope for Earth. We could live to see it.”

“He’s got the geneprint?” Dana said stupidly.

“Yes,” Sam said. “He’s got it.”

Dana smiled. “Years of negotiation by your Adva Avni Historical Foundation, and this guy just walks in and takes it. In the middle of a terrorist disaster, no less. He must be something.”

“I don’t know that much about him,” Sam admitted.

“What will he do with it?” Dana asked. Lots of things could still go wrong. “Is he safe? Won’t the three families be after him?”

“He has no idea what trouble is coming his way,” Sam said. “His orders are to take the permadoc back to UN headquarters on NYC3. I don’t think the Betancourts will let him get that far.”

“And your cousin?”

“She’s still with him. You can see why my father’s worried.”

Sam was silent, but Dana knew he was only waiting for her to ask him.

“So what’s your father going to do now?”

“He’s taking it to the UN,” Sam said. “It’s time to break the silence.”

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### Charles Dunn

Dunn faced Rangor in a horse stance, feet spread apart roughly the width of his shoulders, fists curled upside down into tight balls at his hips. Rangor was wide open, arms extended outward from his sides, his stomach a vulnerable and inviting target.

Dunn twisted his right elbow back and launched hard with his left foot. His right foot swung forward and Dunn twisted his waist and hips to reinforce his swift forward motion. The combined momentum lifted both Dunn’s feet from the ground and shot him directly at Rangor. Dunn slid swiftly through the air, separated from the carpet by a distance no more than the diameter of a thin piece of paper.

Dunn’s right arm shot forward, his fist twisting from its knuckles down position to knuckles up in a straight *tsuki* punch driving directly to Rangor’s exposed solar plexus. As Dunn neared his target, Rangor slid a step forward as if he were about to meet Dunn’s attack with an onslaught of his own. Dunn’s fist continued its momentum outward from his body but suddenly Rangor was no longer there to meet it.

Rangor had stepped forward but slightly to the outside of Dunn’s onrushing blow. He twisted quickly toward Dunn, matching his velocity and covering Dunn’s fist with his own open hand. Rangor’s thumb slid easily into the narrow valley behind and below Dunn’s fourth and fifth fingers. Rangor bent his left knee, sending his center forward to ease into Dunn’s momentum and then turned his center to the right, bringing Dunn’s fist down and into Rangor’s own body. He then swung Dunn’s fist up, keeping it in a straight line

along his center, and Dunn flipped over in the air. Dunn slammed the ground on his back, left leg twisted in, left hand twisted out to slap the carpet as he landed.

But Rangor wasn't finished. He dropped to his knees beside Dunn, still grasping Dunn's fist in one hand. With the other hand, Rangor gripped Dunn's elbow. He turned Dunn's elbow inward to Dunn's body, stabilizing his position with Dunn's wrist. Dunn had no choice but to flip over onto his stomach. Rangor slid his knees around Dunn's shoulder, squeezing tight and pulling Dunn's arm against his chest. He locked one arm around Dunn's elbow and the other around Dunn's wrist. He turned slowly, slowly. . .

Dunn enjoyed the little stretch. When it got to be too much, he slapped the carpet with his free hand and Rangor released his hold. Dunn went from lying to kneeling to standing in just a few short movements. The slender synthegeen sprang swiftly to his feet.

Robin, Sarah, and the twins, even little Eric, all clapped.

"They do like watching you get beat up," Daphne commented inside Dunn's head.

"The break fall looks worse than it is," Dunn said. He wore a loose white tunic with deep black edges. "Your open palm spreads the shock of the fall through your outstretched fingers and outward when you hit the mat — in this case, the carpet."

Dunn turned toward Rangor. "A perfect *tsuki kotegaeshi*."

"A perfect *uke*," Rangor said, smiling.

Dunn did not respond. Normally the student did not compliment the teacher, not being of sufficient stature to recognize when the teacher did or did not execute a move properly.

They both bowed, neither imposing the top of his head on the other. Rangor pressed his hands together at the level of his forehead; Dunn's fingertips touched briefly just under his chin.

Dunn turned back to his students. They sat *seiza*, the position of waiting, in a neat little row before him, resting comfortably on their heels in the traditional kneeling position, the boys with their legs slightly spread, the girls with their legs together. "Any questions?"

"Yeah," Robin said. "Could you show us that again?"

"It's your turn now," Dunn said. "Get into pairs and start practicing."

Pablo and Penelope leaped up from their *seiza* positions and faced each other.

"I'll be *uke* first if you want," Pablo said.

"OK," Penelope answered. "I'll be the *nage*."

The twins always chose each other as practice partners. It was a bad habit. They were almost exactly the same size and they knew each other too well. Each could predict the movements the other would make. He would get the others started and come back to them in a minute.

"The punch is like this, Sarah," Dunn said. "Robin." The boy was still wearing the Jovian tourist outfit he had on when they first met him. "Stand just like that. Good. Rangor, could you help them?" The synthegeen was a quick study, and gentle with the children.

Eric sat crouched next to the observation viewglass, playing with his little Hercules cruiser.

Dunn came back to the twins. Pablo was just picking himself up off the carpet. He was smiling.

"This *aikido* training is a great idea, Uncle Luke," Pablo said.

Dunn wished they would stop calling him that.

"Yeah, Uncle Luke," Penelope agreed. "It gives us something to do on our trip back home to the Spanish Floras."

"Mom and Dad will be surprised that we learned this!" Pablo said.

"Your parents are really very smart," Dunn said.

"I guess so," Penelope said.

"They have solid security measures built into this ship," Dunn said, "and they have an understanding with you that if you are ever separated, you will meet again on Perú, in the Spanish Floras."

"Yeah," Pablo said, "but first we have to drop off Robin. I hope his father won't make us wait very long."

"He seemed pretty eager to see his son," Dunn said. "I'm sure he's flying out to Trancendent to meet us right now." Trancendent was a Ceres nation border town. It bordered on nowhere, but it wasn't

far out of their way. Given the famous Ceres neutrality, it seemed like a safe place to deliver Robin.

"I hope so," Pablo said. "I can't wait to unload the little dizzy."

Dunn smiled. He couldn't wait to unload the little dizzy either.

"Anyway, I'm glad you're enjoying the classes," Dunn said. It had taken him a few days to come up with the idea. "I could see you were all bored, and we still have a long way to go." And it keeps you all from tearing each other apart.

"I'm tired!" Robin complained to Sarah.

"Take a break then," Rangor replied. "I'll work with Sarah."

"Let's try something different," Dunn said to the twins. "Penelope, I'll be your *uke*. Pablo, you can watch."

A yellow comm light flashed into the center of the observation deck.

"We're being hailed!" Sarah exclaimed.

"Whose turn is it to be captain?" Pablo asked.

"Yours," Penelope responded.

"Oh, all right." Pablo walked backwards out of the practice area and bowed toward the far side of the carpet where the shining hologram of Morihei Ueshiba, the skinny little man who founded *aikido*, was projected. "Route it to my control bracelet," Pablo said out loud.

"Done," said the *Orquidea's* Digital Person in her grandmotherly voice.

"Who is it?" Dunn said to Daphne.

"How am I supposed to know?" Daphne said. "I can't get anywhere near the ship's DP. Unfortunately, you don't have enough room in your tiny little head for the kind of firepower that would let me break in."

Pablo picked up his control bracelet from where he had left it on the floor, dangerously close to Eric's curious hands.

"Cruise ship *Orquidea* responding to hail from..." Pablo studied the ID codes. "Trask patrol ship TID4836."

Dunn clapped his hands twice. It was the signal to end class. They would do without the final breathing and bows today.

Pablo was suddenly very polite. "How may we assist you, patrol ship?"

"Penelope," Dunn whispered. "Summon the crew elevator." It was the closest one to their position. "We'll hide on the other side of it."

Penelope nodded her head and touched her control bracelet.

"Why is your video off?" rasped the voice from the Trask ship. "Are you hiding something?"

"Let's go!" Penelope hissed, motioning to everyone. Even little Eric felt the urgency. The gray cylinder poked up out of the carpet and they put the elevator between themselves and Pablo's HI.

Pablo looked around. Dunn nodded the go-ahead. Pablo brought up the Holographic Interface and used it to activate the visual. "Nothing to hide, sir. Just a big empty room."

A lean man with shaggy white hair and bushy white eyebrows peered out of Pablo's HI. Dunn caught just a glimpse of him before retreating behind the elevator.

"You're a boy," the man said.

"I know that," Pablo said.

"I want to speak to the captain," the man said.

"It's my shift," Pablo said. "I'm the captain now."

"What captain? You're not even wearing a uniform!" the rough voice said.

Pablo was wearing something with dinosaurs that moved.

"I'm the captain," Pablo repeated. "How may I be of service?"

"Listen, boy," the man said, "This is Captain James Banks, in command of Trask patrol boat TID4836. I've got two hellbolt cannons trained on you."

"Why?" Pablo said. "I didn't do anything."

"Your ship is registered to the Jovian Alliance. It is not welcome here."

"Nobody claims this territory," Pablo said.

"The Trask nation is at war with the Jovians, wherever we find each other," Captain Banks said.

"I watch the Mset. Your fight is in the Koronis, in the Trask ter-

ritories. We're in the Cybeles, three Hirayama families outward from the Koronis and at a thirty degree arc from Io."

Dunn could see the Trask patrol ship through the observation window now. It was a slim gray hulk smaller than the *Orquidea* but a lot more threatening. It headed straight for them, growing steadily larger, hellbolt capacitors glowing with charge.

"Proximity alert," announced the *Orquidea's* DP. Dunn did not think the voice would be transmitted to the other vessel.

"You will submit to inspection," the captain said.

"Why?"

"We have seen Jovian spyships before. We know when they are hunting for a weak spot in our borders."

"Your borders are twenty light seconds from here!" Pablo protested.

"You are within our patrol area. That is enough."

The *Orquidea* shuddered momentarily in the rainbow glow of the Trask ship's tractor field, and then became still again. They were locked in.

"We are coming aboard."

The ships drew closer together.

"No!"

"Do you have something to hide?"

"I have a schedule to keep, and fines to pay if I don't."

The captain laughed. It was deep and dark. "Very funny."

"Forward velocity is decreasing," announced the *Orquidea's* DP

"Get away from my ship!" Pablo said.

Daphne spoke inside Dunn's head. "What a complainer!"

"Pablo is protesting too much," Dunn told her. "He's making things worse by getting the Trask captain angry." Ten days of *aikido* training were not enough to teach that lesson well.

The TID4836 took up half the observation window now.

"Get ready to open your entrance hatch," Captain Banks said.

"And if I don't?" Pablo asked.

"Then we will open it for you." The ships tapped together. Docking locks were in place. "You will not be able to close it again if we do."

Pablo glanced at Dunn, who nodded. There was no other choice. Pablo used his HI to verify docking status, then opened the hatch. "Welcome to the *Orquidea*," he said, then closed the connection.

Dunn stepped out from his hiding place. "No one is going to believe you're alone on this ship. I'll go downstairs with you to meet them."

"If you want to," Pablo said.

"Penelope," Dunn said. "Take the others through the secret passage in the galley, down to the safe room, just like you did when the Jovians boarded.

"I'm not leaving my brother!" Penelope said.

"You can monitor everything from the safe room," Dunn said. "We may need your help from there."

"Go," Pablo said. "You'll have access to all the security systems from the safe room."

"Let me warn you," Dunn said. "This is not like the last time. The Jovian Alliance entered with a minimum team to steal the ship. These people want to search it. They'll bring more crew over. Your father implemented good security measures but there is a chance they will be exposed. Our main focus is on hiding."

"OK," Penelope said.

"Rangor," Dunn said. "You especially need to stay out of sight. The Trasks are not kind to stray synthecons, or to people who help them. Make sure you stay hidden."

"Are we going to throw these guys in the brig, too?" Robin asked, smiling.

"Probably not," Dunn said.

"Oh," Robin said.

"Sarah, take care of — Rangor, can you help Sarah with Eric?" The toddler was asleep; Sarah was struggling under his weight.

Rangor took Eric from Sarah's shoulder and she smiled her thanks at him. Her emerald tunic had developed a wet spot where the toddler had rested his mouth. Sarah seemed not to notice.

"Go now," Dunn said.

The children turned and left.

"Let's go," Dunn said to Pablo. "Captain Banks will be waiting."

"It's about time," Daphne said. "I thought you would never stop talking!"

They got off the elevator and found themselves face to face with Captain Banks and his five-man boarding party. The Trasks wore light green uniforms with tiny metal representations of the Trask banner, Io surrounded by Dactyl's orbit, and plentiful stylized insignia. Not bad for a nation founded by mutineers and pirates. The Trasks liked insignia; they thought it made them look respectable.

The soldiers also wore thick military wristbands, equipped with personal prodar, comm capabilities, and minor shielding energies. The prodar would poke visibility into the *Orquidea's* secret corridors in a matter of minutes if the men used them in the right places.

The Trask captain's eyes widened when he saw Dunn. "So you're not alone after all, boy!"

"I never said I was," Pablo said. "I said I was the captain."

"It's true," Dunn said. "This is his ship."

"Then who the burny blood are you?" Captain Banks demanded. The archaic expression dated back to an old form of radiation sickness.

"I'm a passenger," Dunn said.

"On a ship like this?" Captain Banks looked around. "Shouldn't you be enjoying the view from your massage bed or something like that?"

"I was curious to see why my trip was interrupted," Dunn said.

"Do you think I'm an idiot?" Captain Banks asked. He drew a sleek gray disruptor from his belt holster and focused it on Dunn. "I know a spy when I see one!"

Dunn raised his hands. "Could you put that away? I have nothing to hide."

"Men, search this ship," Captain Banks said. "Every turn and angle."

"I don't think the captain will mind," Dunn said, his hands still in the air. "But let me warn you about my luggage. It hasn't been freshened in a few days..."

"Oh, that was a good one," Daphne said. "They'll certainly think twice about going to your suite."

"Search his luggage first!" the captain ordered.

The men looked at each other. "Where is it?" one asked.

"Are you sure? OK, I'll show you," Dunn said. "With the captain's permission." Dunn had come aboard without luggage but several passengers had left theirs behind when the Jovian Alliance rushed them off the ship.

Pablo shrugged. "Fine with me."

It would give the children more time to hide.

Dunn led the Trask crew members along the promenade deck to the closest elevator, and to his suite one floor up on Deck 2.

"Poor soldiers," Daphne said. "Searching your luggage. They don't know what they're in for."

There were six of them but they were overconfident. Dunn might have a chance if Pablo were smart enough to stay out of the way. He hesitated. Traveling with children made him too cautious.

Captain Banks never wavered his disruptor pistol from Dunn's torso. "Our activity is being monitored by my ship's DP," Captain Banks said. "You want to go up against our tractor beam?"

"No, captain," Dunn said. Captain Banks might be a million kilometers away from reinforcements, but he knew how to watch his back.

"You don't want to be in my tractor range when I max the pull power and implode you," Captain Banks said.

"Definitely not," Dunn said.

"Anything you want to say before you open that?" Captain Banks asked.

"Hold your breath," Dunn said, and opened the suitcase.

One of the men fired up the prodar module on his wristband. Light refracted around the suitcase as faintly visible waves of energy lashed out at the suitcase's bulky black form. Dunn stood back. At low power levels, prodar waves were considered harmless, noninvasive energy flows. But their effects were cumulative over a short period of time, so it was best to stay out of the way of them. At much higher power levels, prodar could be used like a weapon.



"There's nothing in here," one of the men said, after spilling the contents of the suitcase all over the floor. "It doesn't even smell bad." The man continued to check his prodar holo readout. "There's nothing here," he repeated.

"Sorry to disappoint you," Dunn said.

"Quit playing games with us!" Banks said, waving the pistol menacingly. "What are you really doing here? I want to know now!"

"Why are you really out here, Captain?" Dunn asked.

"What?" the captain said.

"You know what I mean. Your fleetmates are touring the Koronis right now, guarding the shipping routes and fighting the brave fight against the Jovians, while you're pointing a gun at an unarmed civilian and a little boy on an unarmed cruise ship half a light minute from where you want to be."

It was a distraction, but it would not be effective for long.

"You little dirt fleck, I should shoot you where you stand —" The captain stopped his sentence and stared away, lost for a moment in inner space. Was his ship's DP talking to him?

"Uh-oh," Daphne said.

A slow smile spread across the captain's face. "I knew it. I knew you were hiding something. Men, keep your weapons trained on these two. We're all going down to the galley. Dunsten's team just found something."

Dunsten? The captain had a separate team searching the ship! All the time Dunn thought he was delaying the search, he was really just being kept out of the way.

Captain Banks marched Dunn and Pablo down to the *Orquidea's* galley. The door to the main food storage unit hung open, cold air blasting outward through the neglected doorway.

"In here!" yelled an excited voice from inside. It had to be Dunsten.

"We're right behind you, Lieutenant Dunsten," Captain Banks called.

"The probes found a narrow corridor behind this freezer unit," Dunsten said, panting excitedly. He was a slim little man with narrow

features and dark, darting eyes. The cold painted his breath white. "This back wall has to open somehow." Dunsten was accompanied by two other men in light green Trask uniforms. All were carefully searching the back wall for the mechanism that would open the hidden door.

"I can hardly feel a thing!" one of the men complained. "My fingers freeze up against this cold wall!"

That was probably the point, Dunn realized. Nice design.

"Never mind that," Banks said, pushing the slide control on his disruptor pistol into the red zone. "You guys get out of the way. My team, simultaneous fire on my mark."

"Wait," Dunn said.

The captain looked at him. "Well? You suddenly decided to cooperate?"

"You said your ship DP is monitoring all this, right?" Dunn said.

"Of course it is. I have nothing to hide from my superiors."

"Then record this: I am ordering you not to proceed any further. I am ordering you to get your men back into your patrol boat and continue on your way, in search of some real criminals," Dunn said.

"Burn you," Banks said. He raised his pistol.

"Don't shoot," Pablo said. "I'll open the door."

"Is this another trick?" Banks asked.

"I don't want to see my ship damaged," Pablo said.

"I couldn't open that door if I wanted to," Dunn said. The last time he had come this way, Penelope had been in the lead with Dunn and Rangor bringing up the rear. Dunn did not see how Penelope opened the door.

"Open it, then, kid," Banks said.

"Captain Banks," Dunn said, "Once I again I repeat my order —"

"Shut up," Banks said, and he pistol whacked Dunn across the mouth.

Dunn fell against the burning cold wall of the freezer and onto a

pile of food crates stacked halfway to the ceiling. His bare skin stuck to the cold surfaces. The salty taste of blood filled his mouth.

"Did that hurt, honey?" Daphne asked.

"Jovian Judas." Captain Banks spat the words. He rammed a kick into Dunn's ribs while he was down. "Using trade agreements to send spyships into our territories." He kicked Dunn again. "And then you don't even pay your tariffs on time!" The captain delivered another angry kick.

"Stop it!" Pablo shouted. "I said I would open the door!"

"The boy thinks you felt those kicks," Daphne smirked.

Dunn could not respond. He was gasping for breath. His special skin was dent resistant but not shockproof. This was the last time he would ever go anywhere with any child!

The captain faced his gun on Pablo. "So do it."

"Let me through." Pablo walked to the wall and pushed at an area about the level of his chest. He twisted and turned the indistinguishable spot with his index finger and backed up when the door slid open in front of him.

"Door's open," Pablo said. "Now what?"

"Now we go through it!" Banks said, and pushed Pablo into the corridor first. Banks followed next, and motioned his men to come through. "Drag the Jovian along with you!"

Rough hands picked Dunn up off the floor and pushed him into the dimly lit corridor.

"Where is it?" Banks asked Dunn.

"Where's what?" Dunn gasped.

"The telemetry equipment! The comms eavesdroppers! The decoding systems!"

"You're chasing the lost gold asteroid of Braheny," Dunn said. It was an old Belt legend. "There's nothing like that here."

"We'll see about that," Captain Banks said. He grabbed Pablo by the back of the neck and shook him like a sonic cleaner. "Now what do you say?" Banks laughed as Pablo struck uselessly at him with fists and feet. "You're nothing but background noise, kid." Banks slammed Pablo's head against the wall. Pablo fell silent, hanging limply from

the captain's grasp. Even in the dim white light, Dunn could see the blood spill from Pablo's temple. Banks dropped Pablo onto the floor and stepped over him.

"Stop it," came Penelope's voice from down the corridor. The light was to her rear; she cast a shadow ahead of her as she advanced.

Eric was crying, his sobs indistinct from one of side corridors ahead.

"I know we promised to hide," Sarah called, "but we couldn't watch them do this to you any longer."

"Leave my brother alone," Penelope said. She was still advancing. "We'll surrender to you. Just don't hurt him." She spread her hands. "Look, I'm unarmed."

Sarah stepped forward. She was behind Penelope in the tight corridor. She was carrying Eric, who was still crying.

"What kind of trick is this?" Barnes said. "Who are these children?"

"Uncle Luke!" Robin yelled from down the corridor. "Why do you let those guys push you around like that? Give them a suki koti thingie and make them scream!" Robin came running up behind Sarah.

"Shut up, dirt spurt," Penelope said. "Uncle Luke is doing the right thing. Can't you see that guy has my brother?"

"Great going, kid," Daphne said. "Now he's got all of you."

"Why are they calling you Uncle Luke?" Captain Banks demanded.

"They're kids," Dunn said. "What do they know?"

"I don't care who they are! That one's wearing Jovian dyno-garb!" Captain Banks pointed his gun past Penelope and straight at Robin, who flinched. "And what's that one carrying?" Captain Banks pointed his gun at Eric.

Sarah stopped. "It's just a toy."

"Bring the kid here," Banks said, waving the gun at her. "Now. I want to see it."

Sarah hesitated and looked at Dunn.

"Now!" Banks shouted. He aimed his disruptor at Sarah.

"Yes, sir," Sarah said. She crowded past Penelope in the narrow corridor. "Look. It's just a toy."

"Put it on the floor," Banks ordered. "It's a tiny Hercules battle cruiser! What is this, a miniature spy device? A bomb? Dunsten! Probe this thing!"

Dunsten moved forward cautiously, rainbow energies targeting the Hercules toy.

"Stand back, Sarah," Dunn warned her. Probe energies were especially dangerous to young children.

"Somebody shut him up!" Banks yelled.

The sudden skin prickle meant that a disruptor pulse had been unleashed on him. He never saw it coming so it must have been from behind. The corridor became a swirl of bright colors that mixed together and began to fade. Blackness took over the outer edges of Dunn's field of vision, leaving a faint circle of light in the middle. The blackness grew larger and larger and the circle of light became smaller and smaller and smaller...

"Hey sleeping beauty," Daphne said. "Are you enjoying your nap? I finally managed to get some portions of your brain working again. Your autonomic nervous system is fine, but your somatic system is still nonfunctional. Voluntary muscle control is out of the question for you, but there's nothing wrong with your middle ears. Your tympanic membranes still vibrate with every sound, and send those vibrations down the ossicular chain to your cochlea, which transforms them to nerve impulses and passes them to your auditory nerve. That's where I come in, because I don't have the patience to wait for your auditory cortex to recover. I've got my own algorithms and they're tuned out of disruptor range. So just let me tell you what's happening."

It was like a dream. Dunn was listening to Daphne but couldn't even feel his own body.

"Big mouth Sarah let it slip that the bawling baby is one of their countrymen. That girl does not know when to shut up. They think you got Eric's mother killed and then stole him away from his father to use as a hostage. Hmmm. Did you?"

Dunn could not answer. His mouth was nowhere to be found.

"They aren't too thrilled at you giving the Trask boy a Hercules toy to play with. They would have preferred a Trask assault ship or at least a rockbuster."

Next time Dunn would think twice before giving any toy to any child!

"They've been in communication with someone from their MilCom. They're going to take Eric off your hands and relocate him back to the Trask territories where he belongs. They found some grandparents and an aunt in the Outer Koronis."

That, at least, was good news.

"Sounds like Pablo has recovered, but he's not talking much."

Pablo never was a big talker.

"Now, here's something interesting. Most of the Trasks have gone to search the rest of the *Orquidea*. I don't know what they expect to find on this boring ship. I haven't seen any sign of weaponry anywhere. Anyway, they carry their comm systems in their wristbands. I guess the Trask Republic can't afford fine Digital Persons such as myself for all their troops. The men are a little sloppy. When they pass close enough, I can hear both sides of their conversations."

But that meant —

"So it was easy to crack their encryption. Well, not that easy. I had to hear enough conversation to fill in all the gaps. And your head is lying at such a funny angle. Couldn't you find a better position to collapse in? The corridor wall is completely blocking one of my receptors! But I've got it now. Aren't you proud of me?"

Very much so. Proud of the UN ingenuity that had produced her, and proud that his own little modifications had worked out so well.

"So I've been eavesdropping. They've been talking about you. They plan on bringing you back to their central MilCom installation on Dactyl so the professionals can interrogate you for the rest of your life. Which shouldn't be long, given their methods. Just thought you'd like to know."

Thanks, Daphne.

"The only thing they can't agree on is which of you to question first. One group thinks the children will talk more freely if you are interrogated first and then dispensed with. The other group thinks that you should witness the children's interrogation first. The sight of it might convince you to confess to all your deep dark crimes and so forth. Hmm. What's your opinion?"

He couldn't let that anything happen to the children.

"Hey, what's that? A little frontal lobe activity? Bright lights stirring in the cerebral cortex? Somatic nervous system response? Charlie! You're back!"

Dunn's body came back to him and his first thought was that somebody had tampered with the *Orquidea's* gravity systems. He pushed against the higher gravity, but all he succeeded in doing was alerting one of the soldiers left to guard him. His hands were bound behind him with something cold and metallic.

"Hey, Laurent!" the man called. "The spy's waking up!"

"Call the captain, you idiot," Laurent said.

Dunn forced himself against the corridor wall as the idiot called the captain. Dunn realized that the ship's gravity was fine. The heavy feeling was an after effect of the disruptor pulse.

"Are you OK, Pablo?" Dunn asked. The boy was slumped next to him. His hands were bound behind him with magnetized metal rings.

"Shut up," Laurent said. "No talking until the captain gets here."

"They took Eric," Sarah whimpered. She was farther down the corridor, sitting against the wall. Dunn could not get a good look at her. Penelope was blocking the view. Dunn guessed that both of the girls' hands were bound. The Hercules toy was smashed to pieces on the floor in front of them.

No sign of Rangor. Dunn was glad he had stayed hidden, but how long would that last?

"Uncle Luke!" Robin yelled. "You're awake! Look what they did to my hands! I'm handcuffed!"

"I told you no talking!" Laurent said. He pulled out his disruptor

tor and shot Robin. He slumped over, head hitting the floor with a loud thump. "That little boy was irritating," Laurent slipped his pistol back into its holster and went back to doing his nails.

Dunn thought they were all irritating, but he did not have ammunition to spare.

Silent tears streaked Sarah's cheeks.

"The captain's not coming," the idiot said. "He says to march the prisoners onto the ship. We'll tow this boat back and keep searching it along the way."

"Somebody's gotta carry that boy," Laurent said. "He's all over the floor."

"You shot him, you carry him," the idiot said.

"Wait," Dunn said.

Laurent raised his pistol. "Are you talking again?"

"I need to speak to Captain Barnes," Dunn said.

"I told you, no talking!" Laurent said.

"Really," Dunn said. "A prisoner has a confession to make and you won't even let him talk to your captain. Most officers would find that suspicious."

"He's got a point," the idiot said. Maybe he wasn't such an idiot after all.

"We'll let him talk to the captain. Call him again," Laurent said.

"It's your turn to call him now."

Laurent shook his head and placed the call to the captain from his wristband. "Prisoner wants to talk to you, sir."

"Which one?" the captain asked.

"The big one. Says he has a confession to make."

"Banks, I need to see you here," Dunn yelled. "On the *Orquidea*. I need to show you something."

"Too late now. We're about to set course for home," Captain Banks said.

Dunn sighed. These Trasks were so stubborn!

"Captain, didn't you say your DP still monitoring all this? Your superiors are going to see situation streamage of a prisoner wanting to confess, and you turning him down!"

A moment of silence.

"This better be good," the captain said.

"It's in my suite," Dunn said. "You'll never find it without me."

"You are not going to —" Daphne said.

"Oh yes I am," Dunn said noiselessly.

"I'll meet you there," Banks said.

Dunn pushed himself to his feet.

Pablo and Penelope stared at him. He knew the question they wanted to ask.

"I really am a spy," he told them, and left under the escort of one of the guards.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### James Banks

Captain James Banks stepped out of the first class suite and glared at the three soldiers stationed outside. "Release him."

"What?"

Clearly, Laurent Henderson was not the brightest star in the sky.

"What did you do, fall asleep while I was in there? I said release the prisoner!"

"Yes, sir," Henderson said.

"You, Franks. Get Dunsten's squad on your comm. Tell them to get off this ship. Leave it alone. Send them back to our own boat."

"Yes, sir," Franks said, although he wasn't much brighter.

"What about the brat?" Banks asked.

"Already stowed aboard our ship, sir," Franks said.

"Keep him out of my way. Barclay, get someone to release the wrist restraints on the other brats downstairs," Banks ordered. Did he have to think of everything himself?

"Yes, sir," Barclay said.

"And all of you, when you're done, get back to my ship and get back to your posts!"

"Yes, sir," they all said in unison.

Slow burning fuel, every last one of them. Banks left the soldiers to try to figure out their orders and made his way back across the docking tunnel to his own ship. He barely grunted at his men as they saluted him. He shoved a few of them out of his way as he approached his quarters.

Alone at last. Banks pulled the chair up to his desk and spit on

the kinetic sensor. How could you expect a boatload of cretins to keep a clean ship. He wiped the clear flat surface with his shirt sleeve and then stabbed the air above it with his outstretched hand. The cabin's HI came to life.

"Pilot on watch!" Banks waited a moment, drumming his fingers on the sensor surface.

"Yes, sir!"

That idiot Smythe or Smith or whatever his name was appeared in his field of vision in crisp military avatar form. But Banks knew better. The real Smith was a slovenly dimwit who should be sweeping up threads in a textile mill somewhere in the inner Koronis, not flying a spaceship. It was amazing what the Academy graduated these days.

"Prepare to undock," Banks commanded.

"Sir?"

"Prepare to undock the Jovian vessel," Banks repeated. This time he spoke more slowly, to give the poor man a chance to understand. Banks was a very considerate captain. "But do your teammates a favor and wait until they're back aboard."

"Yes, sir."

"When that's done, set a course to MilCom."

"To MilCom, sir? On Dactyl?"

"Do you know any other MilCom?" Banks snarled. Even a good captain loses patience sometimes.

"No, sir. It's just that I thought we were on deep patrol—"

"Smythe, the purpose of patrol is to find things. We found something. Mission accomplished. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now let's go home," Banks said, and closed the connection. He smiled as the man's face faded out. He liked watching that. Even if it was only an avatar.

Banks reached into his uniform's chest fold and brought out the permadoc again. It was the color of gold, but many times more valuable. He turned it over in his hands. It was round and small, less than half the size of his palm, as thin as fine foil and harder than diamonds. There was no mistaking the official UN seal on both sides of

it. It was no forgery. His DP had already verified the seals with Mil-Tel, Trask's military intelligence infrastructure. Its contents could only be determined with the high powered decoding equipment back at MilCom. But any permadoc with a UN seal was worth a trip back home. Especially if it really was what that weirdo Uncle Luke said it was. An agreement between Trask and the UN? Let this fall into the wrong hands and you could kiss the whole Trask Republic good bye.

Mama Banks's baby boy had been flirting pretty close to the open airlock this time. To think how he had mistreated an official United Nations agent! The guy wasn't exactly the hottest rod in the charging chamber, but good thing for Banks he was the understanding type. Hey, Banks hadn't been completely wrong about him. He really was a spy. Banks was only a little confused about whose side he was on.

Banks slipped the permadoc back into his chest pocket and glanced out his little porthole. It wasn't as big as the view window in that UN guy's suite, but he saw what he needed to see. They were separating from the *Orquidea*. She would go her own way and Banks would go his. Straight to MilCom and straight to a promotion for bringing in such a big find.

The captain reached down into the desk's bottom drawer. The gray plastic desk wasn't big, but it had enough room for the important stuff. He pulled out a bottle of four year old malt whisky, brewed in one of the foodstuff factories scattered throughout the Koronis dustband clouds. Glasses were for sissies. Banks took it straight from the bottle.

The future was bright. Only three more days with this slow witted crew, and they would be back on Dactyl. It had been a long two months. The captain stumbled to his bunk and dozed off, dreaming about his new future...

"Captain Banks," shouted the audiostream into his dreams. Smythe again. What now? Couldn't his crew go for two minutes without their captain to tell them what to do?

"Captain Banks!"

Banks valiantly forced his eyes open against his personal wear-



ness. After all, wasn't it his sworn duty as captain to help these poor creatures? He pushed himself up on one elbow and glanced toward his desk, where Smith's avatar hovered in midair. The desk clock glowed the time at him. A whole day had passed! Smythe must have gone off shift and then come back on again.

"What is it?" Barnes barked. At the same he was fumbling around for his bottle. Just to help him wake up.

"Exterior prodar readings are fuzzy," Smythe said. "I've never seen anything like it. They're distorted somehow. It's like we're surrounded by vapors."

That wasn't vapor! That was Jovian style stealth masking!

"You idiot! Those are mines! Get us out of —"

The explosion flared the mighty Trask patrol ship into uncountable pieces that scattered against more mines that made more explosions. But the noble Captain Banks no longer cared.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### Charles Dunn

"I was shot," Robin said. "Uncle Luke, I was shot!" His smile couldn't have been bigger.

"So?" Daphne said. "Maybe he didn't notice. He wasn't the only one."

Robin pranced around the narrow corridor, the gas giant on his tunic jumping up and down with him. His hands and feet just wouldn't stay still. Dunn half expected the slow representations of Jupiter's moons to be knocked out of orbit by Robin's dance. "Penny, I was shot!" Robin said.

"Stop calling me that. My name is Penelope."

"Pablo! Sarah! Look at me! I was shot!"

"Has anyone seen Rangor?" Sarah asked.

"I was shot!"

"Hey, damp out the noise, kid," Pablo said.

"Are you all right?" Penelope asked her brother.

"Let's get out of here," Pablo said. "I need to use the first aid kit." He was staring at his hand, bloody from rubbing his head where Captain Banks had slammed it against the wall.

"I can't wait to tell my father! My mother! My grandparents! All my friends! Everyone! I was shot!" Robin said.

"If he doesn't shut up, shoot him again," Daphne said.

"How nice for you," Dunn said to Robin. "You can tell your father all about it when you see him in a couple of days."

"I miss Eric," Sarah said.

"We all do," Dunn lied. "But it's better this way. Eric's grandparents will take good care of him." One down, how many more to go?

"Who are you?" Pablo and Penelope asked simultaneously. These were the same trusting teenagers who had enjoyed his *aikido* training just a few hours ago? Not any more.

"And don't tell us you're Uncle Luke," Penelope said.

"I never told you I was Uncle Luke," Dunn answered. "But you guys are not stupid. You can figure out for yourselves whether I want to help you or hurt you."

"Rangor!" Sarah shouted. She jumped up from her sitting position on the cold corridor floor and ran to greet the gangly synthegen.

Rangor was coming around the corner, his head hung low. He did not move as Sarah hugged him, her face pressed firmly into his brown tunic at Rangor's chest level.

"Rangor, thank you," Dunn said quickly.

Rangor turned toward Dunn, tears spilling from his eyes. "But I saw everything," the boy said. "I saw them hit you. I saw the blood on your mouth, and you fell down. They shot you and then Robin. And I saw them hit Pablo. They put restraints on everyone. I didn't do anything. I didn't help you."

"You did do something," Dunn said. "You followed orders. You did exactly what I told you to do. I told you to hide, and you hid."

"Yes," Rangor said. "I hid."

"Once again, thank you," Dunn said. "Thank you for being strong and obeying orders."

"Oh, Rangor, don't cry," Sarah said. She hugged him more tightly.

"You did the right thing," Penelope told Rangor. "Things would have been worse for us if the Trasks saw you."

"You probably could have taken them," Pablo said. "Probably you and . . . Uncle Luke could have killed all of them without getting out of breath. But their ship's DP had us in a tractor beam. It would have crushed us, and we would all be dead now."

"The important thing is that we're all still alive," Sarah said.

"I got shot!" Robin said happily.

"But they took Eric," Rangor said sorrowfully.

"He'll be OK," Sarah said. She stood back from Rangor and smiled. "He went to be with his family."

"His family will take care of him," Dunn explained. Synthegens didn't have families.

"Let's go," Pablo said. "I've got a ship to fly." He started moving toward the open freezer door.

"No, you don't," Penelope said, following him. "I'm going to get you checked out first, and cleaned up. Besides, your shift ended an hour ago."

"Take her then," Pablo said.

The group moved through the galley out onto the promenade. No one led the way, but they all moved toward the entrance hatch.

"The iris is closed," Penelope said.

"They really are gone," said Sarah. She stared at Dunn, her soft hazel eyes wide open in bewilderment.

"They won't be back," Dunn said reassuringly.

"But why?" Sarah asked. "Why did they leave so suddenly?"

"Go ahead, tell her," Daphne said.

"Yeah," Pablo said. He leaned forward against the wide view-glass. The Trask patrol boat was no longer visible. "What did you do to make them go?"

"Come on," Penelope said. "You can at least tell us that."

"Tell them you sacrificed your mission goal to save their snotted skins," Daphne said.

"I'm hungry," Robin said.

"I gave them back something they lost a long time ago," Dunn said.

"Lost?" Pablo said. "You mean you stole it from them?"

"No," Dunn said. "I didn't steal it from them."

"Oh, that was good," Daphne said. "Emphasis on 'from them.'"

"Then how did you get it?" Penelope asked.

"I found it," Dunn said.

"Then why didn't you give it to them earlier?" Penelope asked.

"It doesn't belong just to them, Penelope. It belongs to other people, too," Dunn said.

"So now the other people..." Penelope said.

"They won't get it back. At least not from me."

"But what was it?" Sarah asked.

"It's not important," Dunn answered. "The important thing is that we're all right." It was a dumb mission anyway. Who cared about a sixty-seven year old treaty that was never even honored?

"Can we eat now?" Robin said.

"Sarah's turn to set up the table," Pablo said.

"Come on, Robin," Sarah said. "You too, Rangor." All three disappeared into the Deck 3 galley entrance.

The twins stayed behind with Dunn.

"You still haven't answered our question," Pablo told Dunn.

"We still don't know who you are," Penelope said. She crossed her arms over her wavy blue tunic.

"The Trask captain found out more than he wanted to know," Dunn said. "That's why he left us alone. I don't want to do that to you two."

"He means he's afraid we'll talk," Pablo told his sister.

"Is that it?" Penelope asked.

"You won't talk because you only have speculation. Let's keep it that way," Dunn said.

"But why?" Penelope asked.

"Because it's safer for us if we do," Pablo said. "Don't you get it?"

"No," Penelope said, stomping her foot. The sound was muffled by the thick red carpet.

"Come on, Penelope," Pablo said. "Let's talk on the bridge."

The bridge was off limits to everyone but the twins.

"See you later... Uncle Luke," Penelope said.

"Do you need any help with that, Pablo?" Dunn asked.

"We can handle the diagnostics and first aid," Pablo said.

"But thanks anyway," Penelope said.

The twins disappeared through a sliding door in the inner wall. Dunn had never even noticed it.

"When we get back to Mars, I'm going to retire," Dunn told Daphne as he summoned the elevator. "I've had enough of this."

"You'll never retire," Daphne said.

"Why?" Dunn asked. The elevator arrived and he stepped in.

"Because you can't live without me," Daphne said.

If Dunn were lucky enough to live to retirement, Daphne would be flashed to null. It was the only way to guarantee that the confidential information she carried would not be compromised.

"Sure I can," Dunn told her. "You're nothing to me."

"Then why didn't you stay retired the last time?" Daphne asked. "You didn't even finish the exit interviews."

"You know why," Dunn said. "Ethan asked me to do this."

"You could have said no," Daphne said.

"I didn't expect it to turn out quite like this," Dunn said as the elevator door opened onto the observation bubble.

Dunn stepped out over the glowing circle of lights to see Rangor racing around the open area with Robin on his shoulders, while the little boy screamed with delight. He clung to Rangor's chin with one hand and flailed the air with the other. Their reflections kaleidoscoped off the curved viewing dome.

"Hey, Uncle Luke, look at me!" Robin called.

Sarah sat at one of the dining tables, but she wasn't watching the spectacle. A pink dessert bowl rested in front of her, prettily painted with little rose flowers and brimming over with chocolate pudding. Sarah's face and fingers were smudged with the dark brown treat. She smiled when she saw Dunn.

"Hi, Uncle Luke," Sarah giggled. She wiped her face with the back of her sleeve, smearing her emerald tunic and its dark outer trim. "Want some?"

They were a resilient bunch. Less than an hour ago they were unconscious or crying in terror. Now Dunn felt as if he had stumbled onto a child's birthday party.

"No, thank you, Sarah," Dunn said. "You kids have fun. I'll be in my room if anyone needs me."

Dunn summoned the elevator back.

"Now what?" Daphne said.

"Now nothing," Dunn said. "I'm going to watch a little Mset."

"You? Yeah, sure."

"I might even turn you off," Dunn said.

"I hear there's a first time for everything."

The room was flashing golden when Dunn entered.

"Aren't you going to get that?" Daphne asked.

"It's probably from Robin's father," Dunn said. He waved off the annoying light. "It can wait a few minutes."

Dunn sat in one of the living room's big chairs and relaxed as it sensed him and initiated its massage routines. He waved the suite's HI into existence and entered an address sequence.

"A message to Ethan," Daphne said. "How nice."

Dunn gave a brief narrative of his encounter with TID4836 and how he had traded the UN treaty permadoc for their lives. Since it was a Trask treaty, no harm was done by handing it over to the Trask military. His mission objective accomplished, Dunn would find a return flight to Mars. Dunn routed the message to his personal mailbox first, so that it could not be traced back to the *Orquidea*. From there he routed it to Ethan's DP.

"Now are you going to get your message?" Daphne asked.

Dunn streamed the waiting message into the center of the room. A surprisingly red haired man of average build and height materialized out of the golden light and oriented himself toward Dunn. The man wore a static triple tunic of dark brown luxosilk with gold and turquoise trim and deep folds across the chest. Very expensive, very formal, even for an avatar. Little Robin's father was a major player in the Ceres finance industry.

"This is Howard Woodhouse," said the avatar, "leaving a message for my son Robin and ... well, Uncle Luke. I'm aboard PanBelt flight 4I30 right now. You can call me here if you want. We just left Ceres Central. There is no direct flight to Transcendent. I'll have to change flights, but it shouldn't take long. I'll be in Transcendent by this time tomorrow. I'm sending you my hotel information in a substream. Please contact me as soon as possible. Robin, are you all right? I miss you. Mommy was very glad to hear you're OK. I'll see you tomorrow. Uncle Luke, you take good care of him. Good-bye for now."

"I am very glad you don't snore," Daphne said quietly.

It was a big ship, mostly empty, and the children could have any cabin they liked. Rangor and Sarah crept stealthily into the room, Rangor stretching out on the couch and Sarah silently heading for her bedroom. Dunn appreciated their efforts not to wake him.

"Hi, Uncle Luke," Robin said. "How's the sleeping?"

Dunn stumbled to his bed, leaving Robin to find his own place to sleep and come up with the answer to his own question.

The next day started off with a routine breakfast. There had been a lot of those over the past two weeks.

"We'll be stopping in Transcendent tomorrow," Dunn said, looking over the buffet table. Dark grainy rice waffles puffed up on a hot plate, draped in warm lemon syrup and walnuts. Next to it, a morning porridge of barley, rice and manna simmered, seasoned perhaps with cinnamon and some spices that Dunn did not recognize. A broad bright platter of garnished greens lay fully sliced and diced next to a loaf of lightly browned manna bread surrounded with jams and jellies. Two full juice jugs completed the collection. "How is the *Orquidea's* food supply? Do we need anything?"

"With this light load?" Penelope asked. "We've got enough food to last us all the way to the Hildas."

"Especially since tomorrow we're getting rid of the guy who eats most of it," Pablo said, looking at Robin.

"I wish I was going with you," Robin said, stuffing his mouth with the hot porridge. In his other hand he held a fat slice of toasted manna bread. "That's almost to the Inner Belt! I've never been out there."

"You saw your father's message," Dunn said quickly. "By now he's in Transcendent, waiting for you to arrive. He's eager to see you again."

"Yeah, I guess so," Robin said. He gasped, and stuffed the manna toast into his mouth.

With Robin gone, the rest of the trip should be a pleasure cruise. Unfortunately, the detour to drop him off had cost Dunn precious time. By now, Mars was headed around the other side of the sun from

their present location. It would take a few hundred days for the red planet to align with them. Earth was closer, lining up between their present position and the sun. Once the twins brought the *Orquidea* home to their parents, he and Sarah would slip out in the midst of their joyous reunion and find a passenger ship to take them to one of the Earth nations. From there they could find a ship to take them back to Mars. There was still the problem of what to do with Rangor. Dunn would have to give that some thought.

"We have provisions," Pablo said, "but the fuel cells are low."

"We need to recharge them, or swap them out," Penelope said.

"Can we do that at Transcendent?" Dunn asked.

"Yes," Penelope said. "The spaceport is small, but it's really touristy. They have everything."

"We've been there before," Pablo said.

"It was a few years ago," Penelope said. "We took a bunch of tourists on a charter trip to see the bowl. We got to see it too!"

"What bowl?" Robin asked.

"She means the museum," Pablo said.

"It's more than that," Penelope said. "It's an art gallery, too!"

"Boring," Pablo said.

"What kind of art?" Sarah wanted to know.

"Old stuff and modern stuff mixed together," Penelope said.

"Transcendent is one of the old mirror cities. It didn't start out on an asteroid like most cities in the Belt. A big half-sphere was built in space and then they put mirrors inside it so they could focus the light from the sun on other cities around here for a source of power."

"That was before modern microcrystal power generation," Pablo said. He smiled. "Penelope and I took the same tour."

"Back when the city was operational, it looked like a big bright bowl. That's how it got the name Transcendent, because it was so bright," Penelope said. "The people who lived there maintained the bowl and the mirrors and directed them to nearby cities."

"And if you didn't pay your bill, you were left in the dark," Pablo said.

"The people built a city on the back of the bowl," Penelope

said. "Lots of mirror cities did that. But when no one wanted focused solar energy any more, Transcendent made the bowl into a museum, and they use the mirror to make art. Other mirror cities are mostly abandoned now."

"Not all," Pablo said. "Pirates live on some of them."

"Not really pirates," Penelope said. "They're more like scavengers."

"Sometimes there isn't much difference," Pablo said.

"Uncle Luke, can we stop on Transcendent, please?" Sarah begged. "Can we visit the bowl and the museum?"

Dunn was in no hurry, but the twins might be. "It's not up to me. Ask the captain. Whichever one is on duty now."

"I'm sorry," Penelope said. She put her hand over Sarah's. "We can't. My parents are expecting us. We won't have time to see the museum."

For a moment, Dunn thought Sarah was going to cry. Her nose wrinkled up and her eyes got wet. Fortunately there were safety napkins close at hand. Then Sarah sighed and nodded. "You're right. I need to get to home, too."

"We will have to talk about your passage," Pablo said suddenly to Dunn.

"Pablo!" Penelope said.

"Fuel cells aren't cheap, and we are making a big detour to drop off Robin," Pablo said. "We wouldn't have been boarded by the Trasks if we had gone straight home like Mom and Dad wanted."

Dunn was glad they had been in communication with their parents.

"But that's not Uncle Luke's fault," Penelope said.

"He's not anyone's Uncle Luke," Pablo said.

True enough.

"You know what I mean," Penelope said.

"I paid you five thousand joves to deliver Eric and you never did it," Dunn pointed out.

"Yes, we did," the twins said simultaneously.

How could Dunn argue with that?

The money wasn't the issue. Pablo's attitude was. But he was a boy.

"Don't worry," Dunn said. "I'll cover it."

"What do you mean?" Penelope asked.

"How much could it cost to swap fuel cells?" Dunn asked.

"Depending on the dealer, anywhere from eight to ten thousand Ceres dollars," Pablo said.

"I'll cover it," Dunn said. "But I want the dealer's receipt downloaded to my DP." There was no need for the children to inflate their profit margins at his expense. "My DP will transmit her address to the *Orquidea*."

"Done," Daphne said.

"Uncle Luke," Penelope said with a slow smile. She nudged her twin brother with an elbow. "You said 'her address'. You have a female DP?"

Dunn would have to be more careful with these kids.

"Go ahead," Daphne said silently. "Tell her all about me."

"What's her name?" Sarah asked.

"She's just a DP," Dunn said.

"Charlie, that hurts," Daphne whined.

"What's a DP?" Rangor asked.

"A Digital Person," Sarah said. "Sometimes they put them in your head."

"Do you have one?" Rangor asked.

"No, silly," Sarah said. "They don't fit into kids' heads."

"What does your DP look like?" Robin asked.

"She looks like nanochips and chemsistors, like any other endoware DP." Dunn didn't mean to snap the words.

"Oh, is that what you think?" Daphne asked.

"She's probably some top secret superspy DP," Pablo said.

"Why yes," Daphne said. "In fact I'm a combat grade DP-10 with advanced encryption and decryption capabilities, wide spectrum electromagnetic detection and jamming capacity, and affective algorithms compiled by the UN's leading plot engineers, situation simulators, and character designers."

"She's just a DP," Dunn said.

"And I'm charming, too," Daphne said. "And cute."

"Pablo thinks you're something out of a Mark Sadoff action streamie," Penelope said.

Pablo reddened. "I do not!"

"So your DP must be something really special," Penelope said.

"Why, thank you," Daphne said.

"Do the fuel cells have enough charge to make it to Transcendent?" Dunn asked.

"We'll make it there," Pablo said, "but we won't get much farther."

"Then we'll recharge or swap or whatever you want to do," Dunn said. "Make the arrangements. What's our arrival time?"

"The Trasks slowed us down," Penelope said.

"Not that much," Pablo said.

"Tomorrow," Penelope said. "Probably mid-afternoon."

At least there was one less child now. And after Transcendent, there would be even one less. That was something to look forward to.

"Is everyone through with breakfast? I can help clean up," Sarah said.

"Sure," the twins said.

Dunn helped as well. It didn't take long. They left the observation deck and galley in a spotless state.

"Can we play some music?" Sarah asked.

"I can stream something up here," Penelope said. "What do you want to hear?"

The *Orquidea* was passing through a Kirkwood gap now, one of the wide stretches of space that separated the asteroid belt's Hirayama families. There was little to slow them down. They would make good time.

"Splash," Sarah said.

"Yuck," Robin said.

Dunn left Sarah and Penelope teaching Rangor how to dance to semi-rhythmic nerve bending noise against the wide starry view on



the observation deck. Robin was making fun of them and Pablo had vanished, perhaps to the flight deck to make arrangements for fuel cell replenishment. No one seemed in the mood for *aikido* today. Dunn returned to his cabin and found another message from Robin's father. The man was offering money for the safe return of his son.

"Take it," Daphne said.

"Very funny," Dunn said. "I should be paying him to take the little dirt spurt off my hands."

Dunn holod up a map of Transcendent and studied the shiny concave city. The residents liked to show off their art on the concave mirror itself. The mirror was made up of millions of tiny reflective panels that could be individually angled around to capture subtle shades of darkness. The panels could also be mechanically swapped out for panels of different colors. Famous works of art could be duplicated in stunning detail and reflected millions of kilometers out into space. Many original works were also displayed, and of course typical holiday themes like Pioneer Day and Swanson's Landing were depicted on their traditional dates.

Robin's father was staying at the Transcendent Sheraton. It wasn't far from the spaceport. Dunn composed a message for Howard Woodhouse, suggesting they meet in the hotel lobby tomorrow. He would bring Robin, and that would be that. This was not a financial transaction, he was glad to help, etc. Dunn routed the message to the hotel DP with Woodhouse's ID codes. The system would find him.

"Now what?" Daphne said.

"Time to cruise the newsstreams," Dunn said. "I want to see what ONN is reporting about Trask movements."

"The Outer News Network has not reported anything about our encounter with Banks," Daphne said. "Is that what you're looking for?"

"I want to see for myself," Dunn said.

"Anything else you want to know?" Daphne asked.

"Lots," Dunn said. He tuned the Mset to ONN and examined the various substreams. Trask fighter ships had been seen in the area but they wouldn't be stupid enough to attack Ceres. The Ceres

Nation's automatic defense systems were the best in the entire solar system.

"Have you picked up any Trask comm traffic?" Dunn asked Daphne.

"Of course," Daphne said. "The reception is good out here."

"Are you going to make me ask?" Dunn said.

"If it's the only way I can get you to talk to me. The Trasks don't talk about Ceres. They are focused on the Jovian Alliance."

"Any chance that could be code?"

"Sure, but that's low probability."

"So where are the Jovians?" Dunn asked.

"What's the matter, don't you trust ONN?"

"Just tell me what you know."

"Their nice organized formation has been shattered," Daphne said. "The Trasks are pounding them apart, ripping them to pieces, shutting them down and turning them inside out."

"Is that what the Trasks are saying?"

"Yes."

"All right, now where are they really?"

"You better watch ONN," Daphne said.

Dunn noted that Mars was pulling back on manna shipments to the Outer System due to trade route uncertainties. Manna distributors had always favored the Inner System anyway. Dropping cargo sunward was a sure way to save on transportation costs. It was always cheaper to go with the sun's gravitational pull than to fight against it.

The next two days were uneventful, with no complaints from Dunn. The kids were just starting to get on each other's nerves again when Transcendent swung into full view. Dunn noticed it from his suite but he didn't pay much attention. He was running through an isometric exercise routine when the amber comm light flashed. It was a call from the observation deck.

"Uncle Luke!" Sarah gasped. The little girl was red faced with excitement. "You gotta come see this! Oh, Uncle Luke!"

Penelope was out of visual but she could be heard screaming and laughing with delight.

What could be getting these kids so worked up? The people of Transcendent must have created quite a picture on their bright canvas of solar reflection and multishaded mirrors. To reach the hearts of these wayward children, the work of art must be new, dazzling, bold, and tightly executed with fine angle controls and precise mirror coloring. Dunn was impressed by the creativity without even seeing the work of art.

He gestured the suite door open and ran to the closest elevator. It couldn't arrive fast enough. The trip to the observation deck took uncharacteristically long. Dunn burst through the opening doorway, already smiling in anticipation. Sarah and Penelope were still laughing, and he followed their gaze —

"Look, Uncle Luke!" Sarah said. "It's the Comet Droppings!"

Three gangly teenagers blazed across the sky, their giant images shot millions of kilometers out into space. They clutched wildly colored instruments of dubious musicality.

"Ned Trynk!" Penelope squealed stupidly. "Ned Trynk!"

The vast array of sun brightened colors and mechanical precision that had once provided life sustaining power to a multitude of small Belter communities was now advertising a splash concert.

"And Tom Zyst and Robbie Dyle!" Sarah said.

"I can't believe it," Penelope said. "I didn't know they were on tour out here!"

"Oh, Uncle Luke," Sarah said. "We've got to stay, just one night."

Dunn didn't say anything. Pablo was looking away and Rangor was just looking confused. Somebody had to talk some sense into these girls, but Dunn knew it wasn't going to be him.

Dunn summoned the elevator back. He had an exercise routine to resume. As the doors slid shut, Robin said, "My father will take me to the concert if I ask. I'll be able to tell you all about it." Dunn had a brief opportunity to admire Penelope's colorful vocabulary before the elevator took him away.

The next day the *Orquidea* dropped neatly into Transcendent's little spaceport and locked into a maintenance berth. Dunn let the twins take care of the details.

"Come on, Robin," Dunn said. Pablo had opened the entrance hatch on his way out to meet the maintenance crew. Dunn stepped outside under the artificially blue sky and started down the ramp. He knew that unseen radiations were cleansing him of any infectious agents he might have brought with him.

Sarah's cheeks streaked with tears. "Oh, Robin," she said, hugging Robin tightly. "Good-bye."

"You're getting me wet," Robin complained.

"I'm sorry," Sarah said. "I'll miss you."

"Yeah. I'm not really interested in that stupid concert anyway," Robin said.

"Good-bye, Robin," Penelope said. She offered her hand. Robin shook it, limply. "Thank you for choosing the *Orquidea*." She giggled. "Pablo thanks you, too."

"Good-bye," Robin said. "Come on, Uncle Luke."

Dunn was already at the slidewalk junction. He waited a moment while Robin found his way down the gray curves of the rippled rampway.

"I know the way to the hotel," Daphne said. "I downloaded lots of public files. I know all the golden things to do in this place. I can walk with you and point out the sights. Let me go visual and I'll show you a great time!"

"I studied the map," Dunn said. "We'll take a ground taxi." Transcendent's small size and concave shape made it unsuitable for flyers. The edge of the sky was just too close.

"Ohhh, a taxi," Daphne said. "Why didn't you say so."

"Robin, let's go!" Dunn shouted. The boy had stopped to throw punches at a floating directional hologram. It advertised a manna-burger stand not far from their present location, and offered to show them the way. Manntastic Manna was part of a large chain. The smell was tempting. Maybe on the way back...

"Here I am, Uncle Luke," Robin said. He bounced down the rest of the ramp. "Where to?"

"Jump on this slidewalk and stay close to me. Robin! Stay close to me. Start walking. Can you keep up?"

"Sure, Uncle Luke!"

"All right. Let's pass these guys."

The slidewalk took them past the shining clean maintenance area with its undulating cables and specialized tools that walked, crawled, and rolled up to and around the *Orquidea*. Inevitably, the slidewalk subjected them to a maze of attractive tourist shops with many opportunities to spend money. Most of them even had human attendants, with bright jewelry and brighter smiles. Dunn had no use for souvenir mirrors, no matter how pretty they were.

"Uncle Luke —"

Neither did Robin. "Eyes front. You can ask your father when you see him."

Tourist groups of all nationalities mingled in the shops. They included the idle rich, who lived on their cruisers and spent their lives traveling from port to port according to their whims. Maybe they were Jovian jackpot winners or Martian manna heirs.

"Hey, look!"

"Robin. Leave it alone."

"But I just want to pet it!"

"It's not yours. If you want a pink lizard, ask your father."

They emerged from the maze of displays onto Refraction Avenue, a curved metal road that ran all the way around the dome. The road was spotted with variable sized craft that hovered centimeters off the surface. Among them were unoccupied taxis looking for riders. Dunn pointed to one of the larger yellow vehicles, and it quietly pulled up beside him.

"Good afternoon, sir," the taxi's DP said. The door slid open to reveal a soft roomy interior. "Thank you for choosing Transcendent Taxi."

"Get in, Robin."

Robin was sticking his tongue out at another child across the street. The other little boy's parents stared at Dunn with undisguised indignation.

"The Sheraton," Dunn told the taxi's DP. "Optimized route and speed." Dunn did not want a tour of the Mirror Museum or whatever it was they called the main attraction around here.

"Yes, sir," said the taxi. The door slid shut and the elegantly curved vehicle slid silently back into traffic.

"Are we there yet?" Robin asked.

Dunn could only hope so. It was not far to the hotel, but Robin's fidgeting made it seem longer. Dunn studied a multicolored shopping center as they passed it. It consisted of a giant dome, splattered with irregular glass shapes of every imaginable hue. With Robin at his side, the building looked like a nightmare. He only wanted to get around it to the hotel on the other side. The building could have been beautiful. It could have been a visual delight to explore. If Mariana were with him. He would never know.

The taxi hovered into the hotel drop off space and Dunn invoked a dark HI to transfer payment.

"Thank you for choosing Transcendent Taxi," the DP said as Dunn and Robin exited the vehicle onto the slow moving slidewalk into the hotel. A few flowers and other plants lined both sides of the slidewalk. They were carried through a short tunnel of mirrors into the lobby.

"Robin!"

The red haired man with whom Dunn had only exchanged messages stepped forward to greet his son. He picked him up and hugged him. "Robin, are you OK?"

"Please, Dad," Robin said. "Could you put me down?"

"Oh — sorry." He set Robin onto the reflective lobby floor. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your friend?"

"You know who that is," Robin said. "You saw him in the messages. That's Uncle Luke!"

"Of course," Robin's father said. He held out his hand. "Howard Woodhouse."

Dunn took the hand. It was not a bad handshake. "Nice to meet you."

"Let me invite you to dinner," Woodhouse said.

"I really don't have the time," Dunn said.

"Come on, Uncle Luke," Robin said. "Look at this place! They probably have great desserts!"

"I'd like to talk to you," Woodhouse said. "Do you have time for that?"

"Mr. Woodhouse. Your son is fine. Isn't that the most important thing?"

"Of course, but I want to know what he's been up to for the past two weeks."

"I got shot!" Robin said.

"You what?" Woodhouse's jaw dropped open and stayed there.

"I'm sure he'll tell you all about it," Dunn said. "Good-bye, Robin."

"Uncle Luke," Robin said. "You're leaving?" The boy's lower lip trembled.

"Good-bye, Robin," Dunn repeated softly. He turned and stepped onto the exiting slidewalk.

"Uncle Luke!" Robin bawled.

The slidewalk was not moving fast enough. Dunn pushed forward through a group of teenagers. They were babbling about front row seats in the Comet Droppings concert that evening.

"I hear they're staying right in this hotel!" one of the boys said.

"Really?" said a girl.

"I heard they have the whole penthouse floor to themselves," said another girl.

Dunn pushed through the group, but he could not outrun Robin's frantic screaming.

"Uncle Luke!"

Robin was still crying.

"Get me a taxi," Dunn told Daphne.

"Asking for my help?" Daphne said. "You must really be in a hurry."

"Where's my taxi?" Dunn said.

A yellow half dome pulled up in front of Dunn.

"It's not first class," Daphne said. "I hope you don't mind."

Dunn pushed the door out of his way and dived in. The little car immediately darted into traffic, back toward the group of shops that led to the maintenance docks.

"Glad we got rid of the little troublemaker," Daphne said.

Dunn did not answer, and he did not stop at Manntastic Manna.

The little robots were still at work on the *Orquidea's* hull. Had these kids ordered the deluxe job with his money? There was such a thing as abuse. Dunn marched up the ramp to the entrance hatch. It was closed, but it opened when the *Orquidea's* DP saw him. It closed behind him when he entered.

"Where is everybody?" Daphne asked.

A tiny sphere materialized in front of Dunn. It swiftly expanded from ceiling to floor.

"Hi Uncle Luke." It was Sarah. Her makeup was flushed and fresh, and her blonde hair neatly trimmed. She had changed into a surreal garment with pastel lacework, shimmering transparencies, and smooth splotchy colors that flowed with her breathing and body heat.

"Don't you wish you were seventy years younger," Daphne said.

"They grow up so fast these days," Dunn said.

"Penelope is going to ask the *Orquidea's* DP to show you this when you get back," Sarah continued. "We all talked about it and we decided to go to the Comet Droppings concert after all. Bye! Don't wait up for us!"

The sphere shrunk to the size of a tiny dot and then disappeared.

"Well, how about that," Daphne said. "They just abandoned you."

"They didn't have time to go to a museum," Dunn said, "but they managed to fit the Comet Droppings into their schedule."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

## Ned Trynk

He was a dark spot in the center of the open amphitheater. Around him and above him, a labyrinth of light streaked brightness down on the gathering multitudes. A waggy dank beat filled the short spaces between people. They entered like a low gravity avalanche, erratically winding their way down to their seats, and slowly piling up on top of each other. He watched from the sphere of darkness with his fellow darkened gods, one on each side of him, each poised to reign from his own circular platform.

It was time. The light faded and the sound was sucked away with it. The ceaseless murmuring and the scattered screams toppled helplessly into the fresh darkness. And suddenly light grew again, reborn at the center of the amphitheatre. The shifting glimmerings caressed him and became him, but the face was not his. His platform ignited a rainbow beneath him and his face became the face of George Williams, president of the Ceres Nation. He rose like a bright star in the sky, and his face became the face of Mark Sadoff, action streamie deity. It was the face of Vasily Krychek, Outer News Network correspondent. It was the face of Rick Shim, heavyball hall of famer. The face of a Ceres banker, a Ganymede farmer, a Roth politician, a Dreschler corporate lawyer and a Trask refugee. The faces flashed one after the other and he sang.

Of all the faces I show to you  
Is there none that you admire?  
For all the faces I present to you  
Are born of your inspire

Though I put on a face for you  
 Do not think me a liar  
 For the reason I wear a face for you  
 Is to shield you from the fire.

A heatless flared rushed up from below him and exploded out to engulf everyone in the audience. It crackled and popped and rumbled, tickling their ears and teasing their eyes as it waved and undulated and shimmered. The fire gasped and burned itself out, and left only the face of Ned Trynk for all to see.

The fans screamed and cried and shuddered. Tom Zyst and Robbie Dyle rose on either side of him, Tom bending his multiboards and Robbie meshing his kinetar. A beautiful sound spilled out from them to nourish the uplifted faces of their audience.

The Comet Droppings discharged delight on the ears of all as Ned sang and danced and tweaked his kinetar on his roaming platform and the others played and accompanied him. The amphitheatre DP assessed each audience area for applause, dance movement, and vocal intensity and rated each section according to its audience response algorithms. The Digital Person directed their Z platforms into areas of weakest reaction, driving up the audience response quotient and keeping the entire gathering thrilled and happy. The Comet Droppings crisscrossed over the crowd like birds looking for a place to nest, eliciting applause everywhere they went. The amphitheatre DP sent them upside down and sideways and spinning through holographic representations of their music in near miss stunts that left the audience gasping for more. The embedded inertial dampers in the Z platforms ensured that the Comet Droppings felt no disorientation. They kept the crowd happy, cheering, screaming, for hours.

When it was over, the three sweaty gods descended from the heavens through the bottom of the center of the amphitheatre and stepped off their Z platforms. Their mothers wiped their brows and nudged them toward their dressing rooms, with instructions to shower and change their clothes.

“Yes, there is an aftershow party, Ned,” said Mom, “but you’re

not going. I warned you there would be consequences if you didn’t finish your homework on time.”

Like Ned really wanted to go to a party with his mom anyway.

Back in his penthouse suite, Ned fell exhausted onto the bed. The sheets thoughtfully adjusted themselves around him. He closed his eyes and enjoyed some moments of blackness but suddenly the morning newsstream blasted him right out of his rightful relaxation. Was the hotel on a malfunction? He was a hard working man and he deserved his rest. He was truly depleted from last night’s concert, and needed his downtime to prepare for tonight’s shiny repeat of the exhausting ordeal.

So what was all this news stuff about? The sheets were too warm and soft to push away right now, but if he pushed the gravity wall back, he might be able to force his eyes open.

Somehow a swarm of Trask fighters had entered into his hotel room. They were gray and ugly with big bad hellbolt carriages that could probably destroy anything in the asteroid belt, but at least they were quiet. Not like that loudmouth Peter Peters, the local Outer News Network correspondent. Peter Peters was floating in space, babbling excitedly about something. The guy really needed to do something about his hair. It waved around his head like something a pink lizard would love to mate with. If Ned’s stylist Diana ever created an avatar like that for him, Ned would smash Robby’s kinetar over her head. Well, maybe not. Diana would probably tell his mother. Maybe Ned would get one of his bodyguards to do it.

So what was Peter Peters’s problem today? Ned’s ears gradually adjusted to the noise.

“Once again, you are looking at live streamage from ONN’s network of observation and relay stations scattered throughout the most populated sections of the Main Belt to bring you the latest updates on what is happening in the solar system we all live in...”

Cut the commercial, Petey. Just say ONN spy satellites subsidized by an oppressive government.

“Three squadrons of Trask fighter ships have been spotted assembling at different locations in the unclaimed space just beyond the



Ceres Nation's far clockwise border. We can only speculate on what they are doing there. Why are they so close to the Ceres Nation? Are they preparing for an assault? What would be the target? What would be the reason? Trask government spokespersons have not returned our calls..."

"Hotel!" Ned shouted. "Turn that dented thing off!"

"Yes, Mr. Trynk," said the boringly neutral voice of the hotel DP. Ned had his mother to thank for the genderless intonation. Ned couldn't wait until he was eighteen. Then he would choose the sexiest voice on the menu for all his hotel rooms, and Mom couldn't do anything about it.

The Mset died a quiet death and the Trask fighters melted away, along with Peter Peters and his hideous golden tunic with the dark starry 3D tie drawn on the front of it. Ned contemplated getting some more sleep.

"Hotel!" Ned yelled. He didn't really have to yell, but once in a while he liked to pretend that he was the boss. "What time is it?"

"The time is 0436, Ned," said the hotel.

What? He just went to bed two hours ago!

"Oh, Hotel..." Ned said. "Why did you wake me up so early? And I told you, I'm supposed to wake up with music, not newsstreamage." And especially not newsstreamage of some stupid war that would never touch him. He was a citizen of Ceres Nation. Everyone knew that Ceres always remained neutral in any conflict, because nobody wanted to boil the bankers' bubbles.

"Your mother requested the newsstreamage, Ned."

"Thank you, Hotel," Ned said calmly. How could he be mad at such a boring voice? He would fight with Mom again in morning. "Good night, Hotel."

The lights dimmed and Ned rolled over again, ready for another foray into dreamland. That was the only place he ever got any peace in his life. Everything else was just rehearsals, recordings, and screaming audiences. He loved them, but they hurt his ears. He needed quiet time and he needed it now.

Knock knock.

Now what?

Ned's bedroom door slid open.

"Ned!"

It was Mom. Queen Nuisance herself. Easily identifiable by voice alone. No need to roll over and view the pudgy fat face.

"Ned, did you see the Mset?"

"Mom, you're the one always telling me to get enough rest so I won't be so tired the next day."

"Ned, get up. Now."

Ned opened one eye to look at her. He hardly recognized her without her face polish and lip liner. And what was she wearing? A striped street tunic! Alternating blue and red. When the last time he had seen his mother in anything less than full formal dress?

"Mom! We have another show tomorrow! Or today. Whenever. I turned off that stupid newsstream."

"Now, Ned!" Several loose strands of brown hair fell across the round face. Very untidy. Very unMomlike.

"Mom!"

"Stacey. Terrance. Get in here. Get him out of bed!"

"What? Hey! You guys are supposed to be my bodyguards. You're supposed to protect me!"

"We are protecting you," Stacey said, her big blue eyes dazzlingly close, her breath near enough for Ned to feel its warmth on his face.

"He's almost naked!" skinny Terrance exclaimed. What did the little man expect? He was invading Ned's bedroom, for sparkle's sake.

"Put this on him," Mom said. What was she doing? Ned couldn't get a clear view of what Mom was up to. Stacey's big muscular body was blocking the way. It looked like Mom was carrying something over her arm. Something ugly.

"Give that to me," Stacey said. She grabbed the silver and gold plaid tunic out of Mom's hand. The garment had a mottled brown undercoloring. It was ordinary street clothes! Not really his style, and not really by a company that could afford his endorsement fees.

"I'm not wearing that rag," Ned said. What if a CrystalClothes rep saw him in that? He would probably get sued for breach of contract.

"Yes, you are," Stacey said. She yanked him upright in the bed and pushed the top down over his head.

"Hey, easy on the hair," Ned said, brushing back the brown locks with his hands. Bad enough he had to wear last year's discount tunic.

"We brought you some different hair," Terrance said. He produced a wig from somewhere. "Black looks good on you."

"I'm going out? All right!" Chances like this didn't come very often. Ned took the wig from Terrance and let it settle onto his head. It vacuumed his curly brown hair underneath it. Ned looked in the mirror, and saw a gangly teen with straight black hair.

"Hold still," Mom said. "I have a pair of eyebrows here, too." She let them loose and they crawled onto his face, concentrating themselves exactly in the right places.

"What about Tom and Robbie?" Ned asked. The three of them together were bound to be recognized and mobbed, but at this early hour they might get away with it.

"Them too," Mom said. "They're getting ready now."

"It's starting," Terrance said. He was standing at the window, staring down at the street. It was a long way down to Refraction Avenue from the penthouse.

"What's starting?" Ned asked. What was the little man looking at down there?

"Hotel, turn the Mset back on, same newsstream." Mom glowered at Ned. "And this time, pay attention."

Ugly Peter Peters appeared in Ned's bedroom once again. Fierce looking Trask fighters flashed past the announcer, hellbolt carriages lit with crimson threat, headed for a bright curved speck in the sky — wait a minute, was that Transcendent?

"Mom..." Ned said, sudden fear choking his throat.

"I love you, Ned," Mom said. "I always will."

"It appears that these Trask fighters are just half an hour away

from Transcendent!" Peters cried. "A general evacuation is being ordered!"

"Mom, is this for real?" Ned said.

"Get up," Mom said.

"Everyone please stay calm!" Peters shouted wildly. "Lifeboats are being brought on line now. Head for the outer ring!" A see through diagram of Transcendent appeared near Peters's right hand and he gestured along the city's circumference. "The widest part of the city is at ground level, here. Lifeboats are housed in this ring so that they are accessible from virtually any point in the city. Head for the part of the outer ring closest to you. There are still some taxis available. All fees are waved. Peacemen are standing by the outer ring entrances to guide you to the lifeboats. Only bring as much as you can carry. Priority is being given to children, anyone under the age of eighteen." The diagram substreamed into a corner and the Trask fighters came to the forefront again. "The Trask government has not responded to our queries, but Ceres is taking this as a threat. A general evacuation has been ordered. You are ordered to leave now!"

"Mom, are you ready? Wait, where are my shoes? Where are we going?"

"Step into these," Stacey said.

The warm brown boots hugged Ned's feet as he slipped into them. "I'm ready!"

"Then let's go," Stacey said.

They rushed out of Ned's bedroom and through the suite's large lounge area. The door to the hallway slid open as they approached. Terrance must be talking to the hotel through the DP thing in his head. They passed into the penthouse floor lobby. The elevator door opened up before them.

"Hey! What about Tom and Robbie?" Ned asked.

"Don't know," Mom said. She pushed him onto the elevator. Ned was surprised; he didn't know she was so strong. "We can't wait for them." The elevator door closed. "Or maybe they went on ahead." The penthouse had its own elevator; Terrance sent it straight down to the parking area. "We really don't have time to find out."

The limo was pulled up to the elevator exit when they got there. The four of them piled into the long silver oval and fell into their seats, facing each other. The car launched forward as the outer doors were still sliding shut.

"What a mess," Stacey said.

It was true. Traffic was jammed with shiny cars of all shapes and colors as far as Ned could see. All over people were pulling back roofs and standing up and yelling at each other in useless efforts to speed up traffic.

"Too many DPs doing their own thing," Terrance complained. "Transcendent doesn't have centralized traffic control, like Ceres." Terrance was a big city boy and would never let you forget it. "They should make it mandatory everywhere."

"Could somebody please turn on a newsstream?" Ned complained. His neck hurt from twisting his head toward the sky to check for Trask approach.

The adults looked surprised.

"Sorry," Stacey said. "We were all watching it internally..."

Adults and their endoware. Another couple of years and Ned would have his own. If he lived past today.

Somebody was talking to the car, because the interior suddenly lit up with Peter Peters's plump figure surrounded by Trask fighters on their way to Transcendent.

"Our analysts have confirmed that the three Trask fighter ship squadrons are pursuing acceleration vectors that will converge them on the same point the city of Transcendent will occupy in approximately twenty minutes. By now you should be well on your way to the evacuation points on the city's rim."

"I hate cities that don't use flyers!" Terrence grumbled.

A pudgy little man with a hairless face appeared alongside the announcer's avatar. The bright white lettering that streamed around the ONN logo at his side identified him as Dr. Adil Najam, professor of Military Intelligence at Ceres University.

"Ceres University's Dr. Adil Najam, a foremost Trask scholar, joins us with a fifty-six second delay," Peters said.

"Each Trask squadron consists of six Trask fighters," the professor said. "These are Mark III Dragons fully loaded with hellbolt and rockbusting capacities. Each one flies a skeleton crew of from five to seven soldiers. They are headed directly to Transcendent and they are not an occupation force. Frankly, I don't think the Trasks could afford an occupation force at this point. The Trasks are..."

Dr. Najam faded away. Ned was sure the good doctor was on the edge of his seat. And a comfortable seat it would be, in his nice cozy office on Ceres, nearly a full light minute away from the Trask nightmare he so coolly described.

"General Frank Jolivet, the Ceres Security Force official in charge of security for this sector, now joins us with a fifty-six second delay. He is responding to questions prepared just a few minutes earlier."

Through the miracle of modern stream composity, it looked like Jolivet and Peters were having a conversation together.

"General Jolivet," said the Peters avatar, "I'm sure many of our viewers are wondering about the Ceres Nation's automatic defense network. Wasn't it put in place at huge taxpayer expense just a few years ago?"

"Not such a huge expense when you consider what you bought," the general said. His chest was lined with medals and ribbons, so Ned guessed the guy was important. "The Perimeter Security System, or PSS, was designed to protect Ceres's most sensitive military and political targets. It consists of ten weapons platforms, strategically located around the Ceres nation, with long distance prodar and threat assessment, rapid fire laser weapons, and rockbuster missiles equipped with a constantly updated catalog of enemy vehicle signatures for targeting and homing purposes."

"General Jolivet," said the Peters avatar, "how will the Perimeter Security System be used in the current impending Trask attack on Transcendent?"

The general hesitated. Light lag or personal doubts? "We cannot use the PSS in the present scenario. The Trasks are using Transcendent as a shield against the PSS, putting the city between the nearest

PSS station and their own line of attack. At their current attack angle, we risk hitting the city of Transcendent itself."

The general faded away to wherever great military minds go when their expensive, carefully planned oversights are about to cost thousands of civilian lives.

"Well, that leaves us with our local Transcendent Peace Force. No one in the Peace Forces is available for interviews right now. As you can see in these streams from our cameras around town, our local peacemen have been deployed to direct you to the lifeboats. Ceres Convention rules bar the use of synthecons in military actions, but I don't think anyone cares about that right now. It doesn't matter anyway, because the peacemen have been assigned to a rescue function, specifically to rescue you from the impending attack. Once again, here is a diagram of Transcendent..."

Peters went on to repeat his earlier escape route directions.

"Remember, only bring as much as you can carry. The children are being rescued first; adults will be allowed to fill the lifeboats that leave after the children have all boarded. The lifeboats don't have much range, but they have about two days' worth of air and food. There is already talk of rescue efforts by the Red Rock and the Belt Charity League, but the Ceres Security Force is ordering them both to wait for an armed escort."

"Mom! Children first! What does that mean?" Ned exclaimed.

"Terrence!" Mom said. "Look!" Cars ahead were stopping, spilling their passengers out onto the gray metal road. Peacemen were assisting the children, and restraining the adults when necessary. "Just pull over."

"Here is a look at the lifeboat docks," Peter Peters exclaimed. "Look at this chaos! Children are fighting to evacuate. Adults are fighting to evacuate. Adults are fighting for their children and even fighting their own children who won't leave without them! There has never been anything like this on Transcendent! Children are being trampled and the peacemen are overwhelmed!" Ned turned away from the gore. He did not care for the sight of blood. "And the Trasks will be here in less than ten minutes!" Ned turned back in time for another stream of the Trask fighters.

The car slid to a smooth stop. "Come on, Mom!" Ned said

"Get out, Ned," Mom said. "Be strong."

"You have to come, too!" Ned said.

"You want me to take the place of one of those children?" Tears leaked down Mom's cheeks. "All your practice and glamour, Ned. Those children adore you. I won't take that away from you or them by fighting them over a place on a lifeboat."

"But it all comes from you, Mom. All those classes you sent me to, and all the practice, and your encouragement..." Not nagging, Ned realized. Encouraging. Supporting. "I can't do it without you." Good thing no one recognized him, the way he was blubbering.

"I love you, Ned," Mom said. "I'll be along soon. Stacey, Terrance, go with him. Make sure he gets aboard. After that... Do whatever feels right."

Stacey and Terrance were already out of the car, one on each side of Ned.

"There can't be that many children in this little town," Terrance said. "Who would want to grow up in this dump?"

"He means there will be a free lifeboat soon enough," Stacey said to Mom. "We'll put the dirt spurt on a lifeboat now and accompany you aboard the next one. It won't be long."

One of the peacemen was working the line of parked cars at the side of Refraction Avenue.

"Come with me," the peaceman said to Ned. He was calm, and showed no concern for his personal safety. "I'm rounding up the minors now."

"I'm not a minor!" Ned protested.

"He's just sixteen years old, officer," Mom said.

"Come with me, young man," the peaceman said. "The lifeboats are leaving."

"We're with him," Terrance said. "We'll help you get him aboard a lifeboat."

The peaceman shook his head. "You'll wait here. If there's room, I'll come back for you."

"We're going with him whether you like it or not," Stacey said,

steadying her stance to slam the peaceman out of the way with a full body blow. Those old heavyball habits die hard, Ned thought.

But the peaceman moved just a few centimeters as Stacey approached, and launched a leg to trip her. Stacey ended up on the ground, but she rolled up and out of it and came around for another lunge.

"Stop!" Mom said. Ned was astonished to see his mother cry openly. "Stop, Stacey."

Stacey rubbed her shoulder. She looked sullenly at Mom.

"Please, Peaceman," Mom said. "Please, take good care of him."

The peaceman nodded and gripped Ned by the elbow.

"But what about you —" Ned started, but Mom got out of the car and pushed Ned away.

"Go! Go now! Ned, please!" Mom was crying, and Ned could not stand up to that. He grabbed her and kissed her.

"I'll see you in just a few hours," Ned said.

"Yes," Mom said. "Just a few hours."

Ned let the peaceman guide him away from the car. He did not notice the other teenagers in the crowd, and they did not notice him.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### Charles Dunn

Dunn rose from his bed and gazed out of the scenic window. Cold bright stars stared back at him against a hollow perpetual night. They were in space again. Transcendent and its famous reflective artwork must be many hours behind them. The twins had probably released the ship from its berth upon their return from the concert.

The time was not early but it wasn't late either. Dunn slowly set a fine breakfast table, hoping the children would join him by the time he was done. There was still no sign of them, so he ate alone. He was clearing it away when Sarah and Rangor stepped off the elevator.

"How was the concert?" Dunn asked. "Did Rangor go too?"

"Yes," Rangor said. "I wore a hat." The synthegeen still wore his static brown tunic. Dunn wondered if he had worn it last night. Rangor stared right past Dunn to the observation window.

"Wow!" Sarah said. She wore rippling Comet Droppings dynogarbs that she must have bought at the concert. Her eyes were bloodshot. Dunn shouldn't have let her stay out so late. But a quick smile lit up her features. "Look out there!" She pointed aft. "Transcendent is so beautiful!"

"Is that some new art?" Rangor asked Sarah.

It must be quite a show to be visible at this distance. Dunn turned to take a look.

"It's really pretty, don't you think?" Sarah said. She moved closer to the window. "Uncle Luke, can you call Penelope and Pablo? I want them to see it, too."

"Daphne, that's..." Dunn said internally.

"I know," Daphne said. "Those Trask fighters talk too much."

People need their sleep." Daphne opened the commstream to the twins' quarters. "You want to talk to them?"

The twins answered in darkness, activating only the audio.

"Yes?" Penelope said. The drowsy monosyllable barely made it into the audiostream.

"It's that Uncle Luke guy," Pablo said. "At least I think it is. The avatar sort of looks like him..."

"It's me," Dunn said.

"Uncle Luke?" Penelope said. "What time is it?"

"Do you know how late we were out last night?" Pablo said.

"I promise not to tell your parents," Dunn said. "You two need to come up to the observation deck right now."

"What wayward resonation twisted you out of tune?" Pablo said. "I'm trying to sleep here!"

"Now look, you've gone and wakened the children," Daphne said.

"Why?" Penelope asked.

"Because... Because Sarah wants you up here. She asked me to call you," Dunn said.

"Oh," Penelope said.

"Did she say why?" Pablo asked.

"She wants you to see something," Dunn said. "You had better hurry."

"Well, since it's for Sarah," Pablo said.

"We'll be right there," Penelope finished. The connection died.

Dunn did not take his eyes off the fiery display before him. Against the broad black backdrop and tiny points of light, a series of silent but brilliant explosions splashed the city of Transcendent into multihued storm clouds of glittering colors.

"Did you talk to them, Uncle Luke?" Sarah asked. She was clutching his arm.

"They're on their way," Dunn said.

Sarah sighed and leaned against Dunn. "Robin must be really enjoying this."

Dunn didn't think so. "What's going on?" Dunn quietly asked Daphne.

"Three squadrons of Trask fighters. Don't they realize how golden comm silence is? Especially when they're grouped in attack formation."

"That doesn't make any sense!"

"We're talking about Trasks here."

"But it's a civilian target."

"That's not what they say."

"Come on, we were just there. Did you see any military presence? Besides, this is Ceres. It may be off the main skyways, but Transcendent is part of the Ceres Nation."

"That doesn't mean anything to the Trasks."

It wouldn't. "Why?"

"Why what?"

"Daphne! Why are the Trasks attacking Transcendent?"

"Because of the mirrors."

"What mirrors?"

"We were just on Transcendent. Maybe you didn't notice them."

"The whole dented place is built out of mirrors. What are you talking about?"

"The Trasks claim that the mirrors are sending coded intelligence into space. They say that messages about Trask troop movements and logistics and defenses are being sent to their enemies."

"What? And because of that they're destroying an entire city?"

"Look at the newsstreams if you don't believe me."

Penelope and Pablo arrived, their faces swollen with interrupted sleep.

"Wow," they said.

"It's all over the Msets," Daphne said. "Any local stream."

"Look at those lights!" Pablo said.

"Look at those colors!" Penelope said.

Together they stood admiring the destruction of Transcendent.

"It's beautiful," Sarah said.

An amber lightning bolt throbbed at the lower left corner of Dunn's vision.



"Incoming message," Daphne said. "It's Ethan."

"What's the message length?" Dunn asked.

"Nine minutes thirty-seven seconds," Daphne said.

"Store it," Dunn said.

"Is it a special holiday or something?" Pablo wondered aloud.

"We have to go back," Dunn said to the children. They were gathered at the observation windows, gazing at the spectacle. The famous city of Transcendent was bursting with color.

"What?" Pablo said. "Are you completely untorqued?"

"Come on, Uncle Luke," Penelope said. "We're not babies. We had fun at the concert, but we know when it's time to go home."

"Uncle Luke," Sarah said. "Really. It's OK." She pressed her hands to her hips and shook her head gently.

"It's not that," Dunn said. "Pablo or Penelope, can you stream local news in here?"

"News?" the twins said together.

"We're gonna watch news?" Sarah said, her nose wrinkling.

"Yes, if you want me to," Penelope said.

"Please," Dunn said.

Penelope tapped her control bracelet and her personal Holographic Interface sprung to life.

"Not that again!" Pablo said.

"Stop making fun of my HI," Penelope said.

"I like it," Sarah said.

"You would," Pablo said.

Rangor stared in astonishment, holding his nose at the sudden strong perfume.

"Here," Penelope said, moving her fingers through the blossoming pinks and lavenders that sprouted from her control bracelet.

A point of light pinpricked the center of the room, and spherically expanded to touch the ceiling and floor.

"Once again, I'm Peter Peters, bringing you an on-the-spot perspective on the Trask invasion of Transcendent."

"The Trask invasion?" the twins said together.

"As you have seen, the Trask warships have breached the outer

perimeter and destroyed the outer neighborhoods. Fortunately dozens of lifeboats have already flown free of the city, although no one knows when they will be met. The Trask are simultaneously targeting the communications relay stations —"

The light sputtered and died.

A smooth silver featureless face appeared in the room. "This is the Outer News Network Digital Person for the city of Transcendent. Technical difficulties have —"

The light sputtered and died.

"Is that it?" Penelope said. Her fingers probed her HI for another response.

"Robin," Sarah said.

"We've got to go back there," Penelope said.

"To do what?" Pablo asked.

"They're abandoning the city," Dunn said. "They're in lifeboats."

"Somebody has to rescue them," Penelope said.

"Oh, poor Robin," Sarah whimpered.

"Good idea, Penelope," Pablo said. "You want us to fly the *Orquidea* straight into a war zone?"

"We have to," Penelope said.

"If they're attacking the Ceres Nation, they must have a good reason," Pablo said.

"Maybe," Dunn said. "They say that Transcendent has encrypted Trask military intelligence into its mirror structure and is beaming strategic information to the Jovians."

"Really?" Pablo said. "What a smart idea."

"We still have to help the ones who can escape," Penelope said.

"And Robin. Don't forget Robin," Sarah said.

"The little dirt spurt really did get shot this time," Daphne said. "He will be intolerable."

"But how did you know what was really going on, Uncle Luke?" Penelope asked.

"Yeah, I didn't see you tuning into any newstream," Pablo said.

"But no fat payload, Penelope. He probably has an endowment set."

"I got the info from my DP," Dunn said.

"Your DP told you what was on the newstream?" Sarah asked.

"No," Dunn said. "My DP monitors Trask military frequencies."

"Oh, great, tell them everything," Daphne said.

"You really are a spy!" Pablo said.

"Not for much longer," Dunn said. "I'm retiring."

"Pablo has a point," Penelope said. "It's too dangerous to go back there."

"Not even for Robin?" Sarah pleaded.

"We have a good chance," Dunn said, "if my DP pilots the *Orquidea*."

"Yay, Charlie!" Daphne said. "And I thought you'd forgotten all about me."

"No way!" Pablo said. "No one pilots this ship but family. Mom and Dad always said so."

Penelope looked thoughtful. "He said his DP watches Trask frequencies."

"So?" Pablo said.

"Don't you get it?" Penelope said. "He knows what the Trasks are doing. Or his DP does anyway."

"So you think that if his DP pilots, we can avoid the Trask," Pablo said.

"Let him do it," Sarah said. "For Robin."

"We should ask Mom and Dad," Pablo said.

"They're twenty light minutes away," Penelope said. "By the time they answer us, we'll be even farther away from Transcendent."

"I don't know," Pablo said.

"Do it," Sarah commanded. "Robin needs us."

"Daphne doesn't require exclusive control," Dunn said. "You can share it with her. You can take it back whenever you want."

"Daphne!" Penelope was smiling. "That's a pretty name, especially for a Digital Person. Can we see her?"

"Yes, can they see me?" Daphne asked. "Please?"

Dunn shook his head. "This really isn't the time."

"Aw..." Daphne said.

"Hear her, then," Pablo said. "If I like her, then she can drive my ship. Temporarily, anyway."

"Please, please, please," Daphne said.

"Yes," Penelope said. "I want to talk to her. Can she interface with the *Orquidea*'s DP?"

"I could if the old lady would let me," Daphne said.

"Yes," Dunn answered.

"*Orquidea*, open an audiostream for Daphne," Pablo said.

"Done," said the *Orquidea*'s DP.

"Hi kids," Daphne said out loud, streaming her zany exuberance from all sides of the half sphere. Her voice took on unexpected resonations and intonations shaped by the observation dome's acoustics. Dunn's heart raced. This wasn't like listening to a DP from inside his head. This was the real result of his programming the DP-I0 with old mediastreams of Mariana provided decades ago by her late grandparents. "Thanks for letting me out of his head. Can I puh-leeze fly your cute little ship?"

An instant smile brightened Sarah's face, while Rangor just looked surprised.

"You're Daphne?" Pablo said.

"I thought your nice Uncle Luke had already introduced me," Daphne said.

"It's just that —" Pablo started.

"You're not what we expected," Penelope finished.

"Oh, you were expecting some dull monotonous grandmother of a DP, weren't you," Daphne said. "Well, I've got affective algorithms that could wake up the dead."

"Can you help us get Robin back?" Sarah asked.

"I can help you look for him," Daphne said. "Or we can stand around talking. It's no problem. I love to talk!"

"I want to find Robin!" Sarah said.

"I don't understand why," Daphne said. "He's an irritating little dirt spurt who always gets into trouble. Remember how you met him? He stole Eric's Hercules fighter toy, for sparkle's sake!"

"You've been watching us all this time?" Penelope asked.

"If Uncle Luke saw it, so did I," Daphne said. "The guy never gives me any peace. It's like he forgot where the shutdown switch is."

"What's it like living in that guy's head?" Pablo asked.

"That's enough," Dunn said. "So? Are we going back for Robin?"

"Please," Sarah said.

"OK," Penelope and Pablo said together.

Penelope smiled. She lifted her wrist and pressed a holofield hotspot. "Orquidea," she said. "Introduce yourself to Daphne."

"Acknowledged," Daphne and Orquidea said simultaneously.

"She shakes hands like an old lady," Daphne said inside Dunn's head.

"Please share ship control with Daphne," Penelope said.

"Done," both DPs said together.

"Thank you," Daphne said.

"Forward velocity is decreasing," Orquidea said. "Angular momentum is revectoring."

"Grandma means we're turning around," Daphne said. "Hang on to your inertial dampers, kids. Isn't this fun?"

The fiery ball that was Transcendent slid around the observation dome from its slowly shrinking position on the *Orquidea's* stern to arc across her starboard side, and on to a brightening point on her bow.

"How long before we reach Transcendent?" Pablo asked.

"You better set a nice dinner table, because we're going to have company," Daphne said.

"How are conditions in the situation zone?" Dunn asked Daphne. It was almost embarrassing to be speaking out loud to her, like putting a private part of himself on public display.

"Hot, but cooling," Daphne said. "The Trask are talking about dispersing, but no one wants to be the first to leave."

"Lifeboats," Sarah wanted to know. "When will we get to the lifeboats?"

"I'm pushing Grandma as fast as it's safe to push her, little lady. It's going to be several more hours."

"Won't the Trask be gone by then?" Pablo asked.

"Maybe, maybe not," Daphne said. "They're having so much fun right where they are. They are talking about using the lifeboats for target practice."

"They wouldn't!" Sarah said.

"Why not?" Daphne said. "The lifeboats' distress beacons make it easy for them."

"We have to hurry!" Sarah cried.

"Be patient," Daphne said. "It doesn't do us any good if we blow a Z drive on the way."

Penelope was watching system indicators via her Holographic Interface. She glanced at Sarah. "Daphne's right. The *Orquidea* can only go so fast."

Pablo was looking over his sister's shoulder. "Your DP's taking good care of the ship, Uncle Luke. She can keep flying for now."

"Say the word and this ship is mine," Daphne said internally to Dunn alone. "I dug up all the codes and I can lock the old lady out anytime you want."

"Daphne, can you do anything about the lifeboat signals?" Dunn asked out loud.

"You mean like jam them or damp them? Sorry, the *Orquidea* doesn't carry that kind of equipment," Daphne answered.

"That's dumb," Pablo said. "The lifeboats should have some stealth capability."

"You watch too many Mark Sadoff streamies," Penelope said.

"They were more concerned about city system failures in those days," Dunn said. "They didn't have military applications in mind when they built the lifeboats. Back then, nobody could even afford to build a warship."

"At least I can do something about our noise," Daphne said out loud. "Grandma here knows how to tiptoe when she wants to. We are one stealthy little cruise ship."

"How much longer?" Sarah asked. She leaned toward the curved observation window, her fingers clenched whitely around the black convenience railing.

"Why don't you kids watch cartoons or something?" Daphne said. "If you want, I can stream in some Mikey the Manna Marshall."

"No thanks, Daphne," Pablo said.

"Well, it would be a little rough around the edges because our buddies the Trask blew up all the comm relay stations in the area, but I think I could clean it up. It does come from nine light minutes away. Everyone else is broadcasting newsstreams of the Trask party on Transcendent."

"What are they saying?" Sarah asked.

"The city has been destroyed. Approximately one and half million are assumed dead. Not all the lifeboats had time to launch. Stuff like that," Daphne said.

"How many lifeboats launched?" Sarah asked.

"One hundred and sixty-eight, by my count," Daphne said. "They are easy to locate from this distance. We are the closest friendly ship to the battle area. Anyone who wasn't smart enough to go the opposite direction when the bombs started flying has already been blown apart."

The children were silent. Dunn studied their young faces. Were they afraid? They weren't soldiers, or even old enough to enlist. He had no right to take them into a live battle zone.

"We don't have to do this," Dunn told them. "We can turn around and set course again for Perú if you want."

"Is anyone else on the way?" Penelope asked. "The Red Rock? Ceres Security Forces?"

"They're too far away," Daphne said. "They couldn't arrive before tomorrow."

"But by tomorrow, the Trask could shoot them all!" Sarah said.

"I can think of someone else who might be on the way," Pablo said.

"Pirates," Penelope and Pablo said at the same time.

"Like in the streamies?" Sarah asked.

"Out here they're for real," Pablo said. "The territory on the other side of the Ceres border is unclaimed."

"By now they know about the attack on Transcendent," Dunn said. "It won't be long before they arrive to loot the remains. They'll take anything of value and they won't be friendly to anyone who is still here."

"But we have to help those people!" Penelope said.

"For Robin," Sarah said.

"We should be safe with Daphne around, right?" Penelope asked.

"Why thank you, Penelope," Daphne said.

"Rangor?" Dunn asked. "What do you think?"

"I stay with you, Uncle Luke," the synthege said. "I follow you anywhere."

Dunn wondered how the Dreschler scientists had managed to isolate the loyalty gene.

"I'm glad that's settled," Daphne said, "because Grandma and I are making pretty good time. But I wasn't kidding about setting a big dinner table. And lay out cots, mattresses, whatever you have. It's going to get really crowded in here and you don't have all that much time to prepare. And you better check your First Aid kits. There was quite a riot around the lifeboat docks."

"I never met such a bossy DP," Pablo commented.

"Listen up little dirt spurts, I am in full Search and Rescue mode now and I will not take no for an answer. So move it, all of you!"

"You must store spare bedstuff somewhere," Dunn said to the twins. "Let's start with that."

"I'll break out the medicines and stuff," Penelope said. "Sarah, do you want to come with me?"

Dunn and the children spent the next few hours turning the cruise ship into a refugee shelter. The observation deck became a nursery, with spare cots and blankets spread throughout. They left narrow pathways between the makeshift beds.

Then they turned to the cabins. Penelope showed them how to pull spare beds out of the wall. She explained that sometimes large families or other groups booked many people into a room and used

these spare beds. When they finished, they regrouped on the observation deck.

"Daphne, can you give us an idea of how many survivors to expect?" Dunn said out loud.

"Maximum 2,834," Daphne said. "But probably fewer."

"That's all that survived from the whole city?" Penelope gasped.

"That's more than triple the ship's recommended capacity," Pablo said.

Penelope frowned at her brother. "We can make do for a while."

"Daphne, why do you say probably less?" Dunn asked.

"Maximum assumes all lifeboats are at full capacity," Daphne said. "It also assumes that all lifeboats that are currently broadcasting will continue to broadcast."

"Why would they stop broadcasting?" Pablo asked.

Dunn did not answer him.

"Maximum has already decreased six times," Daphne said.

"The Trask are getting bored," Penelope said.

"Maximum just decreased again," Daphne said.

"Oh, poor Robin," Sarah whimpered.

"How much longer, Daphne?" Dunn asked.

"Closest pickup is now twenty minutes away," Daphne said. "Shouldn't you be heading toward the ship's outer ring to pick up the lifeboats and meet our guests?"

"No." Dunn waved the Mset on. "Stream the Trask and civilian positions in here."

A pinpoint of light pierced the center of the room, erupting into a sphere of dots and debris.

"The Trasks are the red points," Dunn told the children. "The lifeboats are these yellow ones. We're green."

"Standard strategic stuff, kids," Daphne said.

"The red points like to stay together," Rangor noted.

"And you see how the lifeboats are scattered?" Dunn said. "Some of them are pretty far away from the Trasks."

"We can leave those for last," Sarah said. "We have to rescue the people closest to the Trask first. Look!"

A yellow light dimmed and died. It was adjacent to one of the red lights.

"But if we rescue the closest ones first, we put ourselves too close to the Trask," Pablo said.

"You're right," Penelope said. "Uncle Luke, what do we do?"

"There's only one thing we can do," Dunn said. "Daphne, take us around here." He gestured into the sphere. "Let's start with this one." The lifeboat was not so far away, but it was not close either.

"But Uncle Luke!" Sarah protested.

"At least it's more or less by itself," Pablo said.

"It's stupid to get so close to the Trask, Sarah," Dunn said. "It doesn't matter how quiet the *Orquidea* is running. She still casts a shadow, and if we get too close the Trask will see it."

"He's right, Sarah," Penelope said.

"Won't they see us anyway?" Pablo asked. "We're not that far from them."

"Look at the map orientation," Dunn said. The hovering sphere was tilting and turning. "Daphne's not flying a straight course. Are you?"

"Of course not. You think I want to get shot? Grandma has sensitive skin. Lucky for us the Trasks gave us so much cover."

"The mirrors," Pablo said, looking at the sphere.

"That's right," Dunn said. "Transcendent's famous mirrors are just so much prodar glitter now. Daphne is using them for cover."

"The Trasks' prodar gets confused by the mess," Penelope said.

"It hides us, but doesn't do much for the lifeboats," Dunn said. "Their beacons were designed to overcome space debris."

"They're broadcasting loud enough to deafen any decent probe," Daphne said. "But with a little physical effort and a hammer, we can turn off each lifeboat's beacon as we get to it."

"No," Dunn said. "Not at all. We won't be turning the beacons off. We are going to use them against the Trask."

"What?" Pablo asked.

"How?" Penelope asked.

Dunn pointed. "You see how close that one is?"

"We'll be in tractor range in fifteen minutes," Daphne said.

"Dock it at the entrance hatch on the promenade," Dunn said.

"We still have a few minutes. I'll meet you down there."

"Are you going somewhere, Uncle Luke?" Sarah asked.

Dunn was halfway to the closest elevator. "To my quarters. I have to attend to something. I'll see you in a few minutes."

"Are you going to get your message now?" Daphne asked silently.

"There's just enough time," Dunn answered her. He got off the elevator and opened the door to his suite. He didn't need to be in his cabin to see the message, but such a long message from Ethan deserved his complete attention.

"What do you think it is?" Daphne asked excitedly. "A medal for a job well done?"

"Just what I need." Dunn entered the living room. It was littered with extra beds put in place for their new passengers. Dunn did not sit down. "Let's see it."

A bright spot opened up and then dimmed. Ethan appeared behind his desk of luxurious vat grown Venusian woods. The old man's face rested in his hands. This was no avatar. Dunn's eyes wandered to the cloud-streaked sphere outside the window behind Ethan. Earth.

"Charles," Ethan said. "I have just spoken with Noam Belkin. Betancourt lied about the permadoc. It does not contain the historically insignificant Trask-UN treaty as we were told. It contains the salvation of Earth."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

### Adva Avni

Adva Avni fastened her pressure suit without taking her eyes off her husband's face. In spite of her resolve, silent tears leaked from both of her steely blue eyes.

"I'm past the point of protesting this, Advonet," Jacob said.

"That's good, because I'm past the point of protesting your protests," Adva said. She pressed together the last of her suit's seals. "This is it."

"Wait," Jacob said, his dark eyes shrouded in concern. "I'll check the weather again. Just in case."

"Jacob. Kevin is already out there, waiting for me. The UN has made all the arrangements. I can't delay any longer."

"But the sandstorm —"

"Is coming this way," Adva finished for him. "That's the point, remember?"

"I know," Jacob said, "but you're cutting it awfully close."

"Yes," Adva said. Once again her eyes brimmed with tears. "Come here, Jacob." Adva Avni was not a tall woman. She sometimes joked that she came to Mars so the lighter gravity could improve her physical stature. She reached up and buried her fingers in Jacob's neat brown hair. She pressed his head down hard on her. Their lips met. The kiss was not passionate, but indescribably intimate. She released him slowly. "That will have to do for a while. Hopefully not more than a year. Probably less. The preliminary results look good."

"By then we'll be joining you back on Earth. Back in the promised land, where we were always meant to be," Jacob said.

"Tell the children I love them," Adva said. "Tell them that was the last thing I said before I went out to investigate soil samples."



"I will tell them," Jacob said. His hands fell to his sides. Her husband had the good sense not to argue with her any more.

Adva fitted the helmet over her curly black hair. She was clumsy with her gloved hands. Jacob helped her with the final touches.

They nodded at each other. There would be no more talk. Radio conversations were too easily overheard. The Betancourts and the others were watching her too closely, monitoring her every movement.

Jacob hugged her one more time, embracing the suit as it inflated and pushed against the surrounding atmosphere. Adva did not feel his touch, but her eyes filled with tears once again. She hugged her husband in response, then turned and pushed the red button that opened the airlock. She stepped inside and faced him, waving a gentle good-bye as the door closed automatically between them. As the outside door opened, Adva turned away from their house and faced the Martian sunset. She expected it would be the last time she would ever see it.

Adva reminded herself that she would create a greater beauty on Earth. The airlock door slid shut behind her, but she was already stepping away from their big blocky house with its cheerful yellow walls and dark sloped ceiling. She glanced quickly at the outside garden, mostly planted with her own experiments and not all of them successful. Someone else could carry on here. It didn't have to be her.

The wide low workshed sheltered the old jeep, along with a number of Jacob's own experiments. Like hers, some were more successful than others. Fortunately, fire did not burn long in Mars's thin, oxygen poor atmosphere. Jacob's mistakes were not as terrible as they could have been.

The jeep was fully charged. Very thoughtful of Jacob; Adva did not always remember to do it. She rolled out onto the rambling ridges of the Valles Marineris, past rows of manna plants that she had planted herself. By now dozens of families had staked out their homesteads, relying on the manna crop to feed themselves and bring in income from those who preferred the city life. It was a good way of life for the Martian settlers and Adva was glad to have played her role in it. But enough was enough.

By now the dust storm was picking up speed. The wind blew many kilometers per hour, but lacked the pressure to create any real impact. Dust and darkness mixed to obscure visibility and, hopefully, to throw off any satellite surveillance.

The low dark craft was a shadow under a rocky cliff. Adva would have missed it if she had not been looking for it. The UN agent was right where he said he would be. Adva set the jeep's cruise control to forty kilometers an hour and aimed the vehicle into an unplanted section of Martian desert. She leaped from the driver's seat of the uncovered vehicle and managed to hit the ground without tearing her pressure suit. The low Martian gravity made her fall an easy one.

The jeep's full charge and bulky tires would sustain it for hours. In this dust storm, its movements could not be tracked. Adva left no trail.

The entrance lock to the stealth craft slid open as Adva approached. No lights shone out from the inside. Kevin knew what he was doing. Adva recognized the outline of his face behind the inner window, darker than the Martian sandstorm. Kevin was of African descent. Wasn't everybody? The outer door slid shut behind Adva and the environmental controls activated. In a few moments, the inner door opened. "Your presence here is very much appreciated, Dr. Avni." Kevin had clear, straight features.

They were not alone. "The storm is still building," the pilot said, "Let's give it some more time."

"It's good to finally meet you in person," Adva said, taking off her gloves. She took Kevin's hand in hers and grasped it warmly.

Kevin returned her smile. "We appreciate the sacrifice you are making. I speak for the entire UN Central Intelligence branch. May I help you with your pressure suit?"

Adva stepped out of her suit. She folded it and placed it in one of the overhead compartments. "Do whatever you want with it. I won't be needing it again."

"I'm sorry," Kevin said. "I know this must be very difficult for you."

"Just tell me that everything is ready," Adva said.

"We have placed a small wardrobe for you on the freighter," Kevin said. "The literature you requested has been downloaded to the streamset in your room. You should have plenty to keep you occupied for the next two months."

"That's not what I meant," Adva said. "Did you set up the lab in the Negev according to my specs?"

Kevin wrung his hands together. Adva was sure he didn't make that gesture often. "There has been some difficulty. Two of the construction crew were killed. The fighting in that area has been terrible."

Adva placed a hand on one of Kevin's broad shoulders. "I am sorry for the crew and their families. But if you don't build the lab where I specify and how I specify, many more will die."

"Strap yourselves in," the pilot said. Adva could not see the man's face. "We're out of here in three minutes."

Adva reached for the restraints and did as she was told while Kevin did the same.

"We haven't given up," Kevin continued. "We've placed extra security around the compound and strengthened the environmental controls." He glanced at her. "We've also installed an infirmary for you. Just in case. It's stocked with vitamins, antibiotics, disinfectants, anesthetics, you name it. There is also a medprobe updated with the latest diagnostics routines. We need to keep you healthy."

"So you have made some progress," Adva said. "That's good."

"Your laboratory is coming along, too," Kevin said. "Some of the equipment had to be imported from Mars, believe it or not."

"I believe it," Adva said, "because I designed the equipment."

"Yes. Well. ..."

"Here we go," the pilot said.

The ship lurched out from beneath the overhang, traveling level on rumbling thrusters for just a few minutes. Then it launched itself upward at a steep angle.

When it was over, Adva gasped. "Whew. Gravity. Forgot about that stuff."

"Hope the ride wasn't too rough for you," Kevin said. "In a moment, you'll be completely weightless."

"We're coming up on the *Michael H. Carr* now," the pilot said. The half-completed space station spun slowly in front of them, hanging like a forlorn skeleton in space. Human and robot workers scrambled over its many branches and hulls, patiently putting together the giant factory that would build and house the largest and most powerful exploratory ships yet designed. Exploration and colonization of the outer system was beginning in earnest. A viable and reliable source of food on Mars for the past two decades had revitalized humanity's dream of space exploration.

The pilot was heading for one of the long outer arms of the space station. The oblong sphere at the end of the arm was probably a residential complex. The pilot parked the ship in one of the many docks along the arm. A flexible tunnel reached forward and locked onto the ship's outer airlock. The pilot looked up from his instrument panel. His eyes grabbed her; they were broad and black, traced with a faint epicanthic fold. His hair was shiny black and his nose was low bridged and flat. "I have family on Earth. Good luck to you, Dr. Avni."

"Thank you, sir," Adva said.

"Let's go," Kevin said. "I'll show you to your quarters. By some amazing coincidence, they are right next to mine."

The next ship back to Earth left two days later. Adva spent the first day aboard watching her own funeral. The commentators lamented the irony of a Martian sandstorm claiming the life of such a great Martian scientist. They called her the little ripple with the big splash. Her children cried. Oshrit's grief was unbearable. Jason stood dry eyed and motionless at the ceremony, but Adva knew he was crying inside. Her husband Jacob cried outwardly. He was not putting on a show. He was thinking of the millions of kilometers and many months between them. Adva reminded herself that the only way to avoid the Betancourt death threats was to die.

Adva spent two months in her cabin, checking and rechecking her simulations. To make things interesting, she threw in a few doomsday scenarios such as nuclear holocaust, poison gasses of various makes and flavors, and genetically targeted infectious diseases.

The new breed would not withstand everything, but it was tougher than anything found in nature. Theoretically. She would have to plant it, and kick it, and prod it, to be sure.

Kevin called her every day from his own cabin, which, coincidentally, was right next to hers.

"Is everything OK?" he would ask. "Do you need anything?"

"I need a lab," Adva would answer. "How is the progress in the Negev Desert?"

"Your lab is almost finished," Kevin would say, "but there is a war on."

"Thank you," Adva would say, and cut the connection. She did not want to be rude, but she did not want to waste time, either. If she could complete the design phase on the ship, she could start immediately with the development and testing phases on Earth. If everything went well, her family could rejoin her in a matter of months.

The freighter finally docked at NYC2. Adva observed the weary work crews reunite with their families.

"Do you need some time to rest from your long flight?" Kevin asked.

"I've been resting for two months," Adva said.

"I hoped you would say that," Kevin said. "There's not much travel down to Earth these days, but we have put together a crew who will help you."

"So," said a uniformed blonde woman with sharp features and narrow blue eyes, "you want to go to the Negev. Or at least what's left of it."

"This is Captain Vlachko," Kevin said.

"How soon can we leave?" Adva asked.

"This is as far as I go," Kevin said. He held out his hand. "Good luck and good-bye."

Adva shook it. "Thank you for everything."

"My crew is at the shuttle," Captain Vlachko said. "Come with me. We will take you down to the Inner City of the solar system."

The song was a popular one, but Adva hated it. The technocracy had abandoned Earth for the spinning cities in the sky, as they

had once abandoned the cities for the suburbs. Now Earth was in the same condition as the ancient inner cities. It was left to rot, and the poor fought and died over the meager scraps that were left.

Not for much longer. Captain Vlachko dropped her shuttle out of the sky and landed inside Adva's laboratory compound. The armed guards along the fortified walls had apparently been alerted to their arrival. They did not turn to face her, but it wouldn't have mattered anyway. She had glimpsed them on the way in. The oxygen masks they wore effectively hid their features.

The Negev was a horrible, poisoned landscape, littered with rotting organics. Nothing could survive there. It was perfect.

It only took a few days to develop the first seeds. She took a squad of guards out into the desert with her to find an appropriate place to plant them.

"That's too far, ma'am," said Sergeant Wilson through his oxygen mask. He wobbled a bit, as if not used to walking in real gravity. He was probably raised in the centrifugal kind.

"What's the problem?" Adva asked. Her own oxygen mask showed a plentiful supply remaining.

"If you want your work to be defensible, you'll have to keep it within firing distance of the compound, ma'am."

Adva found it easy to agree. The whole point of the design was that the Earth manna could be planted anywhere, with minimum effect on the local ecosystem.

Adva spent the next few months designing and developing and redesigning. UN Central Intelligence had thoughtfully provided her with the same telecommunications gear they used in their politically sensitive listening posts in faraway nations. Adva regularly sent coded messages containing her results to the address provided by Kevin. She did not engage in a lot of conversation. She could not risk giving away her presence here. Some of the more powerful Martian manna investors would not hesitate to kill her family in retaliation.

Late one evening, Adva took an oxygen mask and left her lab. She crossed the courtyard and found the stairs that led to the top of the wall. She climbed up and nodded to the guards.

"Good evening, ma'am."

Adva wasn't sure which guard was talking to her. Behind gas masks, in the darkness, they all looked the same.

"Hello," Adva said. Her voice broke. She realized she hadn't spoken to a single human being in days. She stared out over the wasteland, trying to spot her little garden in the darkness. She would have gotten a better view from the infrared scanner monitors in her lab. The treelets should be waist high by now. At this point there wasn't much left for her to do but watch the plants grow. Her spirits were high. Soon she could call her family and they would resettle this area the way they were meant to.

"What's that noise?" Adva whispered to the guard closest to her. She moved closer to him so that he could hear her hushed voice. She realized he was wearing night glasses.

"Not to worry, ma'am," he said. "That's just Private Dunbar. He's cleaning up the bodies."

"Bodies?" Adva strained to see, but the movements came from darkness too far away.

"The daily kill," said the man next to her.

"Sorry, I don't get you, uh ..."

"Private First Class Williams, ma'am," he said.

"Private First Class Williams, what is Private Dunbar doing?" Adva asked.

"Private Dunbar is cleaning up the bodies, ma'am. The locals attack us during the day and we clean them up at night."

"What? How long has this been going on?" Adva asked. How could she have not noticed this?

"Forever. They must think we have food in here. That must be why they attack."

Adva was speechless. She had been too immersed in her lab work to see this happening.

"They don't usually attack us at night, ma'am. You'll be all right if you stay inside the compound, like you almost always do."

"But maybe we can help them," Adva said. "Don't we have any food to spare? Or any medicine?"

Private First Class Williams shrugged. "Orders."

What orders? From the United Nations?

"We're here to defend you, ma'am," Private Williams said, "not to provide aid and assistance to the locals."

But the whole point of her work was to help all the people of Earth!

"Don't worry, ma'am," Williams said. "We get less attacks every day. We figure it won't be long before there's no one left to attack us."

Then there would be no one left to benefit from her work. Adva returned to her lab and stared at her equipment. She had succeeded, but was she too late?

Adva touched the keyboard and her holographic computer screen came to life. She would not trust her work to an organization that gave orders to kill the starving. She sifted through her findings and summarized exactly what a person would need to know to recreate a successful Earth manna seed.

What good was all this fancy communications equipment anyway? Adva sent her summary to her husband. She coded it the same way she coded her reports to the UN. She even electronically imprinted the UN seal on her message, so that he would know it was official. Jacob would know what to do.

Adva did not sleep well that night. How many people had died because of her insistence on doing research in the Negev? She was glad she had sent the message to Jacob. It was a relief somehow.

A few days later, Adva was in her garden again, surrounded by a squad of watchful guards. The morning sun beat great strokes of heat down on them. "Pretty soon I'm going to eat you," Adva said to one of the plants. "If you taste good to me, I'm going to reproduce you all over the planet. How do you like that, big guy?"

The guards all started shouting at once. Adva followed their pointing fingers with her gaze. There was a flash of heat and light. It was the last thing she ever saw.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

## Charles Dunn

Dunn paced around the first class cabin in spite of the extra beds. Ethan's endogram tracked with his movements across the living room floor. The shining image twisted and turned in Dunn's direction.

"So what happened?" Dunn demanded. "Everyone knows there was a nuclear explosion in the Middle East, but what happened to Adva Avni's last transmission?"

"Calm down, Charlie," Daphne suggested. "Hear the man out. It's not like you can have a two-way conversation with him anyway."

"Adva Avni sent her husband a detailed geneprint of the Earth manna seed," Ethan continued. "Jacob Avni did not act on the information. The manna corporations were consolidating and becoming even more powerful. They squashed any talk of developing a manna strain for Earth. When the nuclear attack was reported, Jacob knew his wife was dead. He preserved the information in a permadoc and made it look like an official UN document. It was easy to do, since Adva Avni had transmitted the information with UN protocols."

"So what?" Dunn cried. "The UN had Avni's reports, too! You mean to tell me they dropped the ball on this?"

"Charlie, unclench your fists right now," Daphne said. "Listen to the man!"

"When Adva Avni died, the project was cancelled," Ethan said. "Interest in Earth was waning anyway. Jacob Avni gave the permadoc to his daughter Oshrit on his deathbed. That's the way it went for the next few generations, until one day the Jovians invaded Mars to retaliate for Martian involvement in freeing the synthegens. Ranit Avni

thought the Jovians would occupy her plantation and steal anything of value. She hid the permadoc behind the Avni painting in the Ruby Office, thinking that if the Jovians got that far it was all over anyway.” Ethan leaned forward. “Noam Belkin and Ranit Avni formed the Adva Avni Historical Foundation for the sole purpose of getting the permadoc back. They tried to do that by negotiating for the return of the painting.”

“There was no reason to send me if Belkin and Avni were already negotiating for the painting’s return,” Dunn pointed out to the unresponsive endogram.

“Noam Belkin doesn’t know how Betancourt found out about the permadoc. He doesn’t know who told her that it was hidden in the painting. He’s afraid the Betancourts have spies within the Adva Avni Historical Foundation. He thinks that if the Betancourts find the permadoc first, they will destroy it. Adva Avni’s work will be lost forever. Belkin’s story explains why Betancourt is so hungry for the permadoc. A Trask treaty? We should have seen this coming.” Ethan sighed. “Your friend Captain Banks has gotten himself blown up. His patrol boat hit a mass of Jovian mines yesterday. You’ve just refueled, but it looks like you might be caught in that Trask thing on Transcendent. I don’t have anyone else in the area. If you can find the permadoc, you can bring Adva Avni’s legacy to Earth, quarantine or no quarantine. You have my support 100%. I’m sure you’ll think of something. Good-bye, Charles.”

“Would you like to compose a response?” Daphne asked.

“I’m thinking,” Dunn said.

“That’s a good idea,” Daphne said.

“Are the Trasks saying anything about the permadoc?” Dunn asked.

“I get the feeling it wasn’t a high priority for them,” Daphne said.

“How much time before the first lifeboat docks?” Dunn asked.

“You’d better get moving,” Daphne said.

Dunn was already out of his suite and summoning the elevator. He got off one deck down, on the promenade.

“Uncle Luke,” Sarah said. “Look.” She pointed out the window. “They’re almost here.”

Dunn caught up to the children just inside the *Orquidea*’s main entrance hatch. The lush red carpet around them was strewn with hastily placed blankets and first aid supplies. At least there was a clear path from the entrance lock to the elevator.

“Daphne, are we in range yet?” Dunn asked out loud.

“Don’t be so impatient,” Daphne responded, also out loud. “The tractors on this ship aren’t exactly industrial strength. Just a little closer...”

“They look pretty close to me!” Sarah stood on the balls of her feet. She could not restrain her impatience.

Dunn took a look out the window. The drifting lifeboat was a long fat cylinder that beacons brilliantly against the starry background beyond. Shards of glinting brightness, the last remnants of the famous mirror city of Transcendent, spun swiftly through the open space around it, striking forcefully against the lifeboat and each other. A few shards came close to the *Orquidea*, but were repelled by the Z fields before they could do any damage.

“Ouch,” Pablo said, turning away. “That hurts my eyes.”

“The lifeboat? It was designed to be noticed,” Dunn said.

“They did a good job,” Pablo said.

“Got it,” said Daphne. Shimmering Zolotoi energies bridged the gap between the *Orquidea* and the smaller craft. The lifeboat visibly changed course, falling in toward the *Orquidea*.

“Can you tell who’s in there?” Sarah asked.

“Of course not, little girl,” Daphne said. “But don’t worry. You’ll see for yourself in just a few minutes.”

Sarah clenched her fists in impatience.

Penelope laid a hand on Sarah’s shoulder. “Just relax. We’re all worried about Robin.”

Sarah let out a deep sigh. “OK, Penelope.”

The shimmering long lifeboat fell inward along the tractor-ing rainbow toward the *Orquidea*’s entrance hatch. A line of round windows circled the midlevel of the smaller ship, providing a vague glimpse of shapeless shadows shifting inside.



"Get ready to greet your new friends, kids," Daphne said.

The lifeboat locked into place against the hatch.

"Unload 'em quick, kids," Daphne said. "Next lifeboat is only a few minutes away."

The hatch irised open.

"It's about time!"

She was a tiny, energetic, dark eyed girl, with a restless vibrancy in her cheekbones and her carriage and even her short black hair. Her tunic was a black velvety background for sound activated designs. The colors shifted and throbbed with her speech.

"I thought I was going to go nuts in there with all those whining dirt spurts. What took you so long, anyway?" She paused and studied the speechless group before her. "Hey, you're not the Red Rock. You don't look like the Belt Charity League either. Who are you guys?"

"Quit complaining, Lila," said the slender black youth behind her. He held a sobbing infant in his arms. His plain white and scarlet tunic was smudged with the child's tears. "Help get the rest of the children off the ship." He took a look at the scattered blankets around the deck. "Do any of you know anything about babies?" he asked his rescuers.

"Don't look at me," Penelope said.

"Why not?" Lila asked. "Daryl certainly hasn't gotten any help from me. He's been holding that baby for hours."

"The poor thing is probably hungry," Sarah said.

"Of course he is," Lila said. "He hasn't kept anything down since we left Transcendent."

Behind Lila and Daryl, more small faces peered out of the lifeboat's hatchway.

"Where are we?" Lila asked.

"Welcome to the *Orquidea*," Pablo smirked. "Meet Uncle Luke."

"Uncle Luke?" Daryl asked.

"Let's get you kids out of there," Dunn said. "We're on a tight schedule."

"Hi all!" a little girl sang from inside the ship.

"I told you that was too much pain killer," Lila said to Daryl.

"They're all babies," Sarah exclaimed.

"I guess that was the peacemen's idea of a joke," Lila said. "They put me and Daryl together to take care of the little ones."

"Only you didn't do anything!" Daryl said. "You didn't help at all."

"I didn't ask to be bombed," Lilah said. "I haven't even slept since the concert last night!"

"You were at the Comet Droppings concert?" Penelope asked. "We were there too!"

"OK kiddies, break it up," Daphne said, her voice streaming in from all sides. "Save it for the playground. We're running a rescue operation here."

"What was that?" Lila said.

"Ship's DP, probably," Daryl said.

"DPs don't talk like that," Lila said.

"This one does," Pablo said. "Let's go. There are more lifeboats out there."

A stream of little children ventured cautiously out of the lifeboat, looking around at their new surroundings. Dunn was glad they weren't crying. By this time they were probably too tired.

"Have any of you seen Robin?" Sarah asked.

"Who?" Daryl and Lila said together. Then they scowled at each other.

"Never mind," Sarah said. She stepped past them and into the lifeboat. "It's all right." Dunn could hear her voice from outside. "Go on out. Uncle Luke will take care of you."

"You're blocking the entranceway," Pablo said. "Let's go, everybody."

"There's hot food for you upstairs," Penelope said.

"Bleuch," Lila said. "We've already had enough lifeboat food."

"Ours is better," Pablo said. "Come on. I'll show you the way."

"Just a minute," Daryl said. "Could someone take the baby? I'll help you get the others out."

"I'll take him," Pablo said.

"You?" Penelope said.

"Why not?" Pablo reached for the crying child. "Or maybe you think I'm not as good as a woman?"

"Hello?" a little girl said. Her pale face was framed with curly black hair.

"Follow them, Gina," Daryl said. "You others, too."

More small children were coming out of the ship. Pablo led the way to the elevator as the others followed him. "Send everyone this way," Pablo said, as the elevator filled up with confused, half-asleep children. Some were forced to wait outside. "I'll be back for you," Pablo reassured them as the elevator door slid shut.

"Is everyone out now?" Penelope asked. "What happened to Sarah?"

"You and Rangor stay with these children," Dunn said. "I'll take a look inside." Dunn entered the ship and turned down its narrow passageway. The lifeboat wasn't much more than a people mover. There were rows of seats and emergency seatbelts on each side of the narrow passageway. Two small bathroom facilities took up the rear of the ship. Open overhead compartments stored blankets, medicines, and foodstuffs. Supplies were scattered all over the ship. "Anyone else in here?" Dunn asked Sarah.

Sarah stood silently next to a blood stained seat. She did not respond.

Dunn moved a little closer, and saw what Sarah was looking at. The little boy was not moving. Dunn put two fingers to the child's neck.

"He's dead, Sarah," Dunn said.

"Why, Uncle Luke?" Sarah asked, suddenly sobbing. "How? How could anyone get hurt in here?"

There was not a hard edge or even a harsh color anywhere in the lifeboat. All the surfaces were made of motion absorbing plastics and intellifabrics.

"Not in here," Dunn said softly. "Back on Transcendent. When the enemy is breathing down your neck and you are told you have to wait in line, even the best citizens don't always follow peacemen orders."

Sarah buried her face in the dark orange folds of Dunn's tunic.

"We don't have time, Sarah," Dunn said gently. "We have to get to the others, before they get hurt too."

"Do we just leave him here?" Sarah asked.

"There's nothing we can do for him on the *Orquidea*," Dunn said. "We have to go now."

"OK, Uncle Luke," Sarah said.

"Let's grab these supplies," Dunn said. He scavenged medicines, blankets, and food from overhead compartments. "Only what we can carry now. We don't have time for another trip back here."

Dunn and Sarah emerged back into the *Orquidea*. They set their armloads of supplies aside. The elevator had made its round trip from the observation deck. Penelope was loading a second group of children onto it.

"Well?" Penelope asked.

"No one else left on board," Dunn said.

"Keep an eye on the others, Rangor," Penelope said. "I'll be right back."

Rangor looked at the children and then at Penelope. She waved at him as the elevator door closed.

"Uh, hi kids," Rangor said.

"Who are you?" one of them asked.

"Closing in on the next lifeboat," Daphne said. "Getting ready to release this one."

"Don't disengage just yet," Dunn said.

Sarah looked at him in surprise. "Why not?"

"Show me the map again, Daphne," Dunn said. "Where are we in relation to the Trask fighters?"

The map flared up into the center of the room.

"We could be drinking tea with them in thirty-five minutes if you want," Daphne said.

Sarah's eyes widened in alarm. "Tea? Uncle Luke, you're not thinking of —"

"Of course not," Dunn said. "Daphne, I want you to throw the empty lifeboat at them."

"Oh yeah, that will really hurt them," Daphne said.

"I doubt it," Dunn said. "But maybe it will distract them. Maybe they can be tricked into going after the empty boats instead of blowing up the full ones."

The *Orquidea's* entranceway slid shut. "Disengaging lifeboat," Daphne said. "Revectoring the *Orquidea* for optimum angle and velocity. Combining ship torque and tractor charge to accelerate lifeboat trajectory. Firing lifeboat at the bad guys."

"Give me a situation map," Dunn said.

A glowing sphere expanded in the middle of the room. The *Orquidea* occupied the center point. A small yellow spark spun off from the cruise ship and headed roughly in the direction of the blinking red spots, representing the Trask fighters.

"It's not much, but it's all we've got," Dunn said. "We'll continue the strategy of tossing them the empty lifeboats. Try to lead them around in a circle, away from the live ones. Hopefully we can draw them away from the others, at least long enough for us to pick all of them up."

"Sure thing!" Daphne exclaimed.

"How long before we get to the next lifeboat?" Sarah asked.

"Docking now," Daphne said. "Preparing to open forward hatch..."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

### Philip Betancourt

Faint rays of diluted sunshine splashed into the quiet bedroom. The sturdy survivors of the thirteen minute journey from the sun, the Martian atmospheric refraction, and the window's protective tint had endured their long journey with but one sadistic goal in mind: To pound mercilessly on Philip Betancourt's tightly closed eyelids.

Another unavoidably miserable day had begun. Philip contemplated ordering the room's DP to close the curtains, to block out every symptom of the new dawn and inevitable afternoon and evening of inebriation and eventual unconsciousness that would follow. Then he remembered why he had left the curtains open in the first place; the same reason he did so every night before retiring.

Phillip was rich. He had money. Lots of it. It took hours to count it all. Guarding it was a full time job, and required an early start. The thought that someone might undermine him while he slept was the brutal awakening that faced him every day. He rushed through his morning toiletry, barely brushing his sparse sandy hair, and scurried down the short crimson lined hallway to his private office.

"Close the door," Philip snapped at his house DP. Breakfast could wait. His money could not.

Philip dropped onto his firm chair with a short tense breath of wary anticipation. This was his element, his spacious personal study, his seat of power, the long dark lounge that his wife complained bore the chocolatey color of overripe manna. She said it even had the same smell. Diana complained about everything, and Philip ignored every word she said. That was why she had a separate bedroom.

None of this mattered now. Even in the throne of his power,

Phillip darkened the HI. There was no guarantee of security, here or anywhere else. Within the light veiling, sound damping Holographic Interface, Phillip was surrounded by choices. What to check first? What area of his empire was under siege? How could he surprise his attackers today? Who would he find nibbling at his meat, watching him, waiting for a fatal sign of weakness? Who should he kill before he himself was killed?

Decades ago, he had tried to explain his daily vigilance to his children.

"Look, Paula," he said as the infant clung to him. His broad gesture took in the pictographic displays of balance sheets and corporate earnings reports. "You see all that? That's money. It's mine. Some day it might be yours. If I decide you can be trusted with it."

"Umph," Paula said.

"Let me put it like this," Phillip said. "You're sucking on that bottle like your life depends on it. What would you do if someone tried to take it from you?" Phillip grabbed the bottle out of Paula's small hand and held it out of her reach. The baby girl cried and grasped for the bottle. Phillip waited patiently as her face reddened and she screamed herself hoarse. He gave it back to her.

"You have to fight to get it back," Phillip told his daughter. "You can't let anyone take it from you. Now look. This is what your life really depends on." He provided the infant with a look at his personal holdings on Mars. Thousands of acres of plush manna fields terraced into the inside of the heavily cratered highlands sprawling along the southern side of the equator around the 330° longitude line. "You see? Betancourt Farms, the taste you can trust. Thank you, great-great-grandfather Francis Betancourt, for your cleverness and cunning, for being the brains behind the Anderson Pact. Your grateful progeny salute you."

Little Paula started to cry.

A few years later, Phillip tried to explain his efforts to Alexander, his second offspring.

"You think that manna in your baby bottle has more nutritive value per square centimeter than anything known to humanity,

right? Yes, I watch the commercials too. I paid for them. But here is something that will feed you for the rest of your life. If I decide you're worth it."

With a wave of his hand, Phillip conjured up his pharmaceutical subsidiary, Betanol, a zero gravity processing plant located in one of the primary Martian Lagrange points.

"Ugh," Alexander said in response to the sudden surrounding darkness. He dangled his feet over the thin Martian atmosphere, so far below, and gawked at the shining factory bubble.

"Daddy ships his manna extracts here to make drugs to cure cancer and radiation sickness or to be used as beauty aids," Phillip explained to the infant. "Some of the drugs are addictive. You will learn to appreciate what that means."

But Alexander did not appreciate his father's wisdom. He responded by drooling on Phillip's sleeve, and then falling asleep.

"You children are spoiled and fat," Phillip said to the sleeping youngster. "All the families are, especially the Avnis even though they started it all. You have all forgotten what it took to reach this point. You have all forgotten the Anderson Pact. In exchange for a comparatively small regular supply of manna, we got to cut Earth out of the economic picture for centuries. And we got easy embryos to give us cheap labor and a new consumer market."

Two decades later Alexander set off on a twelve-year journey to a neighboring solar system. Phillip did not expect him to return.

Phillip's third and final offspring, Richard, was spared the early infancy lecture on manna wealth. By that time Phillip had given up trying to reason with his progeny. Richard was now a happily married architect in Avni City with three children of his own.

Phillip turned his attention now to his star restaurant chain, the famous Manna Heaven brand. Every Manna Heaven restaurant served more than 100 manna dishes, each one a house specialty. With thousands of locations systemwide, Manna Heaven was one of the most popular upscale restaurant chains in the history of humanity.

Phillip's own father had never shown him any of this. He was too busy with his UN backed mission to save the synthegens. He had

no time for his own children. Even the Martian sprout community had criticized him, complaining that his time would be better spent improving conditions right here at home. Old Jack Betancourt had succeeded in nothing except bringing the Jovian war upon Mars and his own death upon himself.

Phillip frowned at the news from Manna Heaven. Outer System profits had been stuck in a downward spiral for days. He was still deciding what to do about the Trask. He only knew that they needed to feel his pain.

The slipping revenues around the Earth system were simply due to alignment issues. Mars and Earth lined up only once in about five hundred days. Transport costs would be astronomical, so to speak, until that happened again. Fortunately Venus was in a position to make up for the Earth system's losses. Phillip knew he could count on steady revenue from the Inner System.

Tiny golden lightning bolts flashed at the lower left portion of Phillip's vision, accompanied by soft mellow chimes that indicated a newly arrived message in his private mailbox. It was about time. Phillip raised his hand to activate the message, but he was interrupted mid-gesture by the dry voice of his personal DP.

"Newsstream item found," announced the Digital Person. It was all happening at once now, as he had expected. Phillip's newsstream search algorithm had yielded a result at almost the same moment as his mail receipt.

"Let me see it," Phillip said to the DP. He would attend to the newsstream first, and then he would look at his message.

A circle of light opened up in front of Phillip. "Breaking news from Oshrit Agriculturals." Kiryah Treves was a local announcer for MSSN, Martian Stream Services Network. Her avatar's pale skin and bright topaz lined red tunic combined to give her a stunning look. Phillip was more interested in the smoking scene she was describing.

"The view below is from an artificial dust stand on the Avni estate in Naim province," Treves announced. The Mset provided Phillip with the illusion that he was floating in space, descending gently toward a splash of scattered black metallic debris. "The wreckage you

are seeing belongs to a late model PowerShot flyer owned by Samuel Belkins, son of Noam Belkins, a major shareholder in Oshrit Agriculturals. Rescue workers are on their way to the scene now." Treves paused, too obviously for dramatic effect. "There is every indication that Samuel Belkins was inside the flyer at the time of the explosion. What's more, he was not alone. MSSN has learned that Samuel Belkins was accompanied by Dana Clewis, a female Oshrit Agriculturals employee." Two substreams had opened up to accompany Phillip on his descent to the wreckage. On the left, Samuel Belkins waved to reporters on his twenty-first birthday. On the right, a three dimensional representation of Dana Clewis stared coldly at the photographer for her Oshrit Agriculturals employee ID badge. "The cause of the explosion is still unknown," Kiryah Treves continued.

Maybe not to you, Kiryah. "That's fine," Phillip said to his DP. The newsstream with its accompanying substreams disappeared. Phillip was left looking at the Manna Heaven financials again.

Phillip gestured his mailbox into existence and found the message he expected. It contained several embedded stream elements. He opened the first to see a teardrop shaped black flyer landing outside of one of the Avni sprouttowns. A gangly figure in a gray pressure suit left the residential hive and walked toward the black flyer. Phillip moved in close to the sprout's helmet and noted the red hair and bright green eyes. It was her. Too bad. It wasn't her fault that her boyfriend was such a talker, but she knew too much for a sprout. The long female figure climbed into the black flyer. It rose straight up into the thin Martian atmosphere on its multicolored energies. After some apparently random navigation, the flyer settled on a completed dust column and was motionless for a while. A gentle rocking motion developed... Phillip chuckled at the fireless explosion. At least they had died happy. Phillip studied the additional streams in his message. They contained further information, but he had seen enough. He added the streams into his private collection and buried them in a deep restricted corner of his personal archives.

That was one big mouth that would blab no more. What would Jack Betancourt have said if he knew about the existence of the Earth manna geneprint? Probably would have given it away for free.

Phillip closed his mailbox and opened one of his off planet untraceable bank accounts. He transferred the tiniest fraction of his money into a private Ceres bank account. The elimination of Samuel Belkins and his unfortunate girlfriend was well worth the small price he paid for it.

Phillip's office flashed yellow with the glow of tiny lightning bolts at the lower left corner of his vision. Phillip joined the caller in a virtual meeting room shared by the upper executive layer of the Five Families. They sat comfortably around a table of plush Martian woods in a breezy boardroom decorated with paintings of manna orchards and their fathers who came before them.

"Bokr tov, Phillip," said the head of AgriTek, Joshua Shore.

Phillip responded in English. "Good morning."

"Did you see the news?" Shore asked.

"Don't play games," Phillip said. "What news are you talking about?"

"One of the Avni kids is dead. Looks like foul play to me."

"I don't think they've had time to investigate yet."

"Come on, Phillip. Maybe I shouldn't have told you about that permadoc after all, with its recipe for Earth manna. Can I help it if Sam Belkins spills his guts after a few drinks with my kids?"

"You think I did this?" Phillip asked. His avatar put on his best shocked face.

"We have been suspicious of your tactics for a while," said Shore. "If I hadn't investigated this matter, you wouldn't even know there was a permadoc. And you certainly wouldn't know what it contained."

Phillip leaned forward and flattened his palms down on the virtual tabletop. "What about you, Joshua? You've got it pretty good here. I don't see you in a big rush to get back to the Promised Land. You've got people that could take care of this too."

Shore's handsome avatar sneered. "Didn't you know? We already are in the Promised Land. It all depends on which interpretation of the Old Testament you prefer."

"Then maybe you would like to stay here a while longer," Phillip said. "Competition from Earth could hurt that."

"Nonsense," Shore said. "Earth is populated by savages who don't even know we exist. The Anderson Pact saw to that. Even if they had manna, they wouldn't know what to do with it."

"You are naïve to think that they could stay ignorant forever," Phillip said.

"So you did arrange for the Belkins boy's death," Shore said.

"I had nothing to do with it," Phillip lied.

"I wonder if you would be so positive about that if you weren't hiding behind that avatar," Shore said.

"You want to talk to me face to face? You know where I live," Phillip said.

"Don't be silly. We don't need to meet physically. No need to start rumors."

"Have it your way. I have business to attend to."

"Shalom," Shore said, and cut the connection.

The Families these days did not appreciate their power, or what it had taken to gain it, or what it would take to keep it. The sacrifices that Phillip made were for the good of all. He would die someday, without the respect he deserved, but it would be worth it to maintain the balance of power.

Phillips turned his attention back to the Manna Heaven summaries. The Trasks had to be made to feel his pain.



CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

## Tomas Almeida

The blaring alarm exploded into December Consensus Defender, screaming its way through the flight deck, the galley, the living quarters, and right into the Mset streamage from the heavyball game between the Roth Raiders and the Callisto Sharks. Tomas Almeida immediately waved away the interruption with an abrupt jerk of his hand. He had money on this game!

“Player 28 has intercepted the ball,” the announcer said. “The Sharks have it again!”

“No!” Tomas cried. He tightened up on the edge of his seat, invisibly perched at the center of the heavyball sphere. For fifty meters in every direction, two teams of nine players each struggled for a mottled yellow ball along a dull spherical gravity slope littered with holo-ads for beer, sport flyers, and steamy streamies for mature audiences only. The Sharks in their blue jerseys faced off against the Raiders wearing yellow.

“Player 28 is Josh Kastel, a native son of Atlantis. Kastel has the ball. Does he think he’s going to make it to Raiders home base? Raider tacklers Bob Yanick and Jean Gothard have him in their sights!”

“Stop him!” Tomas yelled furiously.

“Kastel blows right through them!” the announcer said. “He’s at the 20 degree angle line now and no one is between him and home. But wait — look at the opposite side of the court!”

Tomas frantically gestured the view around. Millions of other viewers must have done likewise, because a holo-ad for Deep beer — deeply satisfying beer from the deeps of Callisto — suddenly sprang up in his line of sight. Tomas angrily waved it out of his way.

"Someday I'll subscribe to the commercial free streamcast," Tomas muttered to himself.

"Raider tackler Rick Shim blows away Shark gravity guard Frank Boyd!" the announcer exclaimed. Blue jerseyed Rick Shim body slammed his yellow shirted nemesis. "Shim is heading for the gravity spout! He's going to make a crosscourt jump to block Kastel! Does Kastel even see Shim coming? There he goes!"

Rick Shim threw himself into the nearest of the six spherically opposite gravity spouts. It grabbed him and hurled him straight up into the air.

"Get him, Shim!" Tomas screamed, gesturing his point of view around to keep up with the fast moving athlete. Another holo-ad appeared at Shim's destination, the gravity free zone at the center of the sphere. It was an advertisement for the new Mark Sadoff *Warrior from Beyond* streamie, the story of a soldier who journeyed to one of the neighboring solar systems and returned twenty years later to find his homeland destroyed by pirates. Tomas didn't think he would care much for the ending. Shim drove straight into the holo-ad. Paralyzed by suspense, Tomas was powerless to wave the ad out of his vision.

"Look out Shim! The Sharks are coming! Mark Webb and Luis Mendez are moving in on you!" the announcer said. "But will they be in time?"

"Look out Shim!" Tomas cried, his gray and black hair falling in his face and stinging his eyes with sweat.

Webb and Mendez launched themselves from gravity spouts at opposite ends of the playing sphere just as Shim reached the weightless zone in the center. Shim flipped his body around to aim feet first toward the Raiders home base. He was too late. Webb dove into the no gravity zone and grabbed Shim's ankle while Mendez hit from the other angle and put a hand under his shoulder.

"Grabbing is only permitted in the no gravity zone and these two are surely making the most of it," the announcer said.

"Kick them away, Shim!" Marcos yelled. He was close enough to smell the sweat on all three players.

The two Shark teammates spun Shim clockwise and pushed him outward toward the edge of the zone.

"It doesn't look good for Shim," the announcer said. "Wait — Look at that speed! Shim does a reverse flip and spins Webb right out of the no gravity zone! Webb is caught completely by surprise!"

Mark Webb tumbled out of zero gravity, unable to control his angular momentum. Normal gravity yanked at him from nearly fifty meters above ground level. Webb angled a dive for the closest gravity spout but he missed it. Ten meters above the floor, the rainbow glitter of the safety beam caught him and brought him gently down.

"Looks like Mark Webb will be sitting out the rest of this inning," the announcer said. "Luis Mendez might be a little luckier, but not much."

Mendez flew spinning out of the no gravity zone and crossed right into a gravity spout. The spout carried him firmly away from the Raiders home base. He watched helplessly as Shim vectored toward the spout that would take him toward Kastel.

"Shim fought off the Shark, but will he make it to Kastel before he scores?" the announcer asked.

Shim twisted out of the gravity spout before it could lower him to the floor, launching himself at Kastel from three meters in the air. A sleek red FlashFire Mark 9, from Sterling Sapphire Industries in the Rocklands, flashed holographically around the athlete but Tomas instantly waved the sport flyer away.

"Look at Shim go!" the announcer screamed. "They call this game heavyball because the ball is not allowed in the no gravity zone. You can be sure Kastel wishes that Shim wasn't allowed there either."

"Get him!" Tomas cried. "Get him!"

Kastel raised his arm to throw the ball into the Sharks' meter-high and meter-thick home base, tapered slightly at the top like a miniature volcano.

"He's going to throw it!" the announcer shrieked. "Will Shim make it in time?"

"Block him, Shim!" Tomas yelled.

"Tomas Almeida, are you going to spend the rest of your life in that lounge?" His wife shrieked at him in a voice shriller than the

ship alarm and louder than the heavyball game. How the burny blood did she sneak up behind him? “Didn’t you hear the alarm? Don’t you want to know what set off those Jovian mines?”

“Later!” Tomas yelled. “I’m busy now!”

“Shut that dented Mset off and get to work!” the old wreckage rot yelled, stepping through the Mset illusion. She raised her arms and waved the mediastreams into silence.

“Listen, you,” Tomas growled. “Whatever set the mine field off isn’t going anywhere. At least not very fast.” He waved the Mset back on and amped up the volume. “Now let me finish my game!”

“I want out of this rock!” Andreia yelled. “I hate hiding here and waiting! Let’s see what the mines caught us and then let’s go join the others!”

“We’ll stay hidden in this asteroid until I’m ready to go,” Tomas said. “You need to be more like me. Find yourself a hobby.”

“Oh yeah? What if someone else comes poking around this wreckage?”

“What if they do? My hellbolt carriages are loaded. We can deal with them.”

“So what’s the chief going to say when he finds out you’re watching the game on the Mset while the debris gets scattered into space?”

“Marcos is watching the same game, and you can be dented sure that no screeching woman is getting in his way,” Tomas said. “We’ll catch up with that wreckage in time. Now get out of here and let the Raiders win!”

“Oh, watch your stupid game then,” Andreia said, turning her back and disappearing into the heavyball court, muttering something about lazy husbands and the one that got away.

The Raiders lost, of course.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

### Olusegun Obasanjo

The elevator door slid silently open and Captain Olusegun Obasanjo stepped out onto the fully active flight deck of the Hercules battleship *George Sulmers*.

“Captain on deck!” announced a crisp female voice. Commander Jacqueline Davis broke away from a conversation with a group of other senior officers.

Obasanjo waved away the salutes. “Return to stations.” Flight systems indicators shifted out of his way as he approached the U shaped command center at the fore end of the flight deck. The captain took a moment to assess the situation map that hovered in holographic space around him.

The map focused in on their position outside the Trask claimed portion of the Koronis. The little green Hercules in the center was the *George Sulmers*. The battleship was surrounded by light green replicas of itself projected into space to disguise its true position from the enemy. Smaller Eureka scoutships spread out around the *George Sulmers*, their tiny blue blips moving in irregular search patterns dictated by the *George Sulmers*’s Digital Person. The red dots were enemy ships; the yellow points were enemy military installations and therefore potential targets.

The Trask conflict was stagnating, and it was mostly due to lack of reliable intelligence. There was no trace of the hijacked FedEx freighter, nor any of its cargo or passengers.

Obasanjo altered the map’s perspective to inspect another series of red dots approaching Belt center at 30 degrees off the ecliptic and coming his way. The Martian fleet had been flirting with his position

for days. Jovian Alliance Intelligence had not been able to provide an explanation.

An amber lightning bolt throbbed at Obasanjo's lower left vision. It was Chapman from Security Force. Obasanjo tongued up the endogram.

"Captain, please excuse the interruption," Chapman said. His strong features were calm; this was no emergency.

"Go ahead, Lieutenant," Obasanjo said.

"Pele mine installation K57D has detonated, sir." The Peles were an older model of proximity sensitive mine. They were named after a volcanic plume on Jupiter's low orbiting moon Io, indisputably the most volcanically active body in the solar system. "Streamage from the area indicates that a Trask patrol boat was destroyed. Would you like to see it?"

"I'll take your word for it," Obasanjo said. He glanced past Chapman's endograph toward the holomap, gesturing the K57D installation into focus. It was on the south clockwise border of the Trask Republic, perhaps thirty light seconds from their present position. Peles were usually deployed in groups of ten. The map indicated four Peles remaining in that sector. Obasanjo frowned. He did not see any other ships in that area. "Was the patrol boat alone?"

"As far as we can determine, one Trask patrol stumbled into the minefield at high speed and set off multiple explosions," Chapman responded.

Only one? At high speed? "What was its trajectory?" Obasanjo asked.

"Given its speed and course, we estimate it was headed to the MilCom military complex on Dactyl. On the chance that it was carrying something of importance, we did a prodar scan and an analysis of the wreckage logs. There was a permadoc on board, apparently of UN origin, age indeterminate. We are recommending retrieval."

"Good work, Lieutenant," Obasanjo said. "Anything else?"

"No, thank you, sir," Chapman said.

Obasanjo cut the connection. Who did he have in that area? He pointed to his situation map, repositioning the center and expanding

the covered area. A solitary white blip appeared in front of him. One of the supply ships bringing food and medicines from back home. The details would be easy to determine, but Obasanjo preferred to involve his chief tactical officer. He decided to communicate the old fashioned way.

"Commander Davis," Obasanjo called.

The Commander looked up from the flight console she was examining and turned hard blue eyes toward him. "Yes, sir?"

"Take a look here," Obasanjo said.

The Commander approached where Obasanjo indicated, studying the map with intense interest.

"A Trask patrol boat has been destroyed by a Pele mine installation," Obasanjo said. "Chapman thinks the debris is worth investigating."

"What does Chapman expect to find?" Davis asked.

"A permadoc with UN markings," Obasanjo said.

"Carried by the Trask? Definitely worth a look. We have a supply ship in that area, an unarmed cargo ship commandeered under the Nelson Act," Davis said.

"Who is the pilot?" Obasanjo asked.

"Lieutenant Akemi Yamakawa is aboard with two Security Force agents, Ben Lloyd and Mike Farnam," Commander Davis said. "They are still several days away from Trask space. I haven't sent them an escort yet. There don't appear to be any Trask ships in the area, and who else would attack a ship under Jovian registry?"

"Akemi Yamakawa has already lost one ship," Obasanjo pointed out. "And we do need the provisions she is carrying."

"Her cargo ship is the only one in the area," Davis said. "We will have to move before the Trasks try to recover the permadoc themselves. We can last a few days longer without her supplies. This may be our only opportunity."

"You're right," Obasanjo said. "Bring Yamakawa and her crew back safely. You can turn the permadoc over to Lieutenant Chapman."

"Yes, sir," Davis said.

Captain Obasanjo dismissed the commander and turned back to his holomap to study the approaching Mars fleet once more.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

## Charles Dunn

Dunn was changing a diaper. The procedure was not complex, and he had seen it done before. He had never performed it himself without adult supervision. Daphne was no help at all.

"Have you seen the safety wipes?" Dunn silently asked.

"My designers did not anticipate this," Daphne said. "I have no links to your olfactory nerves. If I did, I would happily shut them down for you."

"I can take it," Dunn said, "but I would like to get it over with. Where are those safety wipes?"

"You are doing very well," Daphne said. "He hasn't urinated on you yet."

"Daphne," Dunn said.

"Pablo took them," Daphne said. "There was another child in need."

Dunn stared desperately at the mess in front of him. "More in need than this one?"

"Pablo thought so," Daphne said.

Dunn looked frantically around the observation deck. He was surrounded by tiny tornados of excited little children. They had broken up into chaotic eddies of child's games, preteen gossip, and excited sightseeing.

"I need help," Dunn said.

"At least these kids are healthy," Daphne said. "Daryl and the others have their hands full tending the wounded in the guest cabins."

"And the supplies won't last forever," Dunn said. "I know."

"Would you like to ask the Trasks for help?" Daphne asked. "They're not far behind us."

"I think they've done enough," Dunn said.

"Then maybe Rangor," Daphne said.

"Rangor's on police duty," Dunn said.

"I know," Daphne said. "He's a natural. In a synthegetic kind of way."

The security oriented synthegeen had already broken up a few fights and rescued a group of children who had locked themselves in the galley freezer. Most of the children took for granted the presence of a peaceman on board the *Orquidea*. They assumed he had been sent on one of the lifeboats to watch out for them.

"Maybe Sarah," Daphne said.

"She just left for her break," Dunn said. "She's been on her feet for hours. I don't think she'll be back soon."

"You don't think so?" Daphne said.

"Hi, Uncle Luke," Sarah said. Dunn spun around. The little girl was walking up behind him, her arms full of sweet smelling supplies. "Thanks for watching little Tommy while I was gone. At least I think that's his name." She smiled giddily.

The darkness under Sarah's eyes touched the tops of her cheeks. "Why did you come back so soon?" Dunn asked her.

"I just went to get some changing stuff from the supplies we got from the lifeboats," Sarah said. "Hey! You started on him already. Didn't you see I ran out of wipes here?"

"Yes, I saw," Dunn said.

"Just not in time," Daphne silently smirked.

"Let me take those from you, Sarah," Dunn said. He placed the various wipes, lotions, and diapers on the dining table that was being used as a changing station. The table's smooth surface was softened with bright white towels brought in from the guest rooms.

"Hey, don't take everything," Sarah said. "I have to bring some to Pablo."

"Pablo must really have his hands full," Dunn said.

"He has help," Sarah said. "Here, take these." Sarah placed some supplies on the table.

"Thanks." Dunn accepted the proffered safety wipes and immediately applied them to the giggling baby boy on the table in front of him.

"You're doing good, Uncle Luke," Sarah said. "I'll be back in a few minutes." She quickly disappeared into the surrounding children.

"Did Sarah get any sleep last night?" Dunn asked Daphne as he fastened the diapers around little Tommy.

"A few hours," Daphne said. "Mostly she just roamed the ship. The observation deck, the promenade, the living quarters. She even looked in on you a couple of times. I'm sure that if the twins would let her in the drive room or on the flight deck, she would have checked there, too."

"She's got to stop that," Dunn said.

"Yes. Her search patterns are very inefficient. Finally she fell asleep right over there, by that group of kids against the viewglass underwall."

Dunn placed the baby back on the pile of soft white bedstuff where he had found him. The child crawled for about a meter and then fell asleep.

"Are you going to do another one?" Daphne asked.

"Let me just check this one," Dunn said. He reached for another crawling baby.

"Oh, you don't have to do that, Uncle Luke," Sarah said. She was back from making her delivery. Her hands were empty now. "I'm ready to take over again."

"Shouldn't you get some rest?" Dunn said.

"There's too much to do right now," Sarah said.

"Need any help then?" Dunn asked.

"No, don't worry," Sarah said. "I can take care of this." She put another baby on the table and reached for the safety wipes. Her little red and yellow tunic was stained with blood, sweat, and tears, far beyond its ability to clean itself.

"She thinks if she stays busy long enough, she will find Robin," Dunn said silently to Daphne.



"She won't," Daphne said. "I tried to tell her. He wasn't on any of the lifeboats."

"I know," Dunn articulated.

Sarah looked up from the restless baby. "What's the matter, Uncle Luke?"

"It doesn't make sense to me that there's too much to do but you don't need any help," Dunn told Sarah.

Sarah produced a quick smile and glanced at Dunn with blood-shot eyes sunken into swollen cheeks. "I'm sure you have lots of other things to do."

"Let's go," Daphne said to Dunn alone. "We do have other things to worry about."

"Like the Trask cutting off from the Ceres Nation? Most of them were smart enough to break pursuit hours ago. Let the three that are left chase us into the unclaimed territories if they want. They've already exhausted most of their fuel and firepower. They'll disperse in a day or two."

"I wasn't referring to the Trask," Daphne said.

"I'll get lunch started," Dunn told Sarah.

"Good idea, Uncle Luke." Sarah did not look up from the little baby girl.

Dunn turned toward the upright cylinder of one of the passenger elevators. It was Elevator I. Red lights glowed around its base. A group of children rushed past him, almost knocking him down. They were an energetic bunch of boys and girls, ranging in age from about four to maybe ten years old. "Hey, you kids!" By now Dunn had long lost hope of remembering all of their names.

"Hi, Uncle Luke!" they all yelled.

"Friends of yours?" Daphne said.

"Never saw them before in my life," Dunn said.

"You may want to hold off on your lunch preparations," Daphne said.

"Why?" Dunn asked.

"Tag, you're it!" one of the children cried from the far end of the observation deck. The group shifted course and dashed back toward Dunn.

"I have been observing a behavioral anomaly in one of the children," Daphne said.

Dunn attempted to dodge the onrushing group by stepping back against the viewglass wall. "Just one of them?" Dunn grabbed the convenience rail to prevent himself from being toppled. A child stepped on Dunn's foot.

"Sorry, Uncle Luke!" the boy yelled as he rushed past.

"There is only one passenger who triggers my security alerts," Daphne said.

"Amazing," Dunn said. "They all trigger mine."

"Perhaps our selection criteria are different," Daphne said.

"Probably," Dunn said. "Are you saying there is a spy among the children?"

"A spy, a criminal, a psychopath, who knows," Daphne said.

"A Trask spy, maybe?" Dunn said.

"They could have had people on Transcendent," Daphne said. "After all, they had a whole family on Roth City."

Except it wasn't a family any more. Eden was shot dead by an investigator and little Eric was blown apart by Jovian mines. Sarah still thought Eric was safe, and Dunn wasn't going to tell her any different.

"They wouldn't have attacked Transcendent if their own people were aboard," Dunn said.

"Sure they would," Daphne said. "We're talking about the Trasks here."

"Maybe," Dunn said. "So what is this behavioral anomaly you're talking about?"

"Keep hanging on to that convenience rail," Daphne said. "It will be easier if I show you."

An endostream opened up in front of Dunn's eyes. Daphne kept the endogram translucent so that Dunn could still see the swarming children around him.

"I provided a timestamp for your convenience," Daphne said.

"How thoughtful of you."

"Just watch."

The view was taken at 10:08 that morning from just outside one of the men's restrooms. One of the boys was walking toward the restroom door. Daphne locked the stream and targeted the teenager's face. He wore a tunic of irregular brown over his slight build, dashed with silver and gold. Dark straight hair covered his ears, and his features were marked by wide green eyes and surprisingly thick black eyebrows. Daphne shifted the view, circling all the way around the boy's head and finally returning to his face.

"Was he hurt?" Dunn asked.

"You mean the plasmeds," Daphne said.

"Most of his face is covered with them," Dunn said. "You can't really get a good look at his cheeks or chin. And that pale plasmed color is not an exact match to the rest of his skin."

"Exactly," Daphne said.

"The *Orquidea* doesn't have the facilities to create custom medical supplies," Dunn said.

"How convenient for him," Daphne said.

"Lots of these kids had to fight to get aboard their lifeboats," Dunn said. "He's not the only one with plasmeds on his face."

"I believe he is hiding his identity," Daphne said.

"You are too suspicious," Dunn said. "He's just a kid."

"Take a look at this," Daphne said. The endostream time stamp jumped to 10:15. The same boy was now leaving the restroom. Once again Daphne locked in on his face.

"He was in the restroom for seven minutes," Dunn said.

"Yes," Daphne said.

"So?" Dunn asked.

"Don't you see?" Daphne asked.

"See what?" Dunn asked.

"His forehead plasmed has shifted two centimeters to his right," Daphne said.

"So where's the fat payload? He probably removed it to clean his wound. He didn't put it back exactly the same way."

"The plasmed on right cheek shifted two and half centimeters along a 31 degree angle from its previous center," Daphne said.

"Next you'll be telling me the one on his chin shifted too," Dunn said.

"Downward, less than a centimeter," Daphne said.

"So he cleaned his wounds and applied fresh plasmeds. You can't expect him to replace everything in the same exact position," Dunn said.

"I don't," Daphne said. "But I do expect him to consistently cover injured areas."

"Doesn't he?" Dunn asked.

"Not always. By comparing time frames and sight angles since he emerged from his lifeboat two days ago, I have determined that there is no visible injury to his chin. He is faking it. Look." Daphne flashed a series of endogramic representations of the boy's face across Dunn's vision one after the other. Each one was time stamped minutes or hours apart. "You see how the plasmed moves around? It covers different areas of his chin at different times. If you composite the bare skin in these pictures, you get this." It was a picture of the boy without the plasmed on his chin.

"So he doesn't really need that plasmed after all," Dunn said.

"Not for any medical reason," Daphne said.

"Do you recognize him?" Dunn asked.

"No," Daphne said. "There is not enough visible face for accurate determination of identity."

"Hair color may be faked as well," Dunn said.

"Not just the color," Daphne said. "Texture and density. Head hair and eyebrows don't match the body type. I can extrapolate them to some extent, but there is likely to be variation."

"Has he gotten into any arguments?" Dunn asked. "Has he hurt anyone?"

"No," Daphne said. "He keeps to himself. He takes his meals after everyone else finishes and he sleeps as far away as he can from the others."

"Let's go have a talk with him," Dunn said. "Where is he now?"

"Promenade level, aft section." Daphne cleared away the endograph.

"Just below us." Dunn started across the dining deck toward the waiting elevator.

"Try not to trip over any babies," Daphne said.

"Call Rangor," Dunn said. "Have him meet us there."

"Rangor is in one of the passengers' quarters with Penelope," Daphne said.

"Let Penelope know what's going on. She can join us if she wants," Dunn said.

"Be careful," Daphne said. "They make a lot of noise if you step on them."

Dunn swerved around another crawling infant.

"Where are you going, Uncle Luke?"

It was Sarah. She didn't need to be involved in this.

"Nothing to worry about, heartlight," Dunn said.

"Most of the children have been changed now," Sarah said. "Pablo and Gloria and Mingxue are taking care of the rest. I can help you make lunch if you want."

Pablo and who and who?

"Isn't that nice," Daphne told Dunn. "Pablo is making new friends."

"I'll do lunch later," Dunn said to Sarah. "I'm heading down to the promenade right now."

"I'll come with you," Sarah said.

"Looks like you won't be able to stop her from joining you," Daphne said to Dunn.

"OK," Dunn said. "Let's go."

They stepped into the elevator together.

"Rangor and Penelope are on their way," Daphne said silently. "They are taking Elevator 4."

The elevator door slid open. They had reached Deck 3, the promenade level. Dunn stepped out. The older kids were on this deck. A few of them strolled restlessly around the promenade, talking quietly and staring out the gently curved window at the cold still lights in the distant darkness.

"Hi, Uncle Luke," said a dark skinned girl with tight curly black hair.

"Hello," Dunn said.

"Hi," Sarah said, smiling.

The girl nodded and walked away from them.

Dunn motioned to Sarah. "Follow me. Penelope and Rangor are going to join us." He set off down the promenade toward Elevator 4.

"What's going on?" Sarah asked.

"One of our passengers is acting suspiciously," Dunn said. "We are going to have a talk with him. Are you sure you still want to be here?"

"What? Yes! Has he hurt any of the children?"

"No," Dunn told Sarah, "but he might. He is hiding his identity. We want to find out why."

Penelope and Rangor stepped off the elevator.

"Over here," Dunn called.

"Uncle Luke," Penelope said. "Daphne showed the streamage to Rangor and me."

"I know," Dunn said. "Let's try to keep this quiet."

Rangor nodded his head.

"I don't even remember him coming aboard," Penelope said.

"I saw him," Rangor said. "He came in the sixth lifeboat."

"What does he look like?" Sarah asked.

"Daphne, let's go dark," Dunn said. "Please stream us the target visual and his current location."

A sudden sphere of darkness sprang up to surround them. Inside, a tiny dot of light expanded to reveal a straight slice of the *Orquidea's* promenade deck. A youngster of about sixteen or seventeen years old leaned against the sturdy guard rail and stared into space. He was oriented outward, so that his features were difficult to distinguish. A young couple walked past him, hand in hand. The boy did not turn his head.

"This is realtime streamage from the *Orquidea's* security system," Daphne said so that the small group could all hear.

"That's him right there," Dunn said. "Thanks, Daphne. Please clear it up now."

The security streamage vanished and the dark HI lifted. A few children were looking at them curiously.

"Hi, Uncle Luke," one of them said.

Dunn nodded at the little boy.

"Let's get moving," Penelope said quietly. "We're attracting attention here."

"Right," Dunn said. He led them slowly toward the spot where the disguised boy was standing.

"I don't remember ever seeing that boy around either, Penelope," Sarah said.

"All we really know about him is that he has been keeping to himself and he appears to be disguised," Dunn said.

"What do you want to do?" Penelope asked.

"Get him away from the others first," Dunn said.

"Like where?" Penelope asked. "All the guest quarters are full. And I'm not bringing him into my quarters."

"You're right," Dunn said. "There really isn't anywhere."

"The brig?" Rangor asked.

"If we need to," Dunn said. "But right now I don't want him to know that the *Orquidea* even has a brig."

"Let's just surround him then, until we find out who he is," Penelope said. "We'll make sure he can't run or escape while we're talking to him."

"Sounds good," Dunn said. "Sarah, are you OK with that?"

"Yes," Sarah said. "We have to find out who he is."

"We will," Dunn said grimly.

"There he is," Penelope whispered.

"Rangor," Dunn whispered. "I'll go behind him and face him from the other side. You stay behind him. The rest of you block his retreat back this way. You got it?"

They all nodded their heads.

"Sarah, Penelope, if he tries to hurt you, just get out of his way. Daphne can track his movements through the ship's security system."

"Track him and whack him," Daphne quipped so that only Dunn could hear. "Sounds like fun."

Both girls nodded.

Dunn broke off from the group and moved quickly ahead of the children. He slipped behind the boy without even glancing at him. Anyone watching would have thought that he didn't even notice the youth standing there. He stopped right next to the boy and turned toward him.

"Hi there," Dunn said.

"Hello, Uncle Luke," the boy said. He shifted his weight uncomfortably but did not turn his head.

"So you know who I am?" Dunn said.

Penelope and Sarah approached from the boy's other side. Rangor took up a position behind him.

"Everybody knows you," the boy said. "You're Uncle Luke. You're in charge here."

"Is that what you heard?" Penelope exclaimed.

The boy folded his arms across his chest and continued to look straight ahead. He managed to shrug.

"This is my ship," Penelope said. "Mine and my brother's."

"It's a good ship," the boy said.

"So you know who I am," Dunn said. "Sort of. But who are you?"

"My name is Nelson Blackburne," the boy said.

"Nice to meet you, Nelson," Dunn said. He held out his hand.

"Standing by for DNA analysis," Daphne said internally.

But Nelson did not return Dunn's greeting. He kept his arms folded. "I'm sorry. I don't feel well."

Dunn's outstretched hand dropped to his side. "That's all right. A lot of people here have been hurt."

"Yeah," Penelope said. "We wouldn't want anyone else to hurt them even more."

"We try to take care of everyone," Sarah said. "We won't let anyone hurt the children."

"I appreciate your rescuing us," the boy said. "I thought we were lost for sure. I've never been in a lifeboat before."

"How's your face?" Dunn asked. "Penelope is a trained medic."

"She is?" Daphne silently exclaimed.

"Let Penelope take a look," Sarah said.

"No, thank you," Nelson said. "I don't want to bother you. I'll be all right." He hunched down a little, bringing his shoulders inward. "Please, leave me alone."

"Let Penelope take a look," Sarah repeated.

Nelson tried to back away, but he bumped into Rangor's unwavering stance.

"Oh come on," Penelope said. "This is ridiculous. Rangor! Grab him!"

"No!" Nelson protested.

Rangor was behind the boy, an elbow grasped in each hand. He stepped back and pulled. It was enough to break the boy's balance, but not enough to topple him. It forced him to lean on Rangor for support. Between Rangor's firm grip and the promenade's close outer wall, with Dunn and Penelope on either side of him, Nelson did not have room to maneuver.

"Please," Nelson said, struggling against Rangor's firm grip. "Stay away."

"We're going to find out what you're hiding," Sarah threatened, shaking an index finger at him. "We're going to find out who you really are."

"Whether you like it or not," Penelope said. She reached over for the first plasmid.

"Don't!" Nelson yelled. "I need that!"

One of the teenage boys passing nearby stopped to watch. "What's going on?"

"Everything's OK," Dunn said. "Just keep moving along."

"Give me that back!" Nelson screamed.

Penelope tossed the plasmid to the floor. "There's nothing wrong with your chin."

"Uncle Luke, look," Sarah said. "His chin is OK."

"Please stop," Nelson's face reddened. He was almost crying.

"Not yet," Penelope said. With a wicked smile, she grabbed the plasmid from his forehead and threw it at the carpet.

"There's nothing wrong with his face," Sarah said, almost disbelievingly.

"Nothing at all," Penelope said. "No wound, no bruise, no scar, not even a pimple. This guy is a fake." She pulled off the plasmid from his cheek and dropped it in surprise.

"Hey," Sarah said.

"Huh?" Penelope said.

"Wow," Rangor said.

"Whoops," Dunn said.

"No fair," Daphne said. "This scenario was never loaded into my system!"

Penelope and Sarah pushed Rangor out of the way. Nelson barely caught his balance as the two girls frantically ripped off his thick dark fake eyebrows and hair.

"Ouch!" the boy yelled.

"It's Ned Trynk!" Sarah and Penelope shouted together. "It's Ned Trynk!"

"Ned Trynk?" said a brown haired girl who was walking along the promenade. She wore a dark green tunic with swirling black designs and carried a fat glittering bag under her arm, stuffed probably with the only personal effects she had time to grab as she fled Transcendent. She stopped to take a closer look.

"I'm sorry," Dunn said to Ned.

"It's really you!" Sarah squealed. "It's really you!"

"Hey! It's really him!" The shout came from somewhere down along the promenade. Dunn did not bother to look for the shouter.

"Who?" shouted someone else.

"Ned Trynk!" a boy yelled. "You know, the Comet Drop-pings?"

"For real?" someone said.

"Tom Zyst is cuter," said one teenage girl with disdain.

"Huh," said Ned.

"My mom doesn't think so," said another girl.

"I don't believe it," another boy said.

"What?" said the girl. "About my mom?"

"So if that's Ned Trynk, where are Tom Zyst and Robbie Dyle?" someone asked.

"I haven't seen them," Ned said quietly. Only those standing close to him could hear. "I don't think they made it."

"Look!" said the girl with the green tunic and glittering hand-bag. "It really is Ned Trynk! Come see for yourself! Hi, Ned! I'm Suzette."

"We knew you were on Transcendent," Penelope babbled. "We even went to your concert our last night there. You were terrific! But we didn't even think about you being on the ship!"

"I'm glad you guys came along," Ned said.

"Welcome to the *Orquidea*!" Sarah said happily.

Penelope shot her a corrosive look. "That's my line."

"You already told me," Ned said. "When I first came aboard."

"Will you sing 'The Anomaly' for us?" a tall blond boy asked.

"I can't now," Ned said. "I just don't feel it."

"Aw, you could sing something sad, then," somebody said. "How about 'Spread Petals'?"

"That's not us, that's Embryo of a Dream," Ned said.

"I'm sorry we did this to you," Dunn said, as the crowd thickened around them. "Penelope? Can't you help?"

Penelope's mouth hung wide open. "With what?"

A mass of youngsters was collecting around the internationally famous singer.

"Hi, Ned," someone said. "When you have time, can you take a look at my demo streamie?"

"Could you sing 'Faces'?" someone asked. "Please?"

"Rangor," Dunn said. "They're crushing us. We need to keep them back."

"That can't be Ned Trynk," someone said. "Look what he's wearing!"

"Stay back," Rangor said. He pushed gently against the kids closest to him, but it was not enough. "I don't know, Uncle Luke. There are too many."

"All of you, break it up," Dunn said. "Back off. Give Ned some breathing room!"

Sarah was among the younger children on this deck. "Help,

Uncle Luke!" She was pressed against the promenade's outer wall by two teenage girls who towered over her.

Penelope finally pulled herself out of whatever stupefying gravity well she had fallen into. She tore her eyes off Ned Trynk and took a look her young friend. "Hey! Get back, you two. What do you think you're doing to Sarah? Everybody, get back!"

"You don't tell us what to do!" one of the girls said.

"Go suck a supernova," Penelope snapped. "You're on my ship and you haven't paid me a penny. I've got lots of spare lifeboats if you want to take your chances outside."

Both of the teenage girls stepped back from Sarah. "OK, OK," they said.

Penelope took a quick look around. "Let's get out of here, Uncle Luke. Ned, come with us." She grabbed the young superstar by the forearm and pulled him along down the corridor.

"Where are we going?" Ned asked.

"Just follow me. Uncle Luke, Rangor, can you get those guys out of our way?" Penelope said.

"Clear out," Dunn said.

"Everybody out of the way," Rangor said. He pushed at the blond boy in front of him, sending him sprawling against several of his peers.

"Hey," the boy cried.

Rangor turned his cold green eyes on the tossed teenager. The boy looked away. Rangor faced front again. "Out of my way," Rangor snarled at the crowd ahead of him.

The other teenagers backed off as Rangor led his shipmates through the crowd.

"Right here, Rangor," Penelope said, as they approached the entrance hatch.

"Hey Ned, where are you going?" asked a little girl.

Rangor stopped and glowered at her.

"Clear away from there," Penelope said, indicating a group leaning against the promenade's azure inner wall.

"Why should we?" exclaimed a petulant female voice behind them. "You can't have Ned all to yourself."



Dunn turned to see Lila, the girl with the sound activated tunic, standing with her arms crossed behind them.

"Yeah," said a black haired boy next to her.

"Come with us, Ned," said a pale skinned girl who reached past Sarah to grab Ned's free arm.

Penelope gestured open the hidden door in the promenade's inner wall. "Let's go, everybody."

A group of kids blocked their way through the door. "No," one of them said.

"Look everybody," yelled a female voice at the end of the corridor. "It's Mark Sadoff!"

"That sounds like Daphne," Sarah said.

"Mark!" someone screamed.

"Who cares," someone else said.

"I do!" said Lila.

The crowd of fan loving teenagers left Ned Trynk and ran back down the curved promenade in search of Mark Sadoff, famous action streamie hero. Penelope pushed Ned through the open door. "Come on, you guys," she said, gesturing quickly for her companions to follow.

The door slid shut behind them to become an invisible part of the wall again.

"Are you sure this is OK?" Sarah asked. "I've never been in here."

"It's supposed to be just for family," Penelope said.

"Is Mark Sadoff really here?" Ned asked.

"No, that's just Daphne," Penelope said.

"Daphne?" Ned asked.

"She means me," Daphne said. Her voice streamed in from above them.

"Where are you?" Ned asked, looking upward.

"Quit fooling around, Daphne," Dunn said.

"Uncle Luke, that's no way to talk to her," Sarah said. "She just saved us from all those crazy people."

"Why, thank you, young lady," Daphne said. "You have no idea what it's like to live in your Uncle Luke's head."

"You're a DP?" Ned asked.

"Not just any DP," Daphne started.

"That's enough, Daphne," Uncle Luke said.

"Come this way," Penelope said. She led them upward along a gently sloping corridor.

"You can let go of my arm now," Ned said to Penelope.

Penelope smiled. "But I don't want to." She released him.

"Is that the bridge?" Dunn asked.

"Yes, but you're not going in there," Penelope said. "I'm already disobeying orders just by letting you all get this far."

"Whose orders?" Ned asked.

"So where are we going?" Sarah asked.

"Situation room," Penelope said. "Same place we hid when the Jovian Alliance hijacked us. Where we ran into the little — where we found Robin, remember?"

"You were hijacked by the Jovian Alliance?" Ned asked.

"I'll tell you all about it, Ned," Penelope said.

"Then I'll tell him all about Robin," Sarah said. "And Eric, too. I'll tell him about that Trask patrol ship that attacked us and took Eric away from us."

"What?" Ned said, turning wide eyes on Sarah.

The girls giggled. "This is going to be fun," Penelope said.

Rangor just looked bored.

Penelope stopped and gestured at the corridor wall. A narrow oblong opening emerged. Beyond it was only darkness. "Sorry. It's kind of tight here. I'll go through first and activate the lighting."

"I've got it," Daphne said. Fresh illumination spilled through the thin doorway.

"Nice work," Penelope said, "but you're starting to scare me."

"Don't worry, I'm on your side," Daphne said.

"Come on, Ned, it's not far now," Penelope said.

One at a time, they followed Penelope through the doorway and down along the narrow white corridor. They turned a corner.

Penelope stopped. "Well, Daphne?"

"It didn't take you long to go from scared to spoiled," Daphne remarked. The door slid open before them.

"It's my natural resilience," Penelope said. She stepped through the open doorway into a tiny one-room cabin.

"What is this place?" Ned asked.

"I know you're used to better," Penelope said. "But this is the safest place in the ship."

The room was pretty much the way they had left it some weeks ago. Silvery square kinetic sensors contrasted with the bright white walls that supported them. Two sets of bunk beds lined up side by side against one of the walls, three beds stacked into each one. A sliding manual door separated the central room from a bathroom the size of a tiny closet. Against the far wall was a pantry with some stored food.

"Have a seat," Sarah said to Ned. She motioned him to the table in the middle of the room. It was a plain gray plastic alloy, surrounded by six bare chairs of the same dull material.

"The chairs are softer than they look," Penelope said, plopping herself down at the head of the table. "Try one."

Ned cautiously pulled up a chair and seated himself. "Who are you guys? Really?"

"I'm Penelope." She smiled. "That's Sarah. The *Orquidea* belongs to me and my brother, Pablo."

"They're twins," Sarah added. She sat down next to Ned.

"The Jovian Alliance took our parents away," Penelope said.

"They did?" Ned said.

"But don't worry. They're OK. We're on our way to meet them," Penelope said.

"Where are they?" Ned asked.

"Spanish Hildas," Penelope said.

"Oh," Ned said. "Is that where we're going?"

"Not all of us," Dunn said. "We'll find some way for you to go home."

"Oh, can't we keep him?" Daphne asked silently. "The kiddies like him so much!"

"I want to go back to Ceres," Ned said. "Can't I at least send a message to my dad?"

"I'm sorry," Penelope said. "Uncle Luke says we can't send messages."

"Comm silence," Dunn said. "It's OK to receive, but don't send anything. The Trasks are right behind us. The less they know about us the better. If they find out how low our food supply is, we'll never shake them."

"The food supply is getting low?" Rangor asked. He was still standing by the open doorway.

"What do you expect?" Penelope said. "Did you see how much these kids eat?"

"Oh," Sarah said. "Uncle Luke and I were just about to make lunch."

Dunn smiled. "I think we can manage that much."

"We have enough for a few more days," Penelope said.

"The Trask will get tired of chasing us by then," Dunn said.

"We didn't resupply the food stores at Transcendent," Penelope said. "We didn't expect passengers."

An amber light flashed over Penelope's control band.

"You have a call," Ned said.

"It's Pablo," Penelope said.

"I forgot all about him!" Sarah said. "I left him and Gloria all alone on the observation deck."

"All alone with a few hundred babies and toddlers," Penelope said. "That's pretty scary." Penelope touched a button and Pablo streamed into the room at one half size. He floated upright over the table, looking at Penelope.

"Hey, Penelope," Pablo said. He held a safety wipe in one hand. "What's this I hear about Mark Sadoff being aboard?"

Even Dunn had to chuckle at that one. Sarah giggled and Penelope laughed outright. Ned held his hand to his face to suppress his amusement. Only Rangor was unaffected.

"Hey, who's that I hear with you?" Pablo asked. "What's so funny?" He looked past Penelope. "Why are you in the safe room?"

"To be safe, what do you think," Penelope said. "Turn around."

Pablo turned slowly. "Hi Sarah, Hi Uncle Luke, Rangor — Hey, who are you — Are you —"

"Good to meet you, Pablo," Ned said. "I'm Ned Trynk. Your sister's told me a lot about you."

Pablo's jaw dropped. "You're that Comet Droppings guy?"

"Yes," Ned said. "I'm glad you like my music."

"But I —" Pablo started.

"Now, Pablo," Penelope said.

"Don't tell anybody else he's here," Sarah said to the hovering hologram. "They went crazy on the promenade. I thought those kids were going to crush us!"

"If you say so." Pablo turned his gaze out of the holosphere to speak to someone next to him. "No Mark Sadoff, Gloria. They must have been kidding." Pablo didn't have to fake his disappointment.

"Nos vemos, Pablo." Penelope cut the connection.

"Someone needs to relieve him," Sarah said. "He's been taking care of the babies for hours."

"Not me," Penelope said.

"Let's go, Sarah," Dunn said. "We'll recruit some of the other kids to help out."

"Are you hungry, Ned?" Sarah smiled sweetly. "I'll be back with your lunch."

"I'll bring it," Penelope said, jumping up from her seat. "Don't get lonely, Ned. I'll be right back. Look." Penelope touched her control bracelet again and launched her Holographic Interface.

"What is that?" Ned gasped.

"Her HI," Sarah said. "She customizes it really nice."

"Sorry," Ned said. "All those smells and colors caught me by surprise."

"Don't worry." Penelope smiled. "You'll get used to it." She plunged her fingers into the flowery images and then shut down the HI. "Smile," she said, "I've just captured your DNA."

Ned's eyes narrowed. "You can't do anything with it. You'll break a half a dozen copyrights and my lawyers will sue you for everything you've got and then some."

"Don't worry, silly, it's just for identification purposes." Penelope gestured a securitystream into existence. "Those are the different parts of the ship. You see, here's the promenade, the observation deck, the galley, even the lifeboat ring if you're interested. The secstream has all the standard controls. It recognizes you from your DNA. I gave you special permissions so you can look wherever you want, except for private places of course like residential quarters and the flight deck. Hopefully that will keep you company until I'm back with your lunch."

"You've been very nice to me," Ned said, his grateful gaze taking in everyone in the security room.

"You're a very special person," Sarah said.

"Let's go, I'm getting all molten here," Penelope said. "See you soon, Ned!"

"Come on, Rangor," Sarah said.

The door closed behind them as they took the corridor back toward the promenade.

"Let's not go this way," Penelope said. "Didn't you see on the secstream back there? There's still a big group by the promenade entrance."

"We don't want to exit through the galley, either," Dunn said. "The sight of us coming out of the freezer would be just a little too obvious."

"Then where will we come out?" Sarah asked. "We have to get to the galley to prepare lunch."

"I'm breaking all the rules today," Penelope said. "There's an exit through the family residence. Anyone wandering the halls will think we were in the crew quarters."

"Sounds good," Dunn said.

"You're going to show us where you live?" Sarah asked.

"Don't get too comfortable," Penelope said. "You won't be staying long."

"Aw," Sarah said.

"This leads to a ventilation passage," Penelope said, making her way through the *Orquidea's* tight internal maze. "It's purposefully human sized. Barely."

They crawled after her through the narrow tunnel.

"Welcome to our bathroom," Penelope said, pulling at the vent at the end of the shaft. "After me." She jumped down first.

Dunn jumped last and followed the children out the door into the living room. He looked around at the family seating and kitchen. Two doors stood side by side. The twins' bedrooms?

"Keep moving," Penelope said. "No sightseeing here." She opened the cabin door and stepped into the corridor outside. "Let's go." She motioned for them to follow.

"Where are we?" Sarah asked.

"Below decks," Penelope said. "Aft side of the ship. The drive room's not far. It's not as pretty here as it is up there." She shrugged. "Just bare walls and floor. But we're going to the galley. Here's an elevator port." Penelope signaled for the elevator to come. "On this level, the elevators only respond to family."

"Look at the gauge," Sarah said. "The elevator's up on the observation level."

"I can see that," Penelope said. "It shouldn't be taking so long."

"It's coming down now," Dunn said.

"I had a word with those kids," Daphne said out loud. "They understand that the elevator isn't a toy now."

Dunn didn't even want to know what Daphne had said to their passengers.

The elevator arrived and the door slid quietly open.

"I'm putting it into exclusive mode," Penelope said. "Nonstop to the promenade."

They stepped in, and the elevator door closed behind them.

"At least the food will distract our passengers for a while," Dunn said.

"What little there is left," Penelope said.

"Daphne, what's your estimate of the Trask fuel supplies?" Dunn asked so they could all hear. "How much longer can they follow us?"

"Trask fuel supplies are at zero," Daphne said. "They are no longer capable of following us. In fact, all three Trask crews have boarded their lifeboats and are returning toward Transcendent."

"Huh?" Sarah blurted.

"Since when?" Penelope asked.

"The elevator door has opened onto the promenade," Daphne said. "You can get out now."

"But —" Penelope said.

"See what I have to put up with," Dunn said.

"Serves them right," Sarah said.

"Let's keep moving," Penelope said, taking them through the galley exterior entrance. "Pablo! What are you doing here?"

Pablo was piling plates and utensils onto one of the hovering trays. He looked up. "Gloria and I are getting lunch ready. We weren't sure when Sarah would be back."

"Who's taking care of the children?" Sarah asked.

"Some of the kids from the promenade downstairs came up to help out," Gloria said. She shrugged firm shoulders under a neat ginger tunic. "I guess they must be bored." She had full smooth features and skin the color of a dark smoky nebula.

"Hi, Gloria," Dunn said politely.

"Hi, Uncle Luke," Gloria said. "Hi, Rangor."

The synthegeen nodded.

"Daphne says the Trask ships aren't coming after us any more!" Sarah blurted out.

"Since when?" Pablo asked.

"Not long ago," Daphne said. "I would have told you earlier, but I didn't want to interrupt Penelope's flirtation with the little —"

"I wasn't flirting!" Penelope said.

"Increased respiration and pulse rate, slight skin flush, dilated pupils, heightened eyelid flutter. . ." Daphne said.

"You were flirting?" Pablo smiled. "I'm going to tell Mom and Dad."

"You little pork pellet!" Penelope said.

"All right, all right," Dunn said. "Daphne, what happened to the Trask ships?"

"Pirates," Daphne said.

"Pirates?" Gloria asked.

"The Trasks didn't put up much of a fight," Daphne said. "They dropped lifeboats as soon as it was obvious the pirates were heading their way. The pirates tapped the Trask Dragons with needle show-ers and then dropped vampire locks on them. The needles confused Trask prodar long enough for the vampires to move in and attach to the hulls. They drained the remaining fuel cell reserves and sucked the life out of life support."

The twins looked at each other.

"Trasks in lifeboats going back to Transcendent," Pablo said. "Ceres Security Forces should find that interesting."

"At least our fuel cells are pretty full," Penelope said.

"Which means they would take a very long time to drain," Pablo said. "The pirates have to know that. They won't like the idea of waiting that long."

"Any idea which band?" Penelope asked Daphne.

"They don't announce themselves," Daphne said. "And the *Orquidea* doesn't carry the equipment to penetrate their stealth. I didn't even see them until they started firing on the Trask."

"But won't they come after us next?" Sarah exclaimed.

"How many are there?" Dunn asked.

"Six ships," Daphne said. "Two of them are old Ceres Stingers modified for larger cargo holds and modern weaponry. One is an older Liberty class with newer weaponry installed. One is a Trask Mark II Dragon. One is DC Defender and the last is a DC Victory."

"Where would they get Ceres Stingers? Or Trask Mark IIs? Or any of those ships?" Dunn wondered aloud. "Most of those lines have been out of production for at least a decade."

"They're pirates," Penelope said. "They probably stole them."

"A December Consensus Victory?" Gloria asked. "Isn't that supposed to be like a flying command center?"

"You know something about spaceships, don't you," Pablo said to the girl.

"I only know what I see on the Mset," Gloria said. "The DCs build solid ships. The Liberty is a DC ship, built by Sterling Sapphire in the Rocklands Province. The *Orquidea* is an older Liberty model but the whole line is well known for its stability."

Pablo beamed with an unusual warmth.

"So far the Victory class has not demonstrated any firepower," Daphne said. "Prodar scans of its interior are blocked. It is moving in an apparent random pattern among the others, keeping pace with them but keeping its distance at the same time."

"The Victory is certainly the lead ship," Dunn said.

"They'll board the Trask vessels first and work on bypassing systems security," Pablo said. "It will take time. They'll be busy for at least a day."

"Pablo's right," Penelope said. "Pirates like easy pickings. Now that they have three Trask ships, they won't bother with us."

"Their prodar scans must have showed them that the Trasks were low on fuel and weapons," Pablo said. "No wonder they attacked."

"They will see that we have no weapons, but we do have a drive room loaded with fully charged fuel cells," Dunn said.

"I don't think they'll chase us," Pablo said. "We probably have more fuel than they do."

"So we can turn back now?" Sarah asked.

"Daphne, the Ceres Security Forces should be approaching Transcendent," Dunn said. "How close are they?"

"The first squadron reached the Transcendent wreckage this morning," Daphne said.

"Too bad for the Trask in their lifeboats," Penelope said, without a nanogram of sympathy in her voice.

"The Belt Charity League and Red Rock came along to hold their hands," Daphne continued. "Everybody's got their torsos torqued because so far they have found no survivors."

"Then they will be happy to see us," Dunn said. "Maintain comm silence and give the pirates plenty of space. Let's bring these children home."

"Not exactly home," Gloria said. "Not any more."

"Do you have family somewhere, Gloria?" Pablo asked.

"My aunt lives on Tingri," Gloria said. "It's not far from Ceres. I'll go tell the others we're turning around." She left the galley.

"So was that really Ned Trynk?" Pablo whispered as soon as Gloria was out of hearing range.

"Yes," Penelope said. "And I'm going to take him his lunch!"

"Me, too!" Sarah said.

"Too bad you can't just smartwaiter his meals down there," Pablo said.

"The security section is all sealed off," Penelope said. "You know that."

"So what's the little Comet Dropping doing here?" Pablo asked.

"He's a refugee, just like all the others," Dunn said. "He's just a little more well known."

"Keep him out of sight," Pablo said. "He'll cause too much trouble in the common areas."

"He knows that," Penelope said.

"That's why he was disguised," Sarah said.

Pablo's voice resumed its normal amplitude. "No reason to hold back on lunch today. We'll be unloading our passengers back at Transcendent soon enough."

Dunn hesitated. Pirates were not known for their predictability. But these kids had been through enough. "Go on, have a party."

Penelope filled a tray and sent it to the smartwaiter. Sarah trailed behind her with an armful of soft drinks.

"Penelope will be in for a big surprise when she finds her favorite musician got bored and helped himself to a tour of the flight deck," Daphne said privately to Dunn.

"You didn't stop him?" Dunn said.

"Obviously not," Daphne said. "Where do you think you're going now?"

"There are hungry children to feed," Dunn said. He nodded to Gloria, who was just returning to the galley with several other teenagers. "Need any help with lunch?"

"No, Uncle Luke, all under control," Gloria said.

"Why don't you go up top, Uncle Luke," a freckle faced adolescent girl said. "We'll serve you."

Pablo and Gloria and a few others were piling the smartwaiter system with food.

"Yeah, go on up and have a seat," one of the boys said. His left eye was bruised. He should have had a plasmed on it, but perhaps he preferred to display his injury. "We'll take care of you."

Dunn exited the galley and found an elevator open as if it were waiting for him. He took it to the observation deck and moved toward a nearby table. Three teenagers sat there, talking enthusiastically. "They are treating me like an old man," Dunn said to Daphne alone. The teenagers smiled and moved away from the table, leaving him isolated in a room full of noisy children.

"Well, you did say you were ready to retire," Daphne said silently.

"I'm retiring young, so I can enjoy my golden years," Dunn said.

"You won't," Daphne said.

"How can you be so sure?" Dunn asked. "You won't be there."

"That's how I can be so sure," Daphne said.

Dunn looked around the wide circular room and drummed his fingers on the table. "What's Penelope up to?"

"She is telling Ned that the Trasks were stopped by pirates," Daphne said. "He wants to know if he can go home now."

"Thank you, Gloria," Dunn said out loud. The girl must have come up the elevator after him. She smiled and laid a full plate on the table in front of him. Dunn repositioned it slightly, then reached for one of the soft drinks she carried. "The Dr. Ponik will be fine." Dunn tapped the spout on the soda can and watched it expand. It was odd to be served while others stood in line for the buffet.

"Now Penelope is asking Ned if he will write a song about her," Daphne said.

Across the room, a group of small hungry children were crying for their mommies. Dunn watched as two young girls tried to feed them and console them. One of the young girls may have been the older sister of one of the little boys. Dunn sipped his soup and did not respond to Daphne.



"Sarah is admiring the flight deck," Daphne said as Dunn continued eating. "She is particularly impressed by the moving holomages of the pirate ships."

Dunn glanced toward the dome, but the pirate ships would be too far away to distinguish visually. He doubted their stealth would allow him to see much anyway. Dunn went back to his salad.

"Sarah is asking why the pirate ships are approaching the *Orquidea* so fast," Daphne said.

Dunn almost choked on his Dr. Ponc. "What?" he said out loud.

The group of crying children across the way was startled into sudden silence. They stared wide eyed at Dunn.

"Be careful, you're scaring the kiddies," Daphne said.

"What are their positions?" Dunn demanded out loud, rising from the table.

The children in line at the buffet table turned and faced him open mouthed.

"Now you've done it," Daphne said. "They think the old man's gone crazy."

"Daphne," Dunn growled from somewhere deep in his throat.

"Brace yourself," Daphne said.

A shock ripped through the *Orquidea's* frame, shaking the tables and toppling some of the toddlers. This wasn't supposed to happen. The inertial dampers were built into virtually every panel of the ship's structure.

"What was that?" Dunn demanded.

"Z bound point bombs to take out the sideline Z drives, embedded in a needle cloud to confuse our prodar," Daphne said. "I finally got to see what weapons the Victory class is carrying."

The terrified screams of young children erupted around the observation dome. A few of the older ones were crying, too.

Gloria appeared at the edge of the serving area, her smooth features tight with worry. "Uncle Luke, what's going on? Pablo left for the flight deck."

"He probably went to do a damage assessment," Dunn told her.

"We'll know more in a few minutes. Can you calm them down?" Dunn's gesture took in the whole dome of panicking children.

"Everyone, please keep calm." Gloria spoke clearly and firmly. She did not yell. "David, Colleen, can you get over here? Help clean up this mess. Younger children, sit in a circle. We're going to eat and then we're going to play a game..."

"She's good," Dunn said, rushing toward an elevator.

"We've lost all maneuverability," Daphne said to Dunn. "The Z drives are dead."

"What about the healing systems?" Dunn asked. "Can they repair the damage?" He was inside the elevator now.

"They've been poisoned," Daphne said. "The point bombs blasted through the drives and injected an irreversible paralysis venom into the system."

"What about life support?" Dunn asked. "Tell me the failsafes are working!"

"Intact for now," Daphne said. "But it may not matter. The bad guys are circling."

"What do they want? Do they want the *Orquidea*?" Dunn asked. He stepped out onto the promenade deck and pushed his way past the startled adolescent crowd. He did not respond to their panicked questions.

"The enemy was nice enough to leave our precious fuel cells intact," Daphne said.

"That's what they want, then," Dunn said. "They want the fuel cells."

"It looks that way," Daphne said.

"We'll be stranded," Dunn said. "There are too many of us for the lifeboats."

"There will be some hard choices," Daphne said. "Life support won't last long without power from the fuel cells."

"Can you hail the lead ship?" Dunn asked. Daphne opened the hidden door in the inner promenade wall, and Dunn stepped through into the bleak corridor that led to the flight deck.

“Penelope is already doing that,” Daphne said. “But maybe ‘hailing’ isn’t the best word to describe dear darling Penelope’s communications.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

## Mike Farnam

Mike Farnam paced restlessly through the narrow maze of walkways among the towering columns of cargo. Dull black lettering described the contents of the dull gray boxes: fuel cells, medical supplies, combat rations, fresh uniforms, toiletries, whatever it took to get the Jovian Force through their long drawn out rescue mission in the Trask claimed territories. Green and white Jovian Force markings splashed the upper corners of the boxes. They were only three days out, but already it seemed like weeks. The TX09 was one of the older unmanned transport models, a fat bulbous cargo ship crafted from the abundant material of Jupiter’s rings. Designed as a drone ship to carry refined ores to Jovian industrial centers, it was obvious to Farnam that humans had no place here. Even so, he was not surprised to round a corner and come face to face with his teammate.

“So you got bored, too,” Ben Lloyd said. He had trimmed his close cropped blond hair once again that morning. Personal hygiene gave them both something to do.

“I can hardly stand up in our quarters,” Farnam said.

Lloyd chuckled. “I don’t think I even have room to breathe up there.”

“Yamakawa says we’re lucky they can accommodate us at all,” Farnam said. “Most unmanned drones don’t carry facilities for people. Only the larger ones do, in case of unforeseen emergencies.”

“It’s hard to remote control a ship when you’re light minutes away from a fluid scenario,” Lloyd said. “Have you seen her today?”

“I saw the Lieutenant at breakfast,” Farnam said. “She says the fleet’s position has shifted again. They’ve added another day to our trip.”

Lloyd's smile tightened. "Six more days before we can start shooting Trask."

Yellow lightning bolts flashed above Farnam's silvery control bracelet.

"I've got a call," both men said at the same time, and then grinned at each other. Farnam saw that Lloyd's bracelet was flashing, too.

A translucent hologram of Lieutenant Yamakawa appeared before Farnam. Lloyd's lifelike avatar head appeared on the right side of the image. Farnam glanced over and saw a similar image in front of Lloyd, with Farnam's own stubbly brown haired head floating in midair at the edge of the commstream. The image had been taken months ago, apparently not on one of his good days. Bringing the two avatar heads into the commstream was Yamakawa's way of letting them know she had established the call to both men.

"Just got a message from Commander Davis," Yamakawa said. The flight deck streaming probes displayed the lieutenant in real life, her slight body squeezed into the single pilot's station. Did that instrumentation look dusty? Farnam wondered how long it had been since anyone actually sat in the pilot's seat of this drone. "Captain Obasanjo wants us to make a detour."

"A detour, Lieutenant?" Farnam asked. "Where? There's nothing around here but a bunch of unclaimed rocks."

"Some of those rocks are hiding old mine clusters that were placed out here when we fought with the Martians," Yamakawa said. "They were turned off decades ago, but Central reactivated them in response to the current emergency."

"So what happened, sir?" Lloyd asked. "Did we get one of those Trask bastards?"

"Yes, Private," Yamakawa said. "A Trask patrol stumbled into the mines about an hour ago. Captain Obasanjo wants us up close with the debris. His prodar findings indicate a UN permadoc in the wreckage."

"A permadoc? With United Nations identifiers?" Farnam said. "What are the Trasks planning? An alliance with the UN?"

"Our orders are to deliver the permadoc to Lieutenant Chapman on board the *George Sulmers*," Yamakawa said.

"What about our escort?" Lloyd asked. "The Eureka scout ships are supposed to meet us halfway. If the Trasks learn we've taken their UN permadoc, our target value goes red hot."

"The TX09 was intended as a limited range cargo ship," Yamakawa said. "The prodar isn't exactly military grade. But Commander Davis is watching us from the *George Sulmers*. She says there are no Trasks in the area. She doesn't expect any interference. Besides, we're the only ship in the area."

"Commander Davis is three light minutes away," Lloyd said. "Round trip for her signal is six minutes. A lot can happen in that time."

"Not that much," Farnam said. "It's worth the risk. Besides, it's an order."

"I changed course before I called you," Yamakawa said. "I'm just letting you know."

"How long before we're in retrieval range of the permadoc?" Farnam asked. He had heard of them, but never seen one. Diplomatic couriers used permadocs to carry confidential information. The recipient was guaranteed that the information was not altered in transit.

"Commander Davis relayed the permadoc's trajectory and velocity. We'll intercept it in about two hours," Yamakawa said. "I'll acknowledge our orders now." She cut the commstream.

Lloyd unholstered his sleek black Dispensor and nudged the charge check toggle. The tiny gray fuel cell embedded in the D2I's ridged handgrip glowed green in response. Lloyd toggled off the charge check and pushed the pistol's intensity slider into the red.

"That won't help much against a Trask Dragon," Farnam pointed out.

"Unless they board us," Lloyd said grimly. "You've heard what they do with prisoners."

Farnam unholstered his own D2I and reviewed its settings. He reholstered the weapon and looked around the cargo bay. "You know, the D2Is aren't the only armament we have."

Lloyd's eyes widened. "You're right! The cargo! But we're not carrying any ship to ship armory."

"If it comes to that, we're dead anyway," Farnam said.

"What did you have in mind?" Lloyd asked.

"Booby traps," Farnam said. "I think we should cover the most strategic areas."

"We're not exactly prodar proof in this old bucket," said Lloyd. "A Trask attack ship could spot booby traps before we were ever boarded."

"Still, it would give them something to think about," Farnam said.

"Good idea," Lloyd said. "I'll start with the ship entryway."

"I'll block off the cargo bay," Farnam said.

"The flight deck is another strategic point," Lloyd said.

"That means the lieutenant will be stuck there for a while," Farnam said.

"Do you think she'll mind?" Lloyd asked.

"I'll call her," Farnam said. "You get started finding the weaponry in all this." He waved his arm to indicate the columns of cargo.

Lloyd went off to locate the armory boxes while Farnam called Lieutenant Yamakawa. The pilot was willing enough to stay put for the next few days until they could rendezvous with their scout ships. Farnam did not envy her. He would not have been able to stand such close quarters for so long.

A few hours later, the work was done.

"That's as good as it's going to get," Lloyd said. He showed Farnam his accomplishments. "I disengaged the personal probe unit from one of the spare control bracelets and fastened it to the airlock door. I configured it to talk to that DLR12 up there. Lloyd indicated the long dark needle of the Disruptor Long Range hanging from an overhead air vent. "The probe will provide the enemy position so the DLR12 knows where to aim. It's set to maximum scatter." Lloyd pointed to the floorplates. "If the Trasks make it past that, the C-series shatter mine I hid under the floor will take them out. It disrupts in the flesh densities only so it will leave the airlock and surrounding

corridor intact while it blows away the human stuff." Lloyd smiled a wicked smile. "I have another probe monitoring airlock activity; the mine doesn't turn on until the airlock door activates and then the shatter waves are triggered by proximity that will be detected by the probe built into the mine itself."

"Good work," Farnam said. "Let me show you what I did to the cargo bay door. Worst case scenario, we blow our supplies into space. No way we're provisioning the Trask with them." He started back down the short corridor toward the cargo hold.

Lightning bolts flashed once more above both men's control bracelets. It was Yamakawa again. The men exchanged glances as they activated the commstreams.

"I've spotted an unknown ship off our port side," Yamakawa said.

"Who are they?" Lloyd asked. "Trask?"

A porthole embedded in the top half of the steely gray airlock door was their only visual into the emptiness outside. Farnam stepped closer to the viewglass, but he could not make out anything but stars and maybe some rocks reflecting light back at him.

"The ship has no markings," Yamakawa said, "but they're approaching fast. They're on a convergence course with the permadoc's coordinates!"

"Are they going to beat us?" Farnam asked.

"Yes," Yamakawa said. "They've passed us. The ship's profile matches the December Consensus Defender IV. We can't match their speed."

"It's not like the December Consensus to sneak around without identifying themselves," Lloyd said.

"Or the Trask either," Yamakawa said. "They like people to know they're there."

"It has to be someone else," Farnam said. "Someone from the unclaimed territories flying a modified DC ship with insignia darkened. Pirates, probably. We're outside of conventional borders here. We could be sharing space with anybody. Lieutenant, what about weaponry? Can you see what they're carrying?"

"What do you expect when they give me a piece of junk to fly?" The Lieutenant sounded desperate. "I can barely make out their ship. But they can definitely see me. They're jamming my prodar with complex counterwaves. My DP can't outcalculate them on his own! I don't have the hardware for this."

Farnam noticed that Yamakawa referred to her DP as a male, but did not comment. The relationship between pilots and their DPs was famously complex. "Where did they come from? Can you track their back trajectory? They couldn't just sneak up on us!"

"Their back trajectory leads nowhere, unless you count a useless rock spinning off our rear vector," Yamakawa said.

"Pirates like to wait at the edge of war zones and mine fields and scavenge whatever they can from the debris," Farnam said. "He could have escaped detection by hiding in that rock."

"At least they're moving away from us," Lloyd said. "Report it back to the captain, sir. See what he says."

"I sent Commander Davis a message before I called you," Yamakawa said. "By the time I get a response, it will already be too late."

"Turn us around," Lloyd said. "Those guys are dangerous."

"Lloyd's right, Lieutenant," Farnam said. "If you think they've spotted the permadoc, there's nothing we can do about it. Let's get out of here."

"But — what about our objective?" Yamakawa asked. "Maybe we should wait to hear back from the captain."

Farnam thought he knew how the lieutenant was feeling. First she had lost the *Orquidea*, a luxury cruise ship that she said was piloted by a crew of children. Farnam did not have fond memories of the *Orquidea's* brig. Now they had failed at another objective.

"Every minute is a risk," Farnam said. "We're a cargo ship with a full hold and zero weaponry. I can't imagine a more tempting target. Let's get out of here while they're distracted by the permadoc."

"All right," Yamakawa said. She muttered something under her breath. Farnam would have liked to hear it; he could use the entertainment. "Setting course for the *George Sulmers*."

Farnam watched the stars outside shift as the TX09 came around. "Thank you, lieutenant."

Lloyd shrugged at Farnam. Lloyd's avatar did not pick up the gesture or enter it into the commstream with Yamakawa. "We tried."

"Resuming course," Yamakawa said, "but I'm going to keep an eye on those — Hey! They're turning around."

"They must have grabbed the permadoc," Farnam said.

"They did," Yamakawa said. "They can't hide their tractor beam. It's still extended, but shortening. They must be pulling it in."

"What's their heading?" Lloyd asked. "Are they coming this way?"

"They're coming right at us!" Yamakawa said. "I can't dodge them. There's nowhere to hide!"

A thousand tiny flashes spread through the space around them, lighting up the emptiness outside and forcing Farnam to blink his eyes.

"They're needling us," Yamakawa said. "I can't see anything!"

"Estimate their tractor range," Farnam said. "How long before we're in it?"

The commstream sputtered, faded, and died. Farnam looked at Lloyd. Lloyd was looking at him.

"They've jammed the commstreams," Farnam said.

"I think we should suit up," Lloyd said.

There were spare spacesuits in a vertical storage space above the tiny berthing quarters. Farnam pulled down two and handed one to Lloyd. Farnam stepped into the other one. It was bright yellow and it smelled like sweat. The Reckhart Mining Company label was attached to the chest. Farnam hefted his D2I in his gloved hand. It wasn't comfortable there, but it would do.

Their comm systems were useless against the Defender's jamming. With the suits on and atmosphere still present, they could communicate by yelling. Farnam preferred to touch helmets. "Let's split up," Farnam said. "You hold the airlock secure. I'll go to the pilot's station. If they break past your booby traps, I'll defend Yamakawa."

"No," Lloyd said. "We both cover the airlock. If we have to fall back, we will. But we have to try to keep them from coming aboard in the first place."

Inside the smudged helmet, Farnam nodded his head. "They will expect that, but you're right. It gives us our best chance to stop them."

The slam of one ship forcing itself against another reverberated from the airlock door. A series of clanking sounds carried through the cargo ship's hard metal alloys. Both men looked toward the source of the sounds. The bright hazy needle shower was gone. In its place, they saw only the shadow of the other ship. It filled the airlock port-hole. The unmarked Defender was docking.

Farnam hand signaled Lloyd to take up a position around the corner on the opposite side of the corridor. "Get ready," Farnam mouthed. He crouched down. He was visible to Lloyd but not to anyone who would come through that airlock. He hoped.

Lloyd nodded, his stance low, his weapon ready.

The clanging docking sounds finally stopped. They waited expectantly. Farnam's breathing was painfully loud inside his helmet.

"Come on, come on," Lloyd murmured. Farnam could see his lips move inside his helmet.

There was sweat in Farnam's eyes, and he hadn't even exerted himself.

"Nothing's happening," Lloyd mouthed, shaking his head and gesturing palm up into the air.

"Give it time," Farnam said quietly, raising his palm toward Lloyd.

They waited in the thickening silence. The view outside the airlock porthole was a black deeper than empty space.

Farnam shifted his weight. It wasn't easy to crouch in a space-suit.

Lloyd was hunched down almost to the hard black floor. He sprang to his feet and ran across the intersection of corridors. He pressed his helmet against Farnam's.

"Aren't they coming?" Lloyd asked.

"They have to be," Farnam said.

"What are they waiting for?" Lloyd asked.

"I don't know," Farnam said.

"They should have boarded by now," Lloyd said.

"Go back to your position," Farnam said. "Just be patient."

"I can't take stooping over in this suit any longer, and my fingers are cramping from holding my disruptor through this dented glove." Lloyd stood up.

Farnam motioned for his squad member to get down, but Lloyd just shook his head. Finally Farnam stood up and touched helmets again. "What are you doing? They could be here any minute!"

"Something's keeping them," Lloyd said. "They must be sick or something. Maybe dead. That's why they haven't boarded us yet."

"You don't know that," Farnam said. "Maybe they're still suiting up."

"After twenty minutes?" Lloyd responded. "They should have been here by now." He started walking toward the airlock.

"What are you going to do?" Farnam asked.

But he kept his voice low and Lloyd did not hear him. Lloyd just kept walking forward. He paused to disconnect his booby traps and then peered through the porthole. He turned back toward Farnam and shrugged. "No one," he mouthed.

Farnam approached the airlock but he stayed low. He motioned to Lloyd to drop down.

Lloyd fell to his knees and brought his helmet into contact with Farnam's.

"Stay down!" Farnam warned again.

"Why?" Lloyd asked. "There's no one here." He rose quickly and slapped the red button that opened the airlock. The metallic door swung open and Lloyd stepped forward into the pressurization chamber.

"Are you crazy?" Farnam yelled.

"I say we attack them before they attack us," Lloyd yelled back.

Farnam touched helmets again. "On their own ship? Your torque is beyond twisted!"



"It's better than sitting here doing nothing," Lloyd said. "Who knows how long we'll be waiting for them, and in the meantime we could be pulled hours off course."

"How do you know you can even get in there?" Farnam asked. "Their airlock door is probably sealed tight."

"Only one way to find out," Lloyd said. "Are you coming?"

"Against my better judgment," Farnam said. He entered the airlock and let Lloyd close the door behind him. "Now what?"

"Now we open the outer door," Lloyd said, slapping the big red button that would activate the outer door mechanism.

The TX09's external airlock door slid open and they found themselves face to face with the smooth external door of the neighboring ship.

Lloyd stepped out onto the Defender's docking corridor and shifted his weapon to his left hand. "There must a button or a switch or some way to activate this door..."

The outer door slid silently open in front of him. Beyond it was the cold vacuum of space. The Defender's airlock had been depressurized. A spacesuited man was a shadowy silhouette in the doorway, his back to the brilliant white light that shone from behind him.

"It's about time you got here," he said, his voice startling them in the silence of their spacesuits. His communications jamming protocols must have left him an open patch of spectrum. His Disruptor was already raised and crackling and aimed right at the both of them. "Drop your weapons."

Neither Farnam nor Lloyd moved.

The man sighed through his suit comm system. "I only need one of you alive. Or maybe I'll just keep your pilot. Do you want to reconsider dropping your weapons?"

Both Farnam and Lloyd carefully laid their disruptors on the hard dock floor.

The man smiled. "That's nice. By the way, do either of you know anything about this?"

He waved the golden permadoc around in the cold airless space like it was the heavyball most valuable player award.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

### Marcos X

"I got them, Marcos," Tomas said. Too far away for real time streaming, Tomas Almeida had recorded the message from his DC Defender's flight bridge. The man was grinning from ear to ear, his swarthy face all twisted up with the unfamiliar expression. He ran a sweaty palm through his greased back black hair. "Just like you said. The Trask boat stumbled right into the minefield. But they weren't the only ones. The Trask ship was carrying a permadoc. You can't miss those things with a decent prodar scan. Another boat came looking for it, so I got them too."

"What other boat?" Marcos X wondered aloud. He sat in his spartan quarters with his youngest grandson on one knee. Roberto smiled and playfully swatted the little holographic dinosaurs around him. They were characters from the popular children's streamie *The Gigantic*. The small prehistoric shapes whirled and attacked each other in response to the toddler's hand movements. Marcos smiled at the child's amusement and turned his attention back to Tomas's message.

"First I grabbed the permadoc right out of space," Tomas continued. "Then I saw the cargo ship turn around." Tomas paused to suck on a beer can spout. "It was a TX09. Those are drone ships, but it turned away when I got close to the permadoc, so I thought maybe someone was aboard and they were after it too. I thought maybe they could tell me something about it, so I turned the prodar scan on them." Tomas was known for his incoherent ramblings. Marcos wished he would get to the point. "I found three crew aboard! They had a cargo hold full of food, clothes, weapons, everything! More

than my little *Andreia* could carry, so I boarded her and took the crew captive." Marcos patiently listened through Tomas's incoherent narration of his cleverness and bravery. "... and I took the TX09 in tow because I couldn't carry everything on my Defender. I didn't waste time looking for other valuables from the Trask boat because I figure the UN permadoc makes me a glowing hot target. I'm already moving out of the area. Get this — The cargo ship's crew is Jovian Force! I thought they could tell me more about the permadoc but all I could get out of them is name, rank, and serial number. I kept the officer and let the other two leave in a lifeboat. But let me tell you, that TX09 is loaded! Kind of makes up for our lousy luck on the game this afternoon..."

Marcos X did not need to be reminded about today's heavyball match between the Sharks and the Raiders, and he didn't care much about the permadoc or the Jovian Force or anything else having to do with the so-called recognized governments. But Tomas had struck it big with that cargo ship and Marcos would let him have his fun. Tomas would be less than a light minute away by now, but Marcos didn't care for conversations where turntaking lags exceeded more than a few seconds. He composed a return message, streaming in his avatar and a geometrically abstract virtual meeting place so that Tomas would not know he was making decisions with his grandson giggling on his knee.

"All right, Tomas, sounds like the wait was worth it. If the cargo checks out, I'll arrange a bonus for you." As attack captain, Marcos got twenty percent. Tomas was ship captain and also got twenty percent. The rest was evenly divided among all other crew in the armada. Depending on the value of the cargo and how Marcos felt that day, he might part with some of his share to arrange for a bonus or two. Certainly *Andreia* deserved something extra for putting up with Tomas. "Your target value will cool when you rejoin the group. Did you see the news about Transcendent? Meet up with us there. We are on the way to recover what we can before the rescue forces arrive." Marcos gestured the message into space and turned back to little Roberto. "You like that?" Marcos showed the boy how to make the dinosaurs roar when they attacked.

Amber lightning bolts flashed into the center of the room. Those were the bridge codes. What now? Marcos waved the commstream into existence. It was the captain of the *Tiradentes*, Jonas Ribeiro, his slight features intensified into an eager look that meant prey was nearby. Maria Peres, an executive officer of unsettling beauty, stood next to Jonas.

"We've got three Trask Dragons dead ahead, Marcos," Jonas said. The captain provided a visual substream to accompany his personal commstream. Within it, three Trask boats raced side by side toward an unknown destination. Navigational indicators put Transcendent in their rear vectors. Live prodar displays indicated low fuel reserves and expended weaponry.

Marcos faced little Roberto in the other direction so that the bridge commstream did not interfere with his attacking dinosaurs. "What are they doing out here?" Marcos asked. "They're heading away from Transcendent. Did something scare them off?" If the Trask were retreating, it might not be such a good idea for his own fleet to be moving toward Transcendent.

"They're not retreating," Jonas said.

"Then why?" Marcos asked.

"Show him the other ship," Maria coaxed Jonas.

Jonas opened up another substream to accommodate a fourth ship. Marcos's living room was getting crowded.

"She is Liberty class," Jonas said. "One of the older ones, but it looks like she's been through a refurbishing. The drives are new."

"I see that," Marcos said. "Why are the Trask chasing them?"

"Prodar imaging returns zero weaponry, but a nice complement of fully charged fuel cells," Maria said.

"Nothing else?" Marcos said. "The Trask must be after more than that. Maybe its their Jovian registration?"

"Why don't we ask them?" Jonas suggested.

"Do it," Marcos said. "Ask the Trask first. Take them out before they do any damage. Then ask the Liberty. I'm on my way to the bridge."

Marcos cut the commstream and then waved off little Roberto's

toy. The child was stunned by the suddenly inanimate space around him. Where miniature dinosaurs had once roamed, grainy brown walls and an undecorated stone colored carpet closed in.

"Don't cry," Tomas told him. "Grampa's got things to do." Tomas nestled the child into the harsh blue and gray folds of his simple tunic and lifted himself out of his old green armchair. "Don't you miss your friends at the nursery, Roberto?"

Apparently not. The child blubbered all the way to the elevator. The nursery was a few floors below, in the bulging belly of the apex of the V shaped ship, shielded from naked space and hostile weaponry by heavy armor and a ring of redundant life support systems and automatic defenses. Tomas's young cousin Veronica Lopes greeted him at the entrance. He gladly handed off his grandchild to her and proceeded up to the bridge.

The elevator released Marcos on the *Tiradentes's* top level. He stepped through the automatic sentry point and ordered the ship's DP to open the protective metal door to the bridge. The door opened on to a ramp that cut downward through the bridge's outer ring. Marcos stood at the command level, where he, Jonas, and Maria had their stations. Marcos nodded to the two young pilots, Fernanda and Marly, and to Celso, one of the junior engineers. They occupied the lower ring. A situation scenario loomed in the center of the room for them all to see. It showed successful dockings with the Trask ships and a steady approach to the needle hazed Liberty. The Trasks were already fleeing in their little lifeboats. Celso had stopped in the middle of tinkering with one of the minor holographic displays, a Z drive monitor that provided more information than Marcos would ever need.

Everyone on the bridge was laughing.

"What's so funny?" Marcos asked them.

"Just listen," Jonas said. He was sprawled in the captain's chair on the upper ring, his trim body shaking with mirth.

A young girl on a live audiostream was cursing them thoroughly and powerfully in Spanish. Her lurid descriptions and colorful condemnations included not only the crew of the *Tiradentes*, but all of their ancestors all the way back to Earth and the entirety of their progeny,

both present and future, wherever they might go or whatever they might do.

Marcos laughed, too. The girl was good. "Who the blazes is this?"

"It's coming from the Liberty," Maria said. She studied a comm display with thoughtful green eyes. "The girl claims to be the pilot."

Marcos laughed again. "She's the pilot? She's just a kid."

"She introduced herself to us as Penelope Velasquez," Jonas said, waving his hand to angle around the situation display. Marcos knew that Jonas was following velocity vectors and extrapolating ship positions. Despite his relaxed appearance, Jonas's dark eyes were sharp. "Naturally, we didn't respond. Better to keep them guessing."

That was Marcos's policy, which they all followed. He strolled over to his station and sat down. "How about a visual on the girl?"

"Sure," Jonas said. "I'll share with everyone."

The large situation map in the center of the room disappeared. Smaller, individual holomaps sprang up at each pilot's station. Fernanda and Marly knew their jobs; they would not allow the changed map scale to distract them. Celso, the engineer, sat down for a moment to enjoy the view.

A dark haired teenage girl with deep green eyes shifted into holographic view in the center of the flight deck. She was about three times life size. She wore a red tunic with some kind of purple splotching that slithered around her body. The girl was apparently streaming from the Liberty's comparatively tiny flight deck. She was the source of the foulest and most colorful cursing Marcos had ever heard in any language, and she was not alone.

"I'm taking stream control," Marcos said. He wanted a closer look at that flight deck. He carefully shifted the focus around to all the faces on the bridge.

"What are you looking for, Marcos?" Maria asked.

Marcos leaned back in his chair. "The girl's an avatar. Maybe a hologram projected onto the bridge. It doesn't matter."

"What?" Maria said, checking her comm display again. She looked over at Marcos. "How can you be so sure?"

"Some sick bastard has programmed a DP to recite an unending stream of profanity," Marcos said. "What else could it be? Look. Do you see who that is?" Marcos shifted the stream to focus on the brown haired teenager next to the avatar that called itself Penelope.

"That guy?" Jonas was looking, too. "Never saw him before in my life."

"He's an avatar, too," Marcos said. "Maria, do you recognize him?"

"Marcos, what are you talking about?" Maria asked. "How am I supposed to know who that is?"

"You two need to spend more time with your children," Marcos said. "Any one of them would tell you that that is Ned Trynk. He sings with some group called the Comet Floppings."

"You mean he's a pep star?" Maria asked.

"I think he does splash," Marcos said. He shrugged. "They both sound alike to me. It doesn't matter. A superstar like that couldn't possibly be on the bridge of minor cruise ship being chased by the Trask into the unclaimed territories."

"But what's the point of putting his avatar there?" Jonas asked.

"Jonas, that's why this is so obvious," Marcos said. "Streamnet is cluttered with avatars of public figures. Whoever set this up was in a hurry. They probably grabbed the first avatar they found and then programmed it to sit quietly behind the teenage girl and just look at her in astonishment like that. Do you see?"

"So who's the other girl?" Jonas asked. "The blonde that looks like a Martian with the red streaks in her hair."

Marcos did not know. He was not eager to admit it. He hesitated.

"I found her!" Maria exclaimed.

"You did?" Jonas said.

"I ran her face against the last thirty days of public news-streams," Maria said. "Her name is Sarah Belkins. Her father was a Martian senator. He was killed on Roth City last month, and she was kidnapped. She's a direct descendant of Adva Avni, that Martian manna woman!"

Marcos smiled. "You see? Another public figure. There are probably lots of avatars of her scattered all around streamnet too."

"But then who's this Penelope girl?" Jonas asked.

A shadow darkened the doorway behind Penelope. Someone else was entering through the rear of the flight deck. Marcos caught himself leaning forward, even though it wasn't really necessary. The girl ceased her tirade and turned to face her visitor.

"It's a peaceman!" Maria said. "But he's immature."

"He's not alone," Marcos said. "Look."

"The girl has a twin?" Jonas said.

"You think so?" Marcos asked. "It's easy to make a duplicate avatar. Just copy the original and flip the gender."

"And change the clothes, too," Maria said. "He's wearing something with dinosaurs on it."

"Of course," Marcos said. "Kids love dinosaurs. They're all over streamnet."

"But why would anybody bother?" Maria asked.

"Who knows." Marcos waved his hand impatiently. He was careful to do so out of range of the kinetic sensors. "We can ask someone when we board. Fernanda, Marly, how close are we?"

"We're just inside tractor range now," Fernanda said.

"Lock on, Fê," Marcos said.

"Yes, sir," Fernanda said.

"Someone else has entered the Liberty's bridge," Maria pointed out.

Marcos saw him. He was an older man with gray eyes that observed everything and revealed nothing. Something about him disturbed Marcos. He did not know what it was.

The avatar that called herself Penelope muted the sound and turned to the older man. She gestured wildly. Marcos could only imagine what she was saying. The little girl also jumped into the conversation, as did the twin boy. The synthegeen was predictably silent. Ned Trynk was looking around the flight deck. He shifted uncomfortably in the sleek black pilot's seat as if it were the first time he had ever sat in one.

Marcos smiled, as he always did when he was about to break his own rules. "I'm going to talk to them."

Maria raised a thin black eyebrow. "Oh?"

Marcos leaned forward and opened a channel on the return stream.

"Is your name really Penelope?" Marcos asked.

The image who called herself Penelope slowly turned around to face Marcos. She looked him up and down and said, "Me cago en el día que tu madre te parió."

The girl or avatar or whatever she was had guts almost to the point of foolishness.

"Hey Penelope," Marcos said. "Where did you pick up a tongue like that?"

"What an ugly avatar," the girl said. "Is that the best you can do?"

She was calling him an avatar? That was the one thing Marcos did not expect.

"You're an unpleasant child," Marcos said.

"Let's see how pleasant you are when someone blasts holes in your ship," the girl said. "What the burny blazes do you think you're doing? Do you realize you just killed my propulsion and put my life support in a coma?"

"Are you really streaming from the Liberty class?" Marcos asked. "You don't seem quite real to me." Marcos intercepted the commstream indicators from Maria. The green stream markers confirmed the signal originated from the slowing Liberty, but the flight deck background could be a lie. He vanished the commstream monitor. "Do you expect me to believe that you're streaming from the pilot's bridge? Where are your mommy and daddy?"

The twin boy gestured the commstream to focus on him. "It doesn't matter where our parents are. We're piloting this ship. You've done enough damage. Get away from us while we try to work this out."

Jonas was laughing. Marcos reddened. He couldn't let these kids talk to him like that, especially in front of his senior staff. "Listen,

dirt spurts. I don't even believe you really are children. You're just avatars programmed to soak some sympathy out of me. It's not going to work. For one thing, you just copied one avatar. When the girl didn't succeed, you tried the same avatar as a boy. At least you could show some originality!"

The older man stepped into the picture, facing Marcos calmly with eyes of cold steel alloy. "You are not looking at avatars. The twins run this ship. We were near Transcendent when the Trask attacked and were able to bring some survivors aboard. These kids have lost their families and their homes. They've been through enough."

"You're lying," Marcos said. "I recognize the Ned Trynk avatar behind the girl. I have kids, you know. Ned Trynk is a singer with a group called the Comet Floppings."

"Hey," the Ned Trynk avatar said. "That's Comet Droppings, not Floppings."

Fernanda and Marly giggled. Jonas and Maria knew better.

"You think that matters?" Marcos said.

"You should at least get your facts right before you attack us," said the Sarah Belkins avatar.

"That's enough chitchat." That voice... It came from somewhere outside the videostream.

"Who was that?" Marcos asked.

"Stop asking so many questions." It was that unseen female voice again. There was something unsettling about it. "You and your gang of roughnecks lay off the children. It's one thing to attack Trask warships, but another thing altogether to beat up a boatload of underage refugees."

"Who is that?" demanded Marcos. "Show yourself!"

"She's our DP," said the little blonde haired girl with Mars red streaks in her hair. "She can't show herself."

"Hey, Sarah, I don't belong to you," came the voice again. "I'm surprised at you."

"Sorry," Sarah said with a grimace. "I forgot."

"Her name is Daphne." The synthegeen had finally spoken.

"You have a peaceman crew member?" Marcos looked at all of them. He didn't know who to ask.



"He's a refugee too," said the older man.

"I am Rangor," the synthegeen said.

"Rangor! Hah! Like in the children's streamie? Show some originality, you avatar puppet," Marcos said.

"I am Rangor," the synthegeen repeated.

"What do you want, anyway?" It was the DP again. Her voice sent Marcos's pulse racing with old memories. But it couldn't be. It just wasn't possible. "What is your objective here? To add another ship to your collection? Can't you be happy with the three Trask attack boats you already captured?"

"Who are you?" Marcos asked again. "I want to see you."

"You've seen all you're going to see," said Penelope said. "We have no choice but to crowd into the lifeboats now. Are you going to let us go in peace?"

"You shut up," Marcos said. "I want to see the DP. Doesn't she have an avatar?"

"I don't know," Penelope shrugged.

"We've never seen her either," Sarah said.

"She belongs to Uncle Luke," said the twin brother, whatever his name was.

"They mean me," said the man. "They call me Uncle Luke."

Marcos took another careful look at the man. His face did not look familiar. "You're nobody's Uncle Luke."

"These kids might argue with you," said the man, "but you're the one with the big guns."

"That's right, we are," said Jonas.

Marcos motioned to him to be silent. "I want to see the avatar. I want to see the hologram that goes with the voice."

"What is it with you and avatars?" Daphne said. "I've never gone visual for anybody except, you know, Uncle Luke."

The voice was unmistakable. "Where are you?" Marcos was confused, and he didn't like it. "Are you part of the ship?"

"No, she's not," Uncle Luke said. "The ship doesn't belong to me. It's theirs." He nodded to the twins. "The avatar is my personal endoware. She's in my head. I named her Daphne."

"That's not her real name," Marcos said.

"Of course it is," Sarah said.

"No," Marcos said. He pounded his fist down on the console in front of him. "It is not."

Jonas and Maria tensed up at their stations and gave him uneasy stares. The two pilots sat frozen like statues. Celso turned back to his Z drive monitor.

"Are you hearing me?" Marcos yelled.

The man was silent, but it was obvious he was carrying on some kind of inner dialog with the DP.

"You are worse than a liar!" Marcos stood and shouted, tears streaming down his cheeks. The unwilling gazes of his crew clung to him in frozen fascination. "A thousand times worse!"

The man still did not respond. He just continued his internal conversation.

Marcos sat back down. "Fernanda, drop the tractor lock," he ordered. "Jonas, charge the hellbolt carriages. We'll fire when we're at a safe distance. Marly, get us away from this ship." Marcos pointed a finger at Uncle Luke. "You are going to die, and all of your precious children are going to die with you."

"Wait!" Uncle Luke said. "Wait. You're right." He paused, caught in some kind of internal struggle. "Daphne is not her real name."

"It's not?" Sarah said.

"Uncle Luke, you lied to us," Penelope accused.

"I knew it!" exclaimed the twin brother.

"He even lied to me!" Daphne said.

"Shut up, Pablo," Penelope said.

"Your Uncle Luke has lied to everybody," Marcos said. "Haven't you, Uncle Luke?"

"He's not kidding about those hellbolt carriages," the avatar said. "They're fully charged and aimed this way."

"Show me the avatar!" Marcos demanded.

Myriad amber lightning bolts flashed over the bridge consoles of his senior staff. The boarding party would want to know why the



*Tiradentes* was moving away from the Liberty class. Weapons engineers would want to know why the hellbolts were charged. The bridge personnel remained breathlessly still. The lightning bolts kept flashing.

"So do I go visual or not?" the DP asked.

Marcos's breath caught in his throat.

"Yes," said the man. "Go visual now."

"Well, it's about time!" the DP shouted joyously.

A teenage girl with long wavy blonde hair and impossibly blue eyes phased into the stream. She threw back her head in incredible exuberant laughter. She was wrapped in alligator skins and horsehide leather around her bust and waist, leaving a tight bare belly exposed. She wore multicolored coral shells around her neck and shone with the bronze of a pure Florida tan.

"Uncle Luke," Pablo said with an appreciative smile, "I thought the pink lizards were bad, but you..."

"Mariana," Marcos breathed. "It's really..." He grasped the console in front of him so hard his fingers turned white.

It couldn't be. But it was.

"What did you say?" Uncle Luke asked.

"Mariana," Marcos said, fighting hard to breathe. "That's Mariana. She's perfect!"

"You recognize her?" Uncle Luke asked.

"Of course, you dumb dizz," Marcos said, face flushing with anger. "She's my sister. My late sister, who died more than fifty years ago on our trip to Earth. What the burny blazes are you doing with an avatar of my sister?"

"Hey, I don't even know you," Daphne said. "But I do see the resemblance."

Uncle Luke was peering closely at him. "Marcelinho?" he whispered.

"Nobody's called me that in years," snapped Marcos.

"Marcelo Ximenez?" Uncle Luke asked.

"You know this guy, Uncle Luke?" Penelope asked. The other children were staring at their Uncle Luke in obvious confusion. Even the avatar turned toward him with an expression of surprise.

"How do you know so much about me?" Marcos demanded.

"It's me," said Uncle Luke. "It's Charles."

"Oh, great, blow your cover," the avatar said.

"Charles?" Marcos said.

"I knew you weren't really Uncle Luke," said Pablo.

"Shut up, Pablo," Penelope said. "Let them talk."

"That's you, Charles?" Marcos said.

"It's me," Uncle Luke said.

"But you don't look anything like I remember," Marcos said.

"He changes faces a lot," Sarah said. "Three times since I met him."

Pablo nudged Sarah. "Why didn't you tell us?"

"And the avatar?" Marcos asked.

"It was my way of keeping your sister's memory alive," Charles said. "My private way. Until now."

"You really loved her," Marcos said.

"Earth was a long time ago," said Charles.

"Earth?" said the twins together.

"You've been to Earth?" Ned Trynk asked.

"He was born there," the avatar said. "It was in his personnel file."

"But what about the quarantine?" the little Martian avatar asked.

"What's this about you changing faces?" Marcos asked.

"I'm a UN operative now," Charles said.

"You are?" the little girl said.

"Oh, that is just so protonic!" Pablo said.

Penelope and Ned Trynk just stared at Charles. The synthegeen remained expressionless.

Marcos shook his head slowly. He almost smiled. "A UN operative? I knew it was a mistake to drop you off on Mars." He turned to Jonas. "This man saved my life and avenged my sister's death. He carried me on horseback across half a continent. I want a clean dock with his ship and I want him welcomed aboard."

"Yes, sir," Jonas said. He opened up a commstream to give the orders.

"It's not his ship!" foul mouthed Penelope pointed out. "I told you that already."

"She's right," Charles said. "The ship belongs to the twins."

"I've got a hungry boarding party standing by to strip the Z drives for spares and relieve you of your full fuel cells," Marcos said. "Let's not argue about whose ship it is."

"That's our ship!" Pablo said.

"What about the children?" Sarah said.

"Sarah's right," Charles said. "I'm not coming aboard without the children."

Marcos smiled. "Still the same old Charles Dunn, risking it all to save the little children from the cruelty of adults."

"Save the smile for the good times," Dunn said. "There's nothing funny about this, Marcelinho."

"You're going to have to stop calling me that," Marcos said.

"How about if we call you a no good ruthless pirate," Penelope said. Her brother put his hand on her shoulder.

"I like her," Marcos said, still smiling. "Bring her and her brother. It's great day to finally meet you again. Bring everyone on the bridge."

"What about the other one thousand eight hundred and fifty-six children?" the avatar asked.

"We're not moving until we know they're cared for," Dunn said.

"Fine," Marcos said. "Anything for an old friend."

"What are you going to do?" Dunn asked. "We don't have much time left before the life support gives out."

"Send the rest back to Transcendent in lifeboats," Marcos said. "The rescue forces are there by now. Your lifeboats have the range. I will even comm them to let them know the refugees are on the way. They can meet each other half way..."

"We only have lifeboats for two thirds that many," Dunn pointed out.

"If I didn't owe you..." Marcos said.

"But you do," the avatar said. "Or at least that's what I am inferring."

Marcos gazed at the image of his sister. "She really is just like her."

"Your grandparents provided lots of old home streamies for me to work with," Dunn said.

"A true labor of love," Marcos said.

Dunn reddened slightly. "I asked them about you, but they always said you were on trips with your uncle."

"Yes," Marcos said. "Trips. Learning the family business."

"So what do we do with the children?" Sarah demanded.

"There is a TX09 cargo freighter headed toward us right now," Marcos said.

"I've been meaning to ask you about that," Mariana's avatar said.

"It has suddenly become my property. It should be here within hours," Marcos said. "Put as many as children as you can into your lifeboats. I will take the rest on board the *Tiradentes* for now. They can help us unload the TX09 when it arrives."

"Unload what?" Sarah asked.

"It doesn't matter, Sarah," Charles said. "Help the passengers find their way to the lifeboats now. Send the smaller ones first. The older ones can unload faster."

"Charles," Marcos said. "Do you know that your little Sarah is the daughter is the daughter of a Martian senator and a direct descendent of Adva Avni?"

"You are?" Ned Trynk asked Sarah.

"Of course we did," said the Mariana avatar.

"And the synthegen... Charles, how did you ever... Never mind. You can tell me all about it when you get here," Marcos said.

"How long before our ships dock?" Charles asked.

"They're docked now," Mariana's avatar said. "What are you waiting for?"

"One more thing, Charles," Marcos said. "I just remembered, and since you are a UN man now... One of my men found a UN permadoc in the wreckage of a Trask patrol boat. Is it valuable?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

## Charles Dunn

“I went to a lot of trouble to get this,” Tomas Almeida said, stepping down off the ridged docking ramp of the TX09 without even a greeting. Thick dark eyebrows and shaggy black hair splattered with small streaks of gray added to the fierceness of his features. Black ripples marred the cold gold background of his old tunic. “You can at least tell me what it is.”

“I told you, Tomas, this man saved my life,” Marcos said. “He doesn’t have to explain anything.”

Their voices echoed mildly against the half empty spaces of the *Tiradentes’s* wide cargo bay. The open end of the TX09 was backed up against the warship’s docking hatch, revealing a cargo of gray metallic crates inside with green and white Jovian Force markings. Inside the *Tiradentes*, messy rows of spare parts and odd machinery lined the opposite wall.

Dunn thoughtfully turned the permadoc over in his hand.

“He doesn’t want to tell you in front of us,” Pablo said. The boy fidgeted nervously. “Come on, Gloria. Let’s go find the others so we can get started unloading the cargo ship. Penelope, are you coming?”

“I’ll help too,” Ned Trynk said. The boy had been forced out of hiding, but he did not stray far from Penelope.

“Thanks, Ned,” Penelope said sweetly.

“Aren’t you going to tell them?” Daphne asked inaudibly. She was not allowed to stream most places on the *Tiradentes*. “I thought we talked about this already.”

“I took the pilot prisoner, but she won’t say anything either,” Tomas continued. “Just keeps repeating her name, rank, and serial number. Akemi Yamakawa, Jovian Force Lieutenant, SRX01862I...”

"Akemi?" Rangor said. Dunn was surprised to see the synthe-gen's dark eyes brighten. "Where is she?"

"I threw her in my brig on board the Defender," Tomas said. "My wife's keeping an eye on her. If we don't need her, I'll put her in the TX09 and send her off with the others. The Ceres Forces will rescue them all soon enough."

"And then what?" Daphne said to Dunn alone. "Ceres won't make any special effort to get her back to her fleet. Cooperating with the Jovians will endanger their neutrality."

"I want to see her," Rangor said firmly. "I want to see Akemi."

"You know this pilot?" Almeida asked the synthe-gen.

"She's my friend," Rangor said simply.

"She was our guest for a while," Dunn said.

"She tried to hijack the *Orquidea*!" Sarah exclaimed, stomping one tiny foot against the bare cargo bay floor.

"That doesn't matter any more," Penelope said, "since you guys are already using my ship for spare parts." She nodded toward the rows of equipment piled up around them. "Thanks a lot, by the way."

"Space dust happens." Marcos shrugged. "By the time we found out you were with Charles, it was too late."

"I heard about your sister," Tomas said. "I never knew, Marcos."

"It was a long time ago," Marcos said. "During a visit to Earth when I was child."

"Earth is no place to take a child," Tomas said. "That's why they quarantined it, right? At least that's what I hear. But what about the permadoc?"

"Let's go," Pablo said again. "Uncle Luke won't talk with us around. He prefers to talk with these pirates."

"No, Pablo," Dunn said. "Stay. No more secrets."

"Hey!" Penelope said. "Uncle Luke's really going to talk to us now."

"Yeah," Pablo said, "but is he going to tell the truth?"

"Yes," Dunn said, "but you might not believe it."

"Try us," Sarah said.

"This permadoc has been around a long time," Dunn said. "It was created by Adva Avni."

"Oh, come on, Uncle Luke," Sarah said. "I know all about her. We studied her in school, and also she's my great-something grandmother."

"Adva Avni did not die in a sandstorm," Dunn said.

"Yes, she did," Sarah said. "I told you, we learned all about that in school and besides I saw it on the docustreamie."

"We all saw that," Pablo said.

"The Little Ripple with the Big Splash," Penelope said. "That was the name of the docustreamie. Because her name means ripple in Hebrew."

Dunn shook his head. "Remember, her body was never found. People just assumed she was dead because no one ever heard from her after that sandstorm."

"What does this all this have to do with the permadoc?" Tomas asked.

"Dr. Avni faked her death on Mars," Dunn said. "Then she traveled to Earth and developed a species of manna that would live there." Dunn held up the permadoc. "The permadoc contains the geneprint for the Earth manna seed. It has been lost for centuries."

"Adva Avni faked her own death?" Sarah said.

"She would have to," Marcos said, nodding. "The Martian vested interests would have killed her if they knew she was developing a manna strain that would grow off Mars."

"They said she was tougher than a Martian sandstorm and sweeter than her own manna," Gloria said. "They must have been more right than they knew."

"Adva Avni didn't care about the Martian manna monopoly," Dunn said. "The old country of Israel was holy to her. She wanted to make it liveable again. She was a brave woman. Unfortunately, Dr. Avni died on Earth, before she could share her discovery."

"But the permadoc survived," Tomas said. "Hey, I wonder how much the Martians would pay to get their hands on this permadoc and get it out of circulation..."

Dunn frowned at him and Tomas took an involuntary step backward. "Maybe Mariana never had to die. If Adva Avni's Earth manna had been allowed to grow freely, Mars never could have manipulated the Earth orbiting nations into quarantining their own planet. A rescue mission could have been launched to find Mariana and Marcos before Father —" Dunn stopped to catch his breath.

"Your father?" Penelope asked. "What did he do?"

"His father killed Mariana," Marcos said.

Tomas Almeida's eyes widened and he reached inside his tunic for his pistol.

Marcos held up a hand. "Leave him alone. Charles killed him back."

Sarah's jaw dropped. "You killed your own father?"

"Like Tomas said, Earth is no place for a child. But maybe we can change all that," Dunn said, "with this." He held up the permadoc again.

"You'll have to get that past the Martians first," Tomas said. "You're a dead man if they find you with it."

"Ah," Marcos said, rubbing the gray stubble on his chin. "Now I understand."

"Understand what?" Dunn asked.

"Why there's a Martian fleet bearing down on us," Marcos said.

"Ask him how close they are, since they won't give me a stream to play on," Daphne said impatiently.

"Daphne wants to know how close they are," Dunn said.

"Tell her I'm sorry the streams are locked in this section," Marcos said. "The Martians will be in combat range this time tomorrow if we don't scatter."

Dunn slipped the permadoc into a brown tunic fold. "Our first priority is the children. We have to get them aboard the TX09."

"I thought they were going to help do the unloading," Tomas said.

"Yes," Pablo said.

"We'll be right back," Gloria said. "We'll find the others and organize them."

"Is this Earth manna stuff supposed to be a secret?" Penelope asked.

"Not any more," Dunn said. "Tell anyone you want."

"It's like Uncle Luke said a few minutes ago," Pablo said. "Nobody would believe it anyway. Come on, Rangor."

"No," Rangor said. "I want to see Akemi first."

"Stay if you want," Penelope said. She was moving toward the steel plated inner doorway, pacing fast to catch up with Ned Trynk. "We'll see you in a few minutes."

"You really want to see the Jovian?" Tomas asked Rangor. "Why?"

"I want to talk to her again," Rangor said.

Tomas shook his head. "I'm sorry, synthegen. My wife will shoot both of us if I let you anywhere near my ship."

"Bring Akemi here," Rangor commanded. His expression was firm.

"I'll have my wife bring her," Tomas said. "She'll shoot me anyway if she doesn't get some time off the ship soon." He stepped back and raised his control bracelet. He pressed the silvery plate that toggled it on, and in a moment he was surrounded by a dark and silent Holographic Interface.

"I'm still skeptical, Charles," Marcos told Dunn while Almeida was talking within his privacy cloud. "Don't you want to verify the contents of the permadoc?"

"Permadoc data is stored on the subatomic level," Dunn said. "It's going to take more than the personal probe on your wrist to access it."

"We'll make use of one of the engineering rooms," Marcos said. He raised his wrist to tap his control bracelet. Shimmering abstracts sprang to life in front of him. Marcos used them to open a comstream. "Celso, meet us in the aft engineering section." Marcos closed the connection. "Celso's no genius but he can get your data for you, at least in raw form. We won't be able to help you with encryption if there is any."

"Tell little brother to step aside and watch big sister work her magic," Daphne said.

"That's why I put up with Daphne," Dunn said.

"Hey," Daphne said.

"Really?" Marcos said. "So the avatar carries UN encryption codes. Maybe we can work something out."

"She'll self-destruct if you try anything," Dunn warned.

"Sorry to hear that," Marcos said.

"Liar," Daphne said.

"If it's any consolation, Daphne cracked a Trask military encryption scheme not too long ago," Dunn said. "The Trask don't know they've been compromised."

"You'll give me the codes?" Marcos asked.

Dunn nodded his head.

"I'll have my DP call your DP and they can set up a comstream together," Marcos said.

Tomas emerged from darkness, toggling off his HI. He looked at Rangor. "You got your way, synthege. My wife Andreia is on her way over here with your girlfriend."

"I'll wait for Akemi right here," Rangor said.

"Fine," Tomas said. He turned away from the synthege. "Marcos, Andreia and I are curious about the avatar of your sister."

"You mean you want to see her?" Marcos asked. "It's up to Charles."

"Tell him yes," Daphne coaxed. "My beauty is far too exquisite for one man alone, even you, dear Charles."

Dunn nodded at Tomas. "Fine."

"Not here," Marcos said. "Remember, shipwide streaming is disabled on the *Tiradentes*. We've had too much trouble with ghosts."

"That's one way to stop the haunters," Daphne said to Dunn, "but it doesn't make life easy for the good guys."

"Come with us to the aft engineering station," Marcos said to Almeida. "We're on the way now. Andreia can track us once she boards the *Tiradentes*."

Marcos led the way out of the *Tiradentes's* cargo hold, back toward the same steel doorway through which they had entered.

Rangor hung back. "What about Akemi? Is she coming?"

"She'll catch up to us," Tomas said. "Don't worry, you'll see your girlfriend again soon."

Rangor shifted uncertainly from one foot to the other. He looked at Dunn.

"Come on, Rangor, we're going to meet her someplace else," Dunn said.

"It's not far," Marcos told them.

The group exited the cargo hold and followed Marcos toward the starboard side of the ship. Marcos and Tomas nodded to the few people they passed in the narrow corridor. The crew members of the *Tiradentes* took long looks at Dunn and Rangor, but said nothing to them. A set of double doors opened before them as Marcos approached.

"I hope you don't mind stairs," Marcos said. "I find them faster than the elevator for short distances." Another door opened beside them and Marcos led them into a narrow stairwell. They were forced into frequent tight turns on their way to the upper levels. Their footsteps echoed off grated steps and hard yellow walls.

"The Victory class was designed with stairs?" Dunn asked, mildly surprised.

"I could have told you that," Daphne said.

"Pretty luxurious, especially for a warship," Marcos said. "Why include stairs if you already have an elevator? A waste of space, most people would say, with a bad reputation for being unsafe. The Decem-berans liked the challenge, I suppose."

"Yeah, and so do you," Tomas said, panting to keep up.

"Come on, Tomas, it's only two flights," Marcos said. He stopped in front of another door and manually pushed it open. "Are you surprised? The doors aren't gesture sensitive from inside the stairwell. Don't ask me why."

They spilled out into another narrow corridor. A bearded man with a dark complexion exchanged warm greetings with Marcos and Tomas, but had only curious stares for Dunn and Rangor.

"Follow me," Marcos said. He paused in front of a dull gray door, labeled only with black numbers and dashes. It silently slid



open. Marcos strode into a room glowing with technical holograms that provided detailed monitoring of the ship's drives and Z based inertials. A series of square jet black desks lined the actively displaying walls, each desk facing inward toward the center of the room. The occasional idling hologram hovered over a few of them. In the middle of the room was a long black oval table with laid in kinetic receptors at each position. "This is Celso."

The blond haired engineer looked away from the monitor he was studying and nodded. He waved the images away so that the space over the table was clear. "I let the others know you were coming. They found other things to do."

"Well done," Marcos said. "Pull up seats, everyone." Marcos took the chair at the head of the table. "Celso, can you open up a stream so that Charles's DP can go holographic?"

"I expected that," Celso said. "It's open already."

"Celso was on the bridge with us yesterday," Marcos explained. "He has already seen Mariana's avatar."

Daphne streamed into the room, shaking out her sun bleached hair as if she had just stepped off a Florida beach. "You don't have to tell me twice!" She wore the same alligator skin and horse leather clothing she had used the day before on the bridge of the *Orquidea*. Her tan seemed somehow deeper, her skin more flush with the first signs of sunburn.

Dunn hands tightened at his sides, but he said nothing. In time, he might get used to the external form and sound of Mariana. For now, her voice resonated in unexpected ways and the shadows she created for herself were themselves blocked out by unanticipated obstacles to light. The sight and sound and smell of her renewed his longing and his grief at the same time.

"Welcome back," Marcos said, contemplating the smiling likeness of his sister, so much like the real woman.

"Why, thank you, little brother," Daphne said. "Aren't you going to offer me a chair?"

"Take any chair you like," Marcos said.

Dunn rested his hands on the table in front of him, the per-

madoc tightly clenched in his right fist, his right fist gripped by his left hand.

"You'll have to let go of that thing if we're going to get a look at it," Marcos pointed out.

"Is that why we're here?" Celso asked. "To view the permadoc data?"

"If you have something that can read it," Dunn said.

"Why is that man staring at me?" Daphne asked, nodding her head toward Tomas and crossing her arms tightly across her chest.

Tomas smiled. "You're a nice piece of work."

"Can I take a look?" Celso held out his hand.

Dunn hesitated.

"Hand over the permadoc, Charles," Marcos said. "We don't owe anything to the Martians."

Dunn stretched out his hand and let Celso take the permadoc from his palm. The engineer examined both sides of the coin shaped object for a moment.

"I'll have to take it next door," Celso said.

"Why?" Dunn asked.

"The engineworks section adjoins this room," Marcos said.

"Right," Celso said. "I have probing equipment there that can give us a pretty deep look."

Dunn stood up, his chair skittering behind him. "I'm coming with you."

Celso looked toward Marcos, who shook his head. "The engine shop is off limits, even to most of the crew. Don't worry, Charles. Celso will take good care of your permadoc."

Dunn remained standing. "I'm not letting it out of my sight again."

Marcos spread his palms flat on the table. "Come on, Charles, do you want our help or not?"

Dunn did not answer.

Marcos sighed. "Fine. You can leave on the Jovian transport with the others, if that's what you want."

"I'll go with him," Daphne said suddenly, turning a bright smile on Celso.

"You wouldn't be allowed either," Dunn said.

"Sure I would," Daphne said. "My access can be restricted. I just want to keep an eye out for you, Charlie."

"Yes," Celso said. "That could work."

"A great compromise," Marcos said. "Now can we get on with it? I'm starting to feel that Martian fleet on my backside."

"I'll open a streamway for you." Celso summoned an HI into existence by gesturing over the table. He went dark for a moment.

"Hey!" Daphne said. "That tickles."

"Very funny," Celso said. He waved away the HI and stood up with the permadoc in his hand. "The avatar has monitor access. If the data is encrypted, I'll need her help with the decoding anyway. I'll stream in the results from the other room." Celso walked toward the wall next to Marcos. A door slid open as he approached, and quietly closed behind him.

"Aren't you going to follow him?" Tomas asked.

"I am," Daphne said. "Unlike you folks, I can be in two places at the same time. He is running tests on the permadoc now. Relax, Charles. Celso is taking good care of it."

"How much longer will he be?" Marcos asked. "The Martians..."

"Not much longer," Celso said, his voice streaming in around them.

"He turned an audiostream on," Daphne said. "I forgot to tell you."

Dunn knew that Daphne never forgot anything.

"I'm going to stream in what I have already," Celso said.

Above the center of the rectangular table, a mangled black geometry expanded out of a field of shimmering green. A mass of garbled forms twisted inside it.

"This is what I've extracted," Celso said. "It doesn't look like much. It's just the raw data."

"Pretty ugly," Daphne said. She wrinkled her forehead. The mass shifted and changed. "I'm trying a few different..." The mass neatened out and assumed a regular pattern. "That's an old one. I had to reach way back for it."

Regular columns of hexadecimal sequences and words in English and Hebrew scrolled in front of them. In the background, long straight bars with scattered sections in white, black, and red slithered past. Each section was identified numerically. Sideways bar graphs accompanied the long bars, orange columns shifting length in time with the movement of the sections.

"What are we looking at?" Tomas asked, scratching at a crease in his black and gold tunic.

The door to the outside corridor slid open. "A geneprint? Here? It looks like a seed."

"Shut up, you," said the kinky haired woman behind Akemi. She had a wide face and black unwavering eyes. "Get in there."

"I'm moving," Akemi said. "You don't have to push."

"It's about time, Andreia," Tomas said.

"Next time you move your own prisoner," Andreia Almeida said. The door slid shut behind them. "She's been nothing but trouble. Can I shoot her now?"

"No," Rangor growled. "Take off the wrist rings."

"Rangor?" Akemi said, taking her eyes off the geneprint. "What are you doing here?" Akemi looked around the room. "You! Uncle Luke or whatever your name is! I should have known you were a pirate!"

"You couldn't be more wrong, princess," Marcos said, shaking his head.

"Yeah, he's a UN operative, you Jovian dizz," Tomas said.

"What did you call me?" Akemi said.

"Take off the wrist rings," Rangor repeated.

Andreia looked at her husband, who nodded. Andreia disappeared behind a dark HI for moment. When she reappeared, Akemi was slipping out of the wrist rings. She handed them back to Andreia without even looking at her. She was studying the floating geneprint.

"Akemi!" Rangor said. "Sit here!" With an uncharacteristic smile, the synthegeen motioned to the empty seat beside him. Then he held his hand out, cupped around an imaginary soda can. With his other hand, he tapped the imaginary top and followed the growth of

the imaginary spout with his fingers. Then he tipped his head back and took an imaginary sip of the imaginary soda. He dispensed with the imaginary can and smiled at Akemi.

"You're such a little dizzy," Akemi said, smiling back at him.

Rangor's smile stretched from ear to ear. Dunn had never seen him so happy.

"You showed me how to do that," Rangor said.

"I remember," Akemi said. She accepted the chair that Rangor offered her. "How are you doing? Is this Uncle Luke guy taking care of you?"

"Yes," Rangor said.

Akemi looked around the table. "What am I doing here?"

"Rangor wanted to see you again," Dunn said.

Akemi gave Daphne a cold stare. "Who's the dimbo with the wardrobe problem?"

"That's my sister," Marcos said coldly.

"Oh," Akemi said, looking away. "Sorry. Really? So young?"

"I'm dead," Daphne said. "At least that's what they tell me."

"She's been dead for more than fifty years," Marcos said.

It was fifty-two years. Or maybe fifty-three. Dunn had been unable to determine the precise date Mariana died. It seemed like an eternity. It seemed like yesterday.

"Yeah, and nobody ever bothered to tell me," Daphne said.

"I wouldn't have told you either," Tomas said. "Yum." Andreia was sitting next to Tomas now. He warded off an elbow to his ribs with obvious long experience.

"You're an avatar," Akemi said.

"Aren't you the luminescent one," Daphne said. "Hijack any more ships from little children lately?"

"Your shadows are all wrong," Akemi said.

"They aren't that bad!" Daphne exclaimed.

"You have to be a DP," Akemi said. "No real person would dress like that."

"Charles likes the way I dress!" Daphne said.

"You better tell Charles, whoever that is, that you need to realign your wardrobe to the current century," Akemi said.

"Oh? How's this?" Daphne's primitive Earth apparel morphed into a replica of Akemi's gray Jovian Force uniform, complete with rank insignia.

"Hey!" Akemi said. "You copied me!"

"Sorry about that," Daphne said. "Maybe you can find some spare clothes in the TX09 if you want to change."

"Impersonating a Jovian Force officer is a violation of —" Akemi started.

"Someone's really going to believe I'm a lieutenant in the Jovian Force?" Daphne asked. "Don't make me laugh."

"While you two ladies are bickering, a Martian fleet is targeting in on our position," Marcos said.

"Martians?" Akemi exclaimed. "Hey, where are we, anyway?"

"They haven't told you anything?" Daphne asked.

"They aren't as talkative as you are," Akemi said.

"We're in one of the inner Kirkwood Gaps," Dunn explained. "Our present course will take us inward toward the Cybeles families."

"The Martian Third Fleet was spotted in this sector," Akemi said. "It's just empty space around here. Not much in the way of cover. You illegals don't have a chance if they spot you. What's your plan?"

"I hate that word 'illegals,'" Marcos said. "But it's better than 'pirate.'"

"The plan is to unload my TX09 and put you back on it," Tomas said. "You can fly the Transcendent kids back to Ceres and do whatever you want from there."

"Ceres? Transcendent kids? But what about my ship? My supplies? What am I supposed to tell my captain?" Akemi said.

"The ship and supplies are ours now," Marcos said. "Tell your captain whatever you want."

"Maybe I'll give him your location," Akemi said. "Maybe I'll tell him about the geneprint you're looking at. Why would a bunch of pirates be interested in a seed, anyway?"

"That's our business," Marcos said.

"It doesn't matter anyway," Dunn said sadly. "We need a live one, and we don't have any way to produce it."

"Of course you do," Akemi said. "It's simple. You can use a seedmaker."

"A what?" Tomas asked.

"They synthesize seeds," Akemi said slowly, as if talking to a dull witted child.

"This isn't a farm ship," Marcos said. "We don't have that kind of equipment laying around here."

"Yes, you do. I saw one on the way in," Akemi said.

"What? Where?" Tomas asked.

"In the cargo hold. Your dear sweet wife took me all through it."

"You did tell me to meet you there, Tomas," Andreia said. "I looked all over for you."

"It was laying in a pile with all the other junk you guys stole," Akemi said. "You must have attacked an agricultural vessel some time back. But you attack so many ships. How could you be expected to remember every one?"

"Celso," Marcos said. Dunn had almost forgotten that the engineer was still listening, out of sight.

"I'm on it," Celso said, his voice streaming around them.

"Who's that?" Akemi asked.

"My engineer will verify your claim," Marcos said.

"I didn't say it was working," Akemi said. "It wasn't exactly the latest model."

"How does a Jovian pilot know so much about geneprints and seedmakers?" Dunn wanted to know.

"Because," Akemi said. "I grew up in Ganymede Acres. I worked for Big Gany most of my life. They're a —"

"I know," Tomas said. "They make Ganymede Gus, right?"

"And Dr. Ponik and a few others," Akemi looked down. "I joined the Force after my parents were killed in an accident in the refinery."

"I'm sorry," Rangor said unexpectedly.

"So you joined the Jovian Force and became a pilot to get as far away you could from Ganymede," Tomas said sympathetically.

"Something like that," Akemi said.

"It must be tough, to lose a ship like that," Tomas said.

"Stop feeling sorry for her," Andreia said.

"She lost two ships," Daphne said. "She tried to take over the *Orquidea*, too."

"Thanks for reminding me," Akemi said. "That made me very popular with my commanding officers. What do you know about it?"

"I live in Uncle Luke's head," Daphne said.

"A personal DP," Akemi grinned slyly at Dunn. "Some avatar."

"Thank you," Daphne said.

"What will your captain do when he finds out you've lost another ship?" Tomas asked.

"Probably send me home," Akemi said. She leaned forward again. "I've never seen a seed quite like that." She indicated the holographic geneprint with a nod of her head. "It's public domain, though. You can do whatever you want with it. Whoever developed this seed didn't care at all about copyrights."

"It's Earth manna," Dunn said.

Akemi frowned. "Really? No. That's impossible."

The geneprint spun into itself and disappeared, suddenly replaced by a tall blond avatar of Celso. "I found the seed synthesizer. At least I think that's what it is. Marcos, I have no idea how to operate it."

Dunn swiveled his chair toward Akemi. Everyone else did the same.

"I can take a look," Akemi shrugged. "But no more wrist rings."

"No more wrist rings," Rangor repeated.

"There's a bunch of kids down here," Celso continued. "They dumped TX09 cargo all over the place. They say they're ready to go. Go where?"

"We're coming back down," Marcos said. "Be ready to show us where the agricultural equipment is."

"I'll be here," Celso said. "What do I tell these kids?"

Marcos glanced at Dunn. "Tell them Uncle Luke is on the way."

"Will do," Celso said, and winked out.

"Let's go," Marcos said. They all stood up, even Daphne. Marcos started moving toward the door, Daphne right behind him. Dunn followed them. "You won't be able to accompany us holographically now."

"Not fair," Daphne said. "Just because a bunch of abusive hunters —"

"Sorry, Sis," Marcos said. Daphne had time for a quick pout before she vanished in the doorway.

"Come on," Rangor said to Akemi.

"Let's go check out our cargo," Andreia said to Tomas. "There has to be something more than just guns and uniforms."

"How about food rations and medicines?" Akemi called behind her. "They belong to the Jovian Force, you know." She followed Rangor toward the stairwell.

"I've had enough stairs," Tomas said. "Andreia, the elevator is this way." Dunn glanced over his shoulder as Andreia followed Tomas around a corner and out of sight.

The others matched Marcos's brisk pace and finally entered the cargo hold to see the TX09's dull gray boxes scattered everywhere.

"Hi, Uncle Luke!" Sarah exclaimed, smiling. Then she saw Akemi. "Oh. It's you again."

"Keep her away from me," Penelope said, turning away from them.

"I'm sorry," Akemi said softly.

Gloria stopped talking to Pablo and slapped her hands together to scare the dust off them. "We're ready to get underway."

"We're going to take a look at some equipment," Dunn said. "It should just be a few minutes."

"That's what you think," Akemi said. "Those old seedmakers can be stubborn."

"Tell the others to get aboard," Dunn said to Gloria. "They'll need to leave as soon as possible."

"They'll be glad to hear it," Gloria said. She went to organize the others.

"Over here," Celso called to them.

"Who are all those kids?" Akemi asked as they walked toward the engineer.

"Refugees from Transcendent," Marcos said. "While you were enjoying Tomas's hospitality, the Trask attacked the Ceres Nation."

"So you rescued the children?" Akemi said, raising her shiny thin black eyebrows at Marcos. "I'm impressed."

"No, Akemi," Rangor said. "Uncle Luke rescued them. Then the pirates attacked us."

"It wasn't me," Tomas had rejoined the group.

"Of course not," Akemi said. "You were too busy attacking me."

Marcos turned around. "Where's Andreia?"

"Catching up with her gossip friends," Tomas said. "Is this the synthesizer?"

"Yes," Celso said. The brawny engineer towered over a dull steel apparatus with black flexible parts and air vents on two sides.

Akemi bent over to give the device a closer look. "It's an old Dreschler. I've used them before. Can someone help me pick it up?"

Dunn and Celso helped Akemi place the appliance on top of a nearby Z drive shield. Akemi paced slowly around the rough box shape, nudging the levers and lids. She removed several caps and peered inside.

"Well?" Dunn said.

"I could tell you more about it if it were powered up," Akemi said. "Also, it needs an input source. There's no way to feed it the geneprint data without one."

"What do you think?" Dunn said quietly to Daphne.

"Are we still maintaining comm silence?" Daphne asked. "I will have to consult an external library to understand this equipment."

"Don't do it," Dunn told Daphne.

"I don't get it," Celso said, scratching his head to prove it. "How would this thing normally work?"

"The fabricator reads your specs through an input conduit and manufactures seed embryos out of raw organic constructs," Akemi said.

"Celso, next time don't ask," Tomas said, throwing his hands up in the air.

"The seeds coalesce right here in this minivat," Akemi said. She lifted one of the lids she had been prodding. The inside was stained dark purple. "There should be a nourigel formula in here, but of course it's dry. Who knows how long this equipment has been sitting here."

"Certainly not me," Marcos said.

Akemi stepped back from the machine and placed her hands on her hips. She looked at Dunn. "It could work, if we gave it steady power, if we set up an input source to communicate in one of the older protocols, and if we could obtain the raw organics to support the embryo growth."

"Is that all you need?" Tomas mocked.

"Uncle Luke!"

Dunn turned in the direction of Sarah's voice. The little girl was running up to meet them.

"We're ready to go now," Sarah said. Her cheeks were flushed and she sounded slightly out of breath. "Everyone's aboard that big transport ship. We're waiting for you."

"Well?" Marcos asked Dunn. "What do you want to do? You are welcome to stay aboard the *Tiradentes* with us. You and Celso can work on the seed device together. Eventually, you may even get it fixed."

"I don't think so..." Dunn said.

"Make up your mind fast," Marcos said. "We're running out of time. If you want, I can keep the Jovian here too. Surely she and Celso together can make this thing work."

"You can't keep me here —" Akemi said.

"You want a reminder?" Tomas threatened.

"I stay if Akemi stays," Rangor said.

"What is it with you?" Akemi asked. "Why are you so concerned about me?"

"You're my friend," Rangor said. "I'm yours."

"I want a ship," Dunn said.

"There you go, Charlie!" Daphne whispered in the back-ground.

"What?" Marcos said.

"Not mine," Tomas said.

"Give me a ship," Dunn said. "In exchange, I'll draw the Martians away from you. They'll follow me instead of you."

"How will you manage that?" Akemi asked.

"When I get far enough away from you, I'll start broadcasting the manna geneprint data. Once they figure out what it is, they'll know I have the permadoc. They won't chase you," Dunn said.

"But they'll chase you," Marcos said. "They'll blow you apart and retrieve the permadoc from your wreckage."

"It's been done before," Akemi said.

"They won't touch me," Dunn said.

"How can you be so sure?" Akemi said.

Dunn put his arm around Sarah. "They won't shoot my hostage."

Sarah smiled up at Dunn and put her arm around him, too. "I'll go with you if you want, Uncle Luke."

"They won't shoot her, but they will want her back," Marcos said.

"I will deliver her to them," Dunn said. "It's time for her to go home anyway."

"Uncle Luke," Sarah said. Her lower lip suddenly shivered.

"I'll stream the Earth manna geneprint into the UN libraries and anywhere else that will accept them," Dunn said. "Adva Avni's legacy will finally be shared. The permadoc won't matter any more."

"But Uncle Luke," Sarah said. "I can't leave you."

"You need to go home, Sarah," Dunn said. "The twins, too. They need to be reunited with their parents."

"You're totally untorqued, Charles," Marcos said. "Completely spun. But you're right. I think your plan will work."

"Of course it will, Charlie," Daphne breathed. "Are you going to let me fly your new ship?"

"It's the only way," Dunn told Marcos.



Marcos tapped his silvery control bracelet and brought up a simplistic HI. His fingers dug into a personal directory and chose several recipients. The movement was too fast for Dunn to see the names. "This is Marcos, multicasting to Luis, Ronaldo, Francisco, Alexandro. Tomas is here with me. I need a ship. The first person who turns their boat over to me, fully charged and fully stocked, gets two of our recently acquired Trask Dragon attack ships in return."

"You can have mine!" Tomas exclaimed instantly.

"I said the first to turn their ship over to me," Marcos said. "Not the first to respond. Can I have your ship right now?"

"Just let me get my stuff off it," Tomas said.

"Then you haven't turned your ship over to me," Marcos said. He paused. "I think Luis might beat you."

"That dented gypsy!" Tomas said, scurrying out of the cargo hatch. "No way I'm going to let him have two ships while I only have one!"

Marcos chuckled out loud and closed his commstream. "I'm sorry you're leaving so soon, Charles. There is a place here for you, if you want it."

"There's one more thing," Dunn said.

"Something else?" Marcos asked. "I'm giving you a ship. Isn't that enough?"

"It's a small request." Dunn pointed to the Dreschler device. "The seed synthesizer. I want it."

"But it doesn't have a . . . a . . .," Marcos said.

"A power supply," Celso filled in helpfully. "And an input source."

"Yes," Marcos said. "Those things. And you don't even know how to operate it."

"I think I can work those things out," Dunn said, looking at Akemi.

"What?" Akemi blurted.

"I need your help," Dunn said. "I want you to come with us."

"With you? You really are completely untorqued!" Akemi said.

"Fine," Dunn said. "I will leave you with Marcos, then."

"No!" Akemi said.

"Maybe Tomas will have you back," Dunn said.

"Keep him away from me!" Akemi said.

"How about the TX09?" Dunn asked. "You can board it with the others. You might be picked up by the Ceres Security Forces, but after all this is unclaimed space and the Martians are nearby. They might decide to make you their guest."

"No," Akemi said quietly.

"Akemi," Dunn said, just as quietly, "what do you have to go home to? You said your parents are dead. You won't get a warm welcome from your commanding officer. Come with me. I need your help."

"Come with you where?" Akemi asked.

"Good question, Charles," Marcos said. "Where are you going?"

"To Earth," Dunn said.

"Earth?" Akemi said. "You want to plant the Earth manna."

"And I want you to help," Dunn said.

"But what about the quarantine?" Akemi asked. "We can't just land there and start putting seeds in the ground."

"Sure we can. The Anderson quarantine doesn't apply to Earth natives," Dunn said, "or to a limited number of their invited guests."

Akemi's eyes narrowed. "You were born on Earth?"

Amber lightning bolts sprang up around Marcos's control bracelet and danced until he hit the toggle plate in response. A miniature Tomas appeared in midair, slightly out of breath. "Take my ship. All my stuff is off. When do I get my Trask boats?"

Marcos laughed. "You've got your ship, Charles."

"I'll help you load the seedmaker," Celso said.

"Thank you both," Dunn said. He turned to Akemi. "I'll tell you the whole story on our flight. And you, too, Sarah."

"And me," Rangor said.

Dunn smiled. "Of course. First, let's go say good-bye to the twins."

CHAPTER THIRTY

## Fred Bellamy

Fred Bellamy was taking an extra long time to get his coffee this morning. For one hundred thousand NYC dollars, Fred would spend more time fine tuning the coffee blend every morning. Fred took so long at the spigot that he couldn't help but neglect his comm system. He just wasn't able to check for daily order updates, and so naturally there would be no telltale acknowledgement signal that he ever received the new orders.

The shiny messaging console rested against his observation station, just out of Fred's line of sight. In other words, he had his back to it. Rapid red pulsations touched the cheery white walls around him. Fred imagined the red message light spinning and flashing above the console with an urgent update. Only Jeffrey Croft, the Senior Controller, could get a message to him here with that level of urgency. Fred wondered what the old guy was so excited about.

Too bad the man on encrypted audiostream last night had advised Fred to stall as much as possible, without being too obvious about it, before attending to emergencies this morning. Or maybe it wasn't too bad. The faceless caller had backed up his advice with an astonishing amount of money. How could Fred say no to such a persuasive person? A simple salary review would be enough to convince anyone. A NEON observer's pay was not the envy of the solar system.

Now poor Fred would have to spill coffee on his nice blue and black uniform. The things Fred did just to get by. That should keep him away from the comm system for a little while longer. Oops. Hey, that was hot. And what a mess. Oh, well. Who could fault Fred for

a quick trip to the lavatory after such a sloppy spill? As a NEON observer, a member of the Network of Earth Orbiting Nations quarantine assurance unit, it was his duty to keep his personal hygiene fresh and inviting.

Fred crossed his office to get to the lavatory. He was careful to keep his eyes trained straight ahead. He was not to look out any portholes that might give him a view of Earth until later today. He did not know why. Wait, yes, he did know why. It was all that money the faceless man offered him.

Fred took his time cleaning his tunic with the yellow safety wipes. NEON uniforms were mostly self-cleaning anyway, but it didn't hurt to make sure. Fred looked at himself in the mirror. Such a young, fresh face, with those delightful hazel eyes. So many promising years ahead. How would he spend his money?

Hmm. Was that a little stubble under his strong, firm chin? Had he missed a spot with his depilatory? Maybe he was due for another round of the perfumed lotion, just to be thorough. Perhaps he should apply it right now. There was a little vending machine inside the lavatory. They even carried his brand...

"Fred Bellamy!"

The audiostream carried everywhere, unfortunately even into the lavatory.

"Fred Bellamy! Report to your station!"

This kind of urgency could only be caused by the greatest of emergencies.

"Mr. Fred Bellamy! Report to your station right now!"

For such an old guy, the Senior Controller could sure make a lot of noise. Fred would have to report to Croft now. His instructions were to delay as long as he could, but not long enough to make anybody suspicious. It had to look like an oversight on his part. Whatever "it" was.

Fred pulled himself away from the lavatory vending machine and rushed out the door. It was an unwelcome change of pace, but now was not the time to complain about it. Unfortunately, the lavatory was not far from his observation post.

He arrived at his station just in time to see the NEON automated weaponry let loose on an approaching spacecraft. A holographic display was telling him that the boat matched the profile of a December Consensus scout ship, specifically the DC Defender. Even as Fred watched, a pair of hellbolts scored a direct hit on the incoming spaceship. That would teach the Decemberans to violate the Earth quarantine.

Fred waved in response to his supervisor's urgent signal. The man materialized in miniature over Fred's console.

"Bellamy! You idiot! You were supposed to let that ship through the quarantine!" Jeffery Croft, the Senior Controller, was practically dancing in anger.

"But why?" Fred asked innocently, and "How was I to know?" Fred asked defensively.

"You are supposed to check your orders before every shift!" Cremshaw said.

"But I was busy —"

The midair monitors revealed the spacestation hellbolt carriages beginning their charging process once again.

"There is an Earth native on that ship!" Croft said.

An Earth native? Really? Out here? Oh, well.

"Shut down now!" Croft ordered. "If your systems fire again, you're out of a job!"

There were worse things than to be out of this job, but Fred powered down his systems anyway. "Yes, sir."

The Senior Controller disappeared away into a little black point and then was completely gone. Fred shrugged and checked his midair monitors again. This time he was curious about the DC ship's status. The unknown craft slammed spinning into Earth's atmosphere, a bright red halo of heat igniting around it. It fell tumbling toward one of the big blue oceans below. It looked completely out of control. Oh, well.

CHAPTER THIRTY ONE

## Various

After returning from his mother's funeral, Ned Trynk disappeared into his private studios. He remained there for several weeks. He had been through a very powerful experience. The music must match it. He monitored the newsstreams daily for any word of Uncle Luke's arrival on Earth. He thought often of the twins, and of little Sarah, the direct descendant of the famous Adva Avni.

Back on Mars, Sarah put her tiny hand in Uncle Noam's big hand and let him guide her through the pressurized steel door of his sprawling country home.

Aunt Ofrah met them at the entrance. She was wearing a loose house tunic of embroidered silver on white. Tiny rubies dotted the openings of the long sleeves. "Welcome back, Sarah."

"You can stay in Samuel's room," Noam said. "I had all your stuff moved in there. Another cousin of yours is taking care of your little teddie bear."

"That's Cassie," Aunt Ofrah said. "I'm afraid she's grown quite attached to your pet. It will break her heart to lose him."

"She should keep him," Sarah said. "The important thing is that Teddy is with someone who loves him."

"You're a smart little girl, Sarah," Aunt Ofrah said.

"Let me show you to Samuel's old room," Uncle Noam said.

Aunt Ofrah's eyes clouded with tears for a moment. "It's right this way."

Sarah had been so sorry to hear about Samuel's death. The investigation was inconclusive. Sarah wondered who was really responsible.

Phillip Betancourt sat in his private study, scowling over the arcane symbols of his financial power. The little vacuumhead from NEON had stayed away from his post as ordered, just long enough to let the quarantine defenses target Dunn's ship and get off a few good ones, but not long enough to guarantee total destruction of the ship, its passengers, and the Earth manna seeds being cooked up inside of it. If only that dizzy brained supervisor hadn't interfered. Phillip should have included him in on the bribe too, but that was spreading the knowledge too wide. Scowling, Philip transferred payment into the private Ceres bank he had set up for Fred Bellamy, if for no other reason than to motivate his silence. Besides, he might need the man again sometime. You never know. . .

Fred Bellamy's comm system flashed yellow with an incoming message. Finally! His new Ceres bank account was sending him a deposit notification. Fred leaned back in his chair and dreamed of early retirement. He would probably have to retire to Ceres, out of reach of UN extradition treaties, but that would be OK. Too bad about the passengers in the Defender. Oh, well. Fred pulled up streamnet to take a look at residential prices in the Ceres Nation.

Penelope and Pablo met their parents at a regional spaceport in the Ceres Nation.

"Come on aboard, kids," Mom said. "Give me a hug, both of you!"

"Mom, we're not kids any more," Penelope said.

"I'll give you a hug, Mom," Pablo said.

"How do you like the new ship? It looks even better up close, right?" Dad said. "We bought it with the money we got from those idiots at the Jovian Alliance."

"I still can't believe they paid you," Penelope said. "They never even took full possession of the *Orquidea*."

"Who are we to argue with the courts?" Dad said. "The Jovian government tried to fight it, but it was their pilot who sent the confirmation comm to her captain saying she had control of the ship. The recording was genuine. The court increased our award because the Jovian Forces made us wait so long for payment."

"So you used it to buy another Liberty," Pablo breathed, looking around the entrance lounge. "Golden. Absolutely golden. This is the latest and greatest. Come on, Penelope, let's go see what our quarters look like."

"Wait a minute," Penelope said. "I didn't see a name tattooed outside. What are you going to call her?"

"Yeah," Pablo said. "A new ship should get a new name."

"We held off on the naming ceremony," Dad said.

"We were waiting for you two," Mom said.

Her parents grinned and held hands as if they shared some secret joke.

"We're going to call her the *Penelope*," Mom and Dad said together.

Penelope smiled involuntarily. "Sounds OK!"

"I like it!" Pablo said, smiling at his sister.

"Penelope," Dad said. "There's more. . ."

"We picked up something for you," Mom said. "A welcome back present."

"What? What present?" Penelope said stupidly.

"Come with us," Dad said. He led the way across the promenade to one of the six passenger elevators.

"You first," Mom said.

Dad sent the elevator to the observation deck. As the walls melted around them, a loping pink animal leaped up to greet Mom, its long tongue hanging sideways as it attempted to sniff her face.

Mom laughed. "Not me! Over there. Look! Penelope. That's Penelope."

Penelope's mouth dropped open in surprise. "A pink lizard! You got me a pink lizard!"

"Just like you wanted," Dad said. "We hope you like him."

"I love him!" Penelope squealed. "Come here, boy! Come here!" The lizard raced over to Penelope and sniffed her all around. Penelope laughed.

"Positively protonic!" Pablo said.

"What did you name him?" Penelope asked.

"He's not ours to name," Mom said. "What do you want to call him, Penelope?"

Penelope looked long and thoughtfully at the panting pet. "I'll call him Rangor."

"Rangor?" Mom said. "Like in that streamie you two watched when you were kids?"

"No," Pablo and Penelope said at the same time.

Rangor stopped in the tall grass and studied the clump of trees on the other side of the stream. "This must be the place."

"It certainly looks like it," Akemi said. She still wore the remains of her old Jovian Force uniform, but her precious black hair was growing out again. She liked that.

"It's the way Uncle Luke described it," Rangor said. "Before he died."

"It matches his coordinates, too," Akemi said. "Can you carry him across?"

"I will need help," Rangor said. "Can you take one end of the stretcher?"

"I'll have to leave the manna on this side of the stream," Akemi said. "And these other things, too."

"More manna will fall," Rangor said. "Uncle Luke said so. And we'll come back for your bags of seeds."

Akemi took one end of the stretcher. They marched slowly across the stream.

"There's the tree," Rangor said. "Just like he wanted. The one with the initials on it."

Akemi squinted. "They're a little faded, but what do you expect after half a century? Let's lay him down."

They gently laid the body on the ground.

"Poor Uncle Luke," Rangor said, standing up again. "He said they wouldn't shoot at us."

"Obviously, someone forgot to tell the automatic defense systems until it was too late," Akemi said. "Good thing you're a fast healer and I'm a golden pilot, or we'd really be in trouble."

Rangor studied his surroundings uncomfortably. He swatted away a flying insect.

"You are still acting as if you've never seen dirt before," Akemi said.

"I've seen it," Rangor said. "I've just never walked on it."

"You had better get used to it," Akemi said. "You'd better get used to digging, too. And planting."

They attacked the ground with broken branches and bare hands, careful not to disturb the other body that rested there. By nightfall, the grave was dug. They laid Dunn's body to rest inside it, next to the tree with the initials MX carved into its bark.



## Epilogue

The Velasquez family spent several years doing charter tours around the Belt, always careful to keep within the borders of the recognized nations.

When she was old enough, Penelope insisted on enrolling as a university student. She cherished her pink lizard, Rangor, all through her university career. He died of old age about the time she graduated with an advanced degree in applied genetics from the Central University of Ceres. Penelope went to work for the Dreschler corporation and designed several best selling pet lines. At her own request, Penelope was moved laterally within Dreschler Corporation to work on advanced peaceman design. She wrote a whistle blowing book on Dreschler's inhumane treatment of human synthecons. She was fired from the corporation, and now teaches genetics at her alma mater, the Central University of Ceres.

Pablo and Gloria got married and had three children about the *Penelope*. After his parents retired back to the Spanish Floras, Pablo continued the family business. Gloria wrote a historical novel, *The Fall of Transcendent*, which won her the Outer Consortium Award for Literary Excellence. It was later made into a Mark Sadoff action streamie, with Mark playing the part of Uncle Luke.

Ned Trynk released a new album with a song about Penelope, a song about surviving the Trask attack on Transcendent, and a song about being captured by pirates. He dedicated the album to his fallen partners, Tom Zyst and Robbie Dyle. He debuted most of the songs at a free live concert dedicated to his mother. The album's title song, "The Manna Trail", with its stirring revelation of Adva Avni's last

sacrifice and bold promise of plentiful manna on Earth, became a systemwide smash single almost overnight.

Phillip Betancourt suffered a heart attack during a visit to his son Richard in Avni City when he heard his grandchildren singing the new Ned Trynk hit song “The Manna Trail”. Death came a few hours later.

Sarah never saw the twins again, but she did read Penelope’s exposé on Dreschler’s practices. She also read Gloria’s historical novel and enjoyed the streamie. She didn’t think she really looked as cute as the child actress who played her part. Later in life, as a senior Martian senator, Sarah was instrumental in abolishing the Anderson quarantine of Earth.

Akemi and Rangor were never heard from again. They were known only by the rippling rows of manna plants they left behind. Because of them, billions benefited from Adva Avni’s legacy.

## Glossary

*Anderson Pact* An agreement among the United Nations made «for the good of Earth». The Earth orbiting nations agreed to impose a quarantine on Earth to give the planet time to recover from the ravages of humanity. Ten recreational sites were exempted from the quarantine. Mars provided humanitarian manna drops to the Earth natives left behind. The major countries of Earth contributed frozen embryos to the space nations to ensure the survival of their gene pools. Called the Anderson Pact after John Anderson, the Martian Ambassador to the UN who proposed it.

*Bentrex* A Jovian Alliance manufacturer of Z field equipment. Bentrex corporation marketers wanted to portray the company as the king of the energy bending field (that was a pun); hence, they dreamed up a compound word formed from Bent (past participle of English bend) and rex (from the Latin word for ‘king’).

*blastard* Someone you would love to see blasted.

*Boil the bubbles off of (someone, something)* To upset or make angry.

*bubblehead* Resident of a bubble city; this term is usually used by rock bottoms. (This word was never actually used in the book.)

*burny blood* A reference to an old form of radiation sickness. Z field enhancements have made this disease obsolete.

*chemsistors* Miniscule biomechanical signal relay devices. Portmanteau word formed from chemical and transistors.

*corioli* Usually found in the expression “Holy corioli!”, popular among Jovian Force pilots perhaps because of their proximity to the gas giant Jupiter. Moving objects not attached to a solid planet appear to swerve to the right in northern hemispheres and to the left

in southern hemispheres. For example, air currents, missiles, and spaceships traveling in a straight line appear to veer right if viewed from the northern hemisphere of a planet or left if viewed from the southern hemisphere. This veering is due to the rotation of the planet beneath the moving objects, and is referred to as the Coriolis force, after the French mathematician and civil engineer Gaspar G. Coriolis (1792-1843) who first described it. One school of thought states that the word “corioli” is derived from “coriolis” as a cheap way to force a rhyme. Another school of thought insists that the derivation is a result of a mistaken comparison with Latin nouns whose singular form ends with *-us* and plural form ends with *-i*. Even the most casual observer will note that the written form of “coriolis” ends with *-is*, not *-us*. Linguists, however, while they may argue with vigorous intonations about the number of stress levels present in English speech, do agree that English speakers reduce unstressed vowel to schwa, regardless of spelling conventions. There is therefore an ample basis of support for both sides of this controversy. The reader is free to draw his or her own conclusions.

*CSV* Commonwealth States of Venus.

*DC* December Consensus

*Daschonic* A make of luxury sports flyer; very popular in the Jovian Alliance.

*December Consensus* An Outer Consortium member nation claiming territory in the asteroid belt.

*dimbo* A man or woman who displays sexual attractiveness out of proportion to intelligence.

*dirt spurt* An irreverent term for a child.

*dizz* A dizzy or disoriented person.

*DLR12* Twelfth iteration of the Disruptor Long Range series.

*DP* Digital Person.

*dynogarb* Popular term for clothing which displays active visuals. Compound word formed from *dynamic* (marked by continuous activity or change), from Greek *dynamikos* (powerful), and *garb* (style of apparel), from old Italian *garbo* (outward appearance, grace).

*EI* Endographic Interface. Provides visual, acoustic, and olfac-

tory cues from a bioembedded Digital Person or other computerized system.

*fat payload* Having a fat payload would be a big deal for most people.

*flexons* Embedded nanocircuitry with form modification functionality.

*Gannon* A Roth City based manufacturer of small arms weapons.

*geneprint* A representation of gene architecture. Unlike a simple genome map, a geneprint provides assembly instructions as well as an illustration of the final product. Word formed by analogy with blueprint.

*golden* Refers to something precious, valuable or esthetically appealing.

*ghost* A holographic avatar designed with malicious or nuisance intent.

*haunter* Someone who designs and implements ghosts.

*heartlight* Compound word to denote extreme fondness.

*HI* Holographic Interface.

*IDB/IDP* Inertial Damping Belt / Inertial Damping Pack. Another fine Bentrex product. It is a Z device which gives the wearer control of a personal gravity field.

*intellifabric* A synthetic fabric capable of directing a cushion effect at areas of high impact.

*Kaiset* Nicolas Kaiset, prominent furniture developer based in Avni City in the 24th century.

*kinetar* A musical instrument with holographic and kinetically sensitive elements. The kinetar's most well known ancestor is the guitar. Portmanteau word formed from “kinetic” and “guitar”.

*kinetic receptors, kinetic sensors* Weak motion sensitive probes operating below human impact threshold. They provide input to computerized systems.

*Luceon* A leading manufacturer of power production equipment.

*luxosilk* Luxurious silk. Originally a marketeer's name for a fake

silk made from complex plastic alloys. The term is now generically used to denote any elegant, soft clothing material.

*Manna Heaven* Restaurant chain featuring elegant manna dining. The Betancourt family has a major controlling interest in this chain.

*Mamntastic* A fast food manna chain. Oshrit Agriculturals is a majority owner.

*Momma Manna's* A fast food chain specializing in manna to go. A subsidiary of AgriTek.

*Mset* Media set.

*needle* Tiny multireflecting circuitry sliver used to confuse prodar.

*NEON* Network of Earth Orbiting Nations. The organization responsible for maintaining the Anderson quarantine around Earth.

*NYC* New York City. At the time of this writing, NYC has had three incarnations. The first one was on the northeast coast of the old USA. After it was nuked, a space station was named NYC2 in its honor. When Borov Zolotoi's energy bending revelations made all previous space habitations obsolete, NYC3 was built and NYC2 was abandoned. Today, NYC3 is the home of the United Nations.

*OC* Outer Consortium. An organization dedicated to promoting and defending the interests of member nations claiming territory outside of Mars's orbit.

*ONN* Outer News Network.

*point bombs* Explosive devices whose payload is directed at a single point, rather than exploding outward in wide dispersal.

*prodar* Probe detecting and ranging; the word (but not the technology) is modeled after radar, *radio detecting and ranging*, and sonar, *sound navigation ranging*.

*protonic* A proton is an elementary particle that carries a positive charge. By association, whatever is referred to as "protonic" would be a positive thing or event.

*PSS* Perimeter Security System. A well designed, if not well implemented, defensive weapons system used to help the Ceres Nation maintain its neutrality.

*rock bottom* Resident of an asteroid, moon, or planet; this term is usually used by bubbleheads. (This word was never actually used in the book.)

*secstream* Security stream.

*smartwaiter* An intelligent shipwide logistics system. Word formed by opposite analogy with *dumb waiter*.

*sprout* Slang used to denote a person whose skeletal structure has developed under subnormal gravity, resulting in abnormal lengthening. Sprouts must ingest daily supplements of bone strengthening nutrients or face crippling osteoporosis.

*SRX018621* Designates a Jovian Force personnel. The meaning of the initials SRX can only be provided on a need to know basis.

*stream* A multidirectional media flow.

*streamie* Word formed by analogy with *movie* from *move*.

*stump* Slang word used by sprouts to denote a person whose skeletal structure has developed under Earth equivalent gravity.

*Tiradentes* Marcos X's ship is named after an eighteenth century Brazilian hero who was a dentist (tiradentes or 'tooth-puller') by trade.

*TX09* 9th edition of a transport (Tx) ship. Jovian Alliance admiralty law designates transport ships as Tx, passenger ships as Px, military vessels as Mx, etc. These are legal designations; commercial names may also be used which are generally, but not always, more appealing.

*TID4836* Trask ID 4836; this is how the Trask identify their military vehicles.

*UMR* Unified Mars Republic.

*UN* United Nations. An organization dedicated to promoting and defending the interests of member nations claiming territory including and within the orbit of Mars.

*vampire* Devices which are popularly thought to suck the energy from another system. Vampires actually work by tricking an opponent system into expending more energy than is necessary, thereby forcing a premature energy drain.

*viewglass* Superhard transparent material.

CLIFFORD W. DUNBAR

*Z* Zolotoi.

*Zolotoi* Borov Zolotoi, the father of energy bending technology.

But that's another story...

