

The terralano Venture

Book One

Agree to Disagree

By

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Forword

Something about “Clark’s Law,” which directly follows this forword, or as some call it, “Clark’s Fallacy” has always struck me as being basically flawed. It presupposes that no matter how sophisticated a person might be when confronted with something he can’t explain, he will automatically ascribe it to magic. I sat through a lot of late night sessions in college and grad school in which this very subject was debated before I finally realized just how wrong it is and why. What it boils down to is one’s personal world view. If you believe in magic then a sufficiently advanced technology may, indeed, seem like magic to you. But if you don’t believe in magic and your world view is technology based I think the odds are that you will see an act of magic as something produced by an unknown technology and if you’re the sort who tries to figure out how an illusionist does his or her tricks you’ll probably be looking for the hidden strings, mirrors or whatever other props you think might have been used to accomplish the trick.

That is one theme I tried to explore, however lightly, in “Agree to Disagree.” However as I have just

done, I can sum up everything I have to say on the subject in a single paragraph. What I really wanted to do was write a "first contact" story. I've read a lot of such stories and everytime I came up with an idea, I decided it was too similar to other stories I've read. That's when I decided to combine the ideas of "first contact" and a rebuttal of Clark's Law in an often satirical manner that, in between the wisecracks, tells an interesting story as well. Enjoy!

Finally, this book really is offered to you free. However, if after reading it you feel it was worth a dollar or two, rather than sending it to me, why not make a donation to the New Bedford Historical Society? The New Bedford Historical Society was organized in October 1996 as a non-profit Massachusetts corporation dedicated to documenting and celebrating the history, legacy and presence of African Americans, Cape Verdeans, Native Americans, West Indians and other people of color in New Bedford, Massachusetts. For more information contact the New Bedford Historical Society at: P.O. Box 40084, New Bedford, MA 02744 (508) 979-8828 <http://www.nps.gov/nebe/nbhs.htm>

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Westport, Mass.
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"Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

ARTHUR C. CLARK

"Any sufficiently advanced magic is indistinguishable from technology."

JEROME L. ISAACS

"Nonsense! Magic is magic. Technology is a crutch used by humans to compensate for their inability to cast spells."

EESAI DI SONEA

Part I Where the Elite Meet

One

By the time *TSS Inillien* entered orbit above the blue-green world, Cereloi, it was not a happy ship. This had nothing to do with the morale of the crew. Never before had Captain Alano Ki Matchi had the pleasure of commanding such an enthusiastically optimistic crew. There was only one thing wrong with their optimism; the belief that everything would work out continued in spite of the fact that so far every system on the ship had failed at least once since they lifted off from the home-world, Treloi. *Inillien* was not a happy ship.

Outwardly, the hull of *Inillien* was a breathtaking double helix of tightly spiraled gold and silver towers. There were a dozen expansive, brightly colored sails of sky-silk - an incredibly strong, gossamer-thin fabric - symmetrically deployed along and around the length of the hull.

The ship, sails and all, caught the light of the approaching sun and reflected it back in a bold pageant of color. A bystander, assuming one could manage to find a comfortable perch on a nearby asteroid, would have been dazzled by the display and might never have suspected the problems going on within the magnificent vessel.

"What is that noise?" Captain Alano asked with tired peevishness. He cut an impressive figure among his kind, standing a tall five and a half feet high with muscles a professional athlete might envy. His skin was a healthy pale amber and jet black curls with just a dignified touch of gray in them framed his exquisitely handsome face. If he had wanted to avoid military duty, as so many high-born Lano did, he could have done alternate service, posing for recruitment posters.

"Which noise do you mean, sir?" Eesai Di Sonea replied. The pretty, blond "first sub-captain" had an excellent point. *Inillien* was infested with strange sounds at the moment.

"The 'chug chug chug' sound," Alano snapped. "My ship does not chug!"

"Begging your pardon, sir," Eesai corrected him with a gentle smile that took the sting out of her retort, "but that is exactly what your ship is doing."

"Wonderful," Alano commented acidly. "Blinding wonderful!" Still he couldn't help but return the first officer's smile. Her easy sense of humor had helped him keep his temper more than once over the last few years. *If only she weren't so low-born*, he thought to himself, *but the family would never approve*. Aloud, he said, "So what is that 'chug chug' sound, sub-captain?"

Eesai checked the tell-tales at her station before reporting, "The aft secondary impellers, sir. They're out of synch."

"Shut them down and furl all but the primary sail array," the captain decided. "We're ready to land anyway."

"Furling sails, sir," Eesai acknowledged. She made several gestures over the console in front of her with her thin and graceful hands. Tell-tales changed color or darkened completely and a small read-out screen gave visual confirmation that the instructions had been received at the appropriate ship-board stations. "Prepared for final approach, captain," she reported a few minutes later.

"Request clearance for landing," Alano grunted.

The communications officer twiddled his fingers at his station. "Ahoy, Cereloi Central," he called in a conversational tone, "this is *TSS Inillien* requesting clearance for landing at Port Cere."

"This is Cereloi, *Inillien*," came the reply. "Come on down. Landing Five is all spruced up and waiting for you."

"I hear you, Cereloi. Start pouring the drinks, first round's on me."

"Is that you, Romalo? I thought you were stationed on the *Tellien*."

"I get around," Romalo chuckled. He was abruptly cut off by a loud throat-clearing sound that erupted from the captain. "Well," Romalo continued sheepishly, "we're going to be a bit busy for a while. I'll catch you ground-side."

When the controller at Port Cere acknowledged, Captain Alano gave several more orders and the spiral-hulled ship broke out of its parking orbit and made its way down to the surface of the lush world below. The journey down may not have been as brief as Romalo implied, but even so it was not long before the landing gear touched gently down on the assigned stretch of pavement and the primary sails were once more furled.

The tension Alano felt whenever he went to space relaxed only when the shock-absorbing springs in the landing gear creaked noisily as the great ship settled into place. Then he ordered standard in-port stations, put Eesai in charge, and left the bridge to meet the port captain at the aft airlock, which became the main door to the ship when in port.

Alano arrived at the freshly opened airlock and breathed in his first lungful of uncanned air in weeks of space travel. Behind him he could hear the powerful ventilation fans pumping stale air out of the ship. Cereloi's air had a pleasant floral fragrance to it that Alano found invigorating.

The two spacemen on duty at the airlock obviously agreed with him as, at the moment, they looked more like a pair of visiting tourists than armed guards. They had walked halfway down the ramp, completely relaxed, and were gawking at the local scenery.

Damned fools! thought Alano. *Can they have forgotten the conditions here just six months ago?* He took another look at the guards and realized that they were both new to the ship. They hadn't been here six months earlier when rioting colonists had threatened to storm the ship. His ship.

Alano made a mental note to talk to his third sub-captain. The young man, a rookie straight out of the academy, was in charge of ship security this week. Even on his first mission, he should have known enough to put at least one veteran on duty.

"Like the view, men?" he asked the two guards with deceptive mildness.

"Huh? Oh right, Captain. It's a beautiful world, isn't it?"

"That's what 'Cereloi' means," Alano told them stiffly. "'Beautiful World.' However, last time we were here the colony was in rebellion and the ship was nearly captured. I would appreciate it if you remain on guard while we're in port."

The guards were embarrassed. Both were young men just out of training and still had all the rules and regulations neatly drilled into them. Remembering the regs, however, was another matter.

Captain Alano cut off their apologies with a quick, "Company's coming." He pointed behind the guards at an approaching ground car.

The flame-painted, open vehicle glided noiselessly over the ground as it approached the parked spaceship. Alano had always had grave doubts concerning the aesthetic tastes of Cereloians, but the gaudy vehicle perfectly matched the uniforms of the two men in the front seats. As the car stopped, the port captain stepped out revealing the full brilliance of his garb. His uniform kilt was a bright orange affair with black trim. His tunic was a bold yellow and the jacket was made of a dark red cloth, half covered with gold trim. The driver's uniform was similar except that there was very little trim.

Alano fought down his urge to laugh at the ground-side costume. Space uniforms were tighter-fitting, using virtually the same design that had been favored back when missions were mostly conducted in free-fall. However, it was the figure who rode in the back seat of the car who most strongly drew on his attention.

An elderly woman, slightly overweight and with steel gray hair, sat there like a monarch surveying her kingdom. Unlike the port captain and his driver, she wore civilian garb in subdued colors. Alano had never met her, but this could only be Madame Malana Di Masai, the famed professional arbitrator, generalist wizard, and the passenger he was here to transport back to Treloi.

"Welcome back to Cereloi, Captain Alano," Port Captain Walti greeted him. "It is a shame you will not be able to stay long. Perhaps next trip. Oh, have you met Madame Malana?" Alano said he hadn't and Walti performed the obligatory ritual.

"I had hoped to stay over a few days," Alano protested to Walti after greeting the august Malana politely. "Several systems are working at less than optimum and we're badly in need of a general overhaul."

"Anything life-threatening?" Malana asked worriedly.

"No," Alano replied after a thoughtful pause. "The back-up systems are working, but if our secondary impellers aren't repaired we'll be in space two weeks longer than necessary."

"Then I'm terribly sorry, Captain," Malana apologized, "but it really is imperative that we lift off as soon as possible."

"Why? I understood that your work here was a complete success and that the newly negotiated colonial charter had been accepted by both factions."

"Oh it was," she replied with a bleak smile. "It was, but in order to unite the feuding colonial factions, I had to give them a common enemy. Me."

"I see," Alano replied. "Is the situation really that desperate?"

"There have been several threats against Madame Malana's life, captain," Walti informed him. "They may only be the usual cranks, but we would prefer not to take any chances. Will you be able to lift before dusk?"

"I suppose so, if you can lend me some of your engineers between now and then. Even a little maintenance would be better than none at all."

"Of course."

Alano wanted to dig his heels in, but if Malana Di Masai said she had to get off the planet, he believed her. Walti handed him a pair of documents to sign, port-usage and permission-to-lift documents. Alano grumbled that it was the first time he'd ever had to sign both at the same time. Port Captain Walti laughed as though Alano had told a joke, then bid them a good day and rode back to his office.

"Damn!" Alano swore in spite of himself as the ground car sped away.

"I am sorry, captain. Really," Malana apologized again, "but it couldn't be helped. Uniting this world took top priority."

"I understand," Alano replied, picking up Malana's one piece of luggage, "but my crew was really looking forward to a few nights off, not to mention a few days to overhaul the ship."

"Was the trip out really that difficult?" she asked as they walked up the ramp.

"Difficult?" Alano repeated. "Vexing is more like it. Hundreds of little problems, each of which by themselves would have gone unnoticed." Malana nodded sagely, but said nothing. "Excuse me a moment, Madame Malana," he said deferentially at the top of the ramp.

"Oh please just call me Malana," she replied waving the honorific aside. "It's bad enough to have to put up with the titles when on duty."

"Very well, Malana," Alano bowed and then turned and activated an intercom unit. "Bridge? This is the captain."

"Yes, captain?" Eesai's voice came back at him.

"It appears we will not be staying. We lift at dusk, but make sure the engineers know that they can demand priority service from the port while we're here. I know it's difficult, but have them do what they can. Oh, and have a chat with the officer in charge of base stores. With the priority status, you might be able to wheedle a few luxury items from him along with the standard ship supplies. We ought to be able to get something to soothe us for getting the bums' rush."

"Aye, aye, sir," Eesai replied, chuckling. Alano smiled. One of Eesai's great joys was in the fine art of the dicker.

"Now then, Malana," the captain said, returning to his guest, "please allow me to show you to your quarters. *Inillien* may not be a large ship, but we do boast an ambassadorial suite."

Lift-off was performed almost flawlessly. Alano chose to lift under full power, hoping to impress his passenger. There was a slight flutter in the secondary aft impeller sails, but he doubted anyone else but the engineers had noticed.

Once more they were under way and that old familiar tension crept back into his nerves. This time, however, it would be all the worse because he knew he was lifting with problems.

The first breakdown manifested itself shortly after lift-off. By then, however, it was too late.

Two

A musical chime reminded Jerry Isaacs to look at the read-outs on his skin-tight spacesuit. Internal temperature and pressure checked out okay, and, aside from a slight build-up of fatigue toxins, his medical monitors showed no change in condition. No surprises there. Then, almost absently, he glanced at the fuel level indicator for the thruster pack he wore.

"Damn!" he swore to himself.

"What was that, Jerry?" a sexy contralto voice asked him. The voice belonged to Serafyma Ivanoff, the pretty, young, chief chemist aboard the *Meriwether-1*. Jerry was the ship's, and the company's, chief geologist.

They both worked for and owned shares in the Meriwether Exploration Company, Inc., a one-ship, independent operation searching for anything on the frontier of human existence that would place it firmly on the black side of the ledger.

"Didn't realize I said that out loud," Jerry replied. "I just noticed that I'm nearly out of fuel."

"Well, you *have* been out there for six hours," Serafyma pointed out. "Do you have enough fuel to get back to the ship?"

"I'll have to ask the suit. Hold on." Jerry peeled open a flap on his left arm to reveal a small vid screen and a set of buttons. He pushed several in sequence and waited.

"Well?"

"It's working on the problem."

"While we're waiting, did you find anything worthwhile on that rock?"

Jerry looked around him. He was perched on a medium-sized asteroid in orbit about a small yellow star. The brownish gray mass, like many thousands of its cousins in the system, had caused the sensors on-board *Meriwether* to do their favorite song and dance indicative of a potential profit. In this case it meant north magnetic monopoles; bits of magnetic matter that exhibited only a north pole without an attached south pole. A dense enough concentration would make mining trips, even this far from nowhere, profitable.

A flash of sunlight was reflected by a thousand metallic crystals. Iron pyrite. Fool's gold. From his first close up inspection, Jerry had suspected what the results would be. Before he could share them with her, however, the annoying musical chime rang in his ear again, informing him that his calculations were complete.

"Later," he replied instead. "I've got the answer to that fuel question now. Oops."

"What the matter?" she asked worriedly.

"You'll have to come after me. I don't have enough fuel to make it safely back to the pinnace before my air runs out."

"That's an unproblem, Jerry!" Serafyma replied enthusiastically. "I'm on the way."

He looked over his shoulder to where the pinnace was set amidst the multi-colored, crystalline stars in the ultimately black sky. He watched as the ship's boat rotated and revolved until it was oriented toward his position. Then it began to accelerate.

Jerry shuddered. Serafyma Ivanoff was the galaxy's most beautiful *klutz* and until now he was the only member of the crew who hadn't experienced at least one minor cut or bruise while working with her. The pinnace was coming in far too fast and with a flash of certainty, Jerry realized that his time was now up.

Three hours later he was among the walking wounded and considering himself fortunate.

"Good God! What happened to you?" Lewis Clark Anspach asked as his chief geologist hobbled into the room. Anspach, six feet tall with light brown hair just starting to turn gray, was the captain of *Meriwether-1*. He was also the president and, with certain proxies, the controlling shareholder of the company.

Jerry Isaacs, on the other hand, normally stood five feet eleven inches tall, but as he entered his boss' office he was considerably shorter, bent over a pair of crutches, with his right leg in a cast. He made his way to one of the chairs in front of Anspach's desk and sat down before answering the question.

"What happened to me?" he replied. "The beautiful Miss Ivanoff happened."

"Are congratulations in order?" Anspach asked with an insincere smile.

"Hardly," Jerry sneered. "That girl is a disaster in a jumpsuit."

"Sure you weren't just distracted again by the way she fills that jumpsuit?"

"Not a chance, Clark. Not this time, anyway. We were surveying that asteroid that gave us those odd readings last week."

"The one we hoped had magnetic monopoles?"

"That's the one. Had them too, but it was real low-grade stuff with pyrite inclusions or vice versa, maybe. We'll almost spend more in refining than we'll ever extract. Anyway, I had just finished up on that rock when I noticed that my thruster pack was too low on fuel to fly back to the pinnace, so I radioed Sera to nudge it in closer."

"I think I see where this is going," Anspach interrupted. "You're lucky to be alive."

"I agree, but she didn't crush me between the rock and the pinnace. Nothing that girl does is so simple. She thought I was in immediate danger, so she came in fast. So fast that it looked as though she was

going to crash. Well, I flicked on my thrusters and used up the last of my fuel just to get out of the way."

"Any damage to the pinnacle?"

"No. For once she knew what she was doing. Brought it to rest a mere ten feet above the surface. Gravity there is so weak that it would have taken the better part of an hour for it to fall from that altitude."

"So, how'd you break your leg?"

"And three ribs," Jerry amplified. "By that time my thruster pack was out of fuel and I was drifting off for parts unknown, so she came after me."

"With another thruster pack?" Anspach asked.

"No, with the pinnacle. She was so sure of her abilities she decided that she could sidle up to me with the outer hatch open and just scoop me up. Almost did it too, but she misjudged my distance from the hatch and as I was climbing in, she gave the boat an additional shove and I found myself slammed up against the inner hatch."

"That would do it," the captain nodded. "Drink?"

"I'd love one, but I'll have to take a rain check. Doc's got me all pumped up on painkillers. Wants me to spend the rest of the day in bed too, but I thought you'd want a report first. Are you ready?"

"More bad news?"

"Unfortunately true. That rock was our last chance at finding anything of value in this system."

"Nothing at all?"

"Not from our point of view anyway. I suppose we can put *apro forma* claim on the system. We're well beyond the settled edge of the frontier, you know. Maybe when there are human colonies out this way someone will want to put a refueling outpost here. Once there's a settlement some of the resources will be worth exploiting, but until then, it's just so much empty space. That rock represented the densest cluster of monopoles we've found here. There may be more, but frankly I think it's time we looked somewhere else."

"We're running out of time, Jerry. If we don't find something soon, preferably an inhabitable planet, we may not be able to afford enough fuel to lift off again."

"Well, if it's that bad, we'll go mine that rock. I'm sure we can salvage enough to fund yet another expedition. Probably won't take more than a day in any case."

"Jerry, we're working hand-to-mouth as it is and if we incur another major expense while in port it will break us. God knows our engines are due for an overhaul. If they fail to make spec this time..." he trailed off. All ships were required to surrender their drive activators and be inspected for safety each time they made port. Failure meant repairs before being allowed to lift again. Repairs cost money and with their credit rating, payment would have to be in cash. There was an alternative, but on their budget bribery was out of the question.

"Can we afford another system?" Jerry asked.

"We have the fuel," Anspach confirmed, "and maybe enough to glance at another system after that on the way home. As I think about it, you'd better grab those monopoles. Every little bit counts."

"You got it. So which system next? That G-0 type star we have next on the list?"

"I considered that," Anspach replied. "It's as nearly identical to Sol as any two stars can be, so I suppose it could be a likely candidate, but it takes us too far from Terra to allow us enough leeway to check out another system on the way home. Then too, why go all the way back to Terra? I know we've done that the last four times out, but there are colonies that are nearer and we can buy fuel at one of them easily enough."

"Which colony did you have in mind?" Jerry asked.

"The Bleachers. It's a relatively new world. They'll have the fuel we need and maybe they'll be willing to overlook a few flaws in the ship if they aren't too bad."

"And if they are, we'll be stuck there until parts arrive from Terra. Oh," Jerry's eyes widened with sudden illumination, "you don't expect we'll be able to afford repairs if they come up anyway, do you?"

"It's more than likely," Anspach admitted, "but even so we might be able to sell some of our dubious claims easier on The Bleachers and thereby pay for repairs."

"Well, you certainly seem to have thought this out. The crew will probably accept it, and you have controlling interest in any case. The Bleachers, eh? I'm not acquainted with that world. Rather unusual name isn't it?"

"I understand it was colonized primarily by North Americans. Baseball fans, you know. They figured that this far out from the World Series, they must be in the really cheap seats."

"The Bleachers," Jerry muttered. "Their descendants may never forgive them."

"Oh, I don't know," the captain disagreed. "Last I heard, they were negotiating to get the Cubs relocated there. They're also a prime candidate for one of the expansion teams next year."

"If you say so," Jerry shrugged. "I've never been a big fan of the game. So where do you want to go?"

"There's a small, F-9 type star - I forget what string of alpha-numerics it has at the moment - about five parsecs from here that's no farther from The Bleachers than we are now. There's a G-2 system between there and The Bleachers, too."

"Okay. Five parsecs, you say? Good. By then I should be used to wandering around in a cast. You would think that with all the technological marvels we are capable of, someone would have found a way to make bones knit together faster than they did in the Twentieth Century."

Three

Inillien had lifted off from Cereloi and sailed through space with a beauty and grace that concealed the internal problems that continued to manifest themselves. Trouble, however, began almost from the start.

They had just barely cleared the atmosphere when life support started pumping out steaming, hot air on the sunward side of the ship and cold, arid air on the anti-sunward side, just the opposite of what it was supposed to do. When engineering went to work on this situation, however, the problem only got worse and it started raining and snowing respectively.

Ground control refused to let *Inillien* return to the port due to the crowds of protesters who came to make sure Madame Malana left the planet. The port authority felt that they might riot if the ship returned so soon, so Captain Alano had arctic gear issued to those crew members stationed on the cold side of the ship and, Reilling, the Lano equivalent of *Gatorade*, for those on the hot side and the ship flew on.

The worst problem was that the bridge was on both the hot and cold sides, so until the precipitation problem was solved, there were snow drifts on one side of the room, while crewmen on the other came close to suffering from heat prostration.

"It's an interesting ship you have here, captain," Malana commented dryly on the second day out as she brushed snow out of the courtesy seat on the bridge.

"Need a shovel?" Alano countered sourly.

"That or moisture-proof pants for when this melts," she replied. "Are all your voyages this exciting?"

Alano allowed himself to glare at the famous and powerful wizard who was his honored passenger. She smiled sweetly in response, leaving him distinctly ill at ease. Picking fights with wizards is not the ideal route to health and happiness, although it might lead to an unpleasantly long life. Seeing his discomfort, Malana laughed, a light cheerful laugh, and Alano experimentally laughed with her.

"Captain, you should never laugh unless you mean it," she told him kindly. "Others might be able to pull it off, but when you try it, it shows."

"I'll keep that in mind," he replied distractedly as an alarm buzzer sounded on the bridge. "Now what?" A moment later he heard a familiar chug-chug sound and he feared the worst.

"It's the aft secondary impellers, sir," Eesai promptly reported, "They're out of synch again. Oh oh!" The chug- chug noise stopped and she started making frantic gestures over her control station.

"Well, sub-captain?" he asked impatiently.

"They've failed, sir," she replied, continuing to make emergency adjustments as she spoke, "and we're experiencing a power surge in response." Another alarm went off and she made a ship-wide announcement, "All hands to emergency stations! Condition Hard! Condition Hard! Engineering, what is your status?"

Alano stiffened in his chair. Eesai was correct in sounding the alarm without consulting him. Anyone who spotted a critical situation had the authority to sound the alert and, if they could handle it, issue the necessary orders. Eesai knew her job better than Alano did so he didn't step in, but that didn't alleviate his feeling of helplessness.

"Just lost the primary governor," came the reply from the chief engineer, "and the surge is growing."

"Can't we disburse it through the functional impellers, Lani?"

"All systems are surging and we're at max already," was Lani Di Ressia's terse reply. "Any more and we'll be blown into next Nersday, and it's in a feedback loop!"

"Blinding hell!" Eesai swore. Then she made a decision and prayed she was right "Shut down all systems," she commanded, "except the secondary aft impellers."

"Eesai!" Lani protested, "you can't mean that!"

"Do it now!"

"Aye!" Suddenly the ship became dark and silent, but a moment later it shook violently as the enormous power surge flowed into the only outlet available, the failed impellers. The ship became silent again. Then the emergency lights came on bathing the interior of the ship in a soft glow.

"Good thinking, sub-captain," Alano told her from out of the darkness.

"What did you do?" Malana asked.

"I just totally bugged up the secondary afts," Eesai replied. "Figured they were dead anyway, so we let the power burn them out. The excess will drain slowly, but we should be under way again in an hour or so."

"Why did you have to turn everything off, though?"

"Anything left on-line would have burnt out too," Eesai replied. "The power was building in a loop. Eventually it would have built to the point where we would have been destroyed."

"I see," Malana said quietly. "Good work, girl."

An hour later, when the power came back on-line, the air was getting a little stale and the temperature had dropped below freezing on both sides of the ship. However, the circulatory fans started emitting hot, dry air as soon as the eerie glow of the emergency lights was replaced by the much brighter regular luminants.

"Current status?" Alano asked immediately.

Eesai flicked her fingers over her board and spoke, "All departments report!" Reports did not come in verbally, but she didn't expect that. Instead, a series of lights on the panels of her station began to come on or change color. "All systems nominal," she eventually reported, adding, "except for the secondary afts, of course."

"Of course," Alano agreed tightly. "What about the life support system?"

"The shutdown seems to have solved the problem, sir. The interruption of power must have reset the system. That happens sometimes."

"Makes me wonder why we didn't try it before. How much will the loss of those two impellers slow us down?"

"Nine point oh five three one," she replied, " give or take five percent."

"That was fast," Alano commented on her reply.

She turned to face him and smiled. "I worked it out an hour ago, just after the lights went out. Curiosity, you know."

"Very good!" he laughed. "Well, we're going to be late enough as it is. No need to sit around in the middle of nowhere."

"Aye, captain," Eesai replied, turning back to her controls in anticipation of the obvious command.

"Unfurl all sails and engage the remaining impellers."

"Aye aye, sir." Eesai passed her hands across the helm display in the sequence that would enable them to resume their progress. At first nothing happened. Eesai frowned and studied the board. All the tell-tales continued to speak volumes about the ship's readiness, perhaps even eagerness, to be on its way. Eesai tried the sequence again with the same results.

"Losing your touch, sub-captain?" Alano chided her gently.

"Not blinding likely," she responded, mildly irritated. She went through the procedure one last time and said something that made her captain wince.

"I don't believe that's possible," he responded weakly.

"Just an expression," she replied, a bright red-orange blush of embarrassment forming on her smooth amber cheeks. Silently she berated herself, *An expression a well brought-up lady ought not to know.*

"May I try?" Alano asked.

"You're the boss, captain. Be my guest." She got out of the seat gracefully, betraying none of the inner turmoil over her failure.

Captain Alano sat down at Eesai's station and studied the controls. It was sheer vanity that made him think he might be able to find the problem where his first sub-captain had not. It had been over five years since he had to sit at a similar station and Eesai's record, he knew, far out-shined his own. His familiarity with the helm came back to him slowly as he studied the lights on the display.

Eesai's station contained more than just the controls for *Inillien's* great engines. From here the status of all shipboard functions could be monitored and messages to each and every department be sent and received. In many ways a Trelloian ship could function perfectly well without her captain, but no ship could sail without a good helmsman at the controls. Eesai was one of the best. So much so that Alano did not correct her zealously on those occasions when she insisted on sitting double watches even though there were two other Lano on board, not counting the captain, qualified to sit at the helm.

Having gotten his bearings at the display board, Alano stretched out his left hand and made a simple gesture that should have unfurled the port skysail, one of that pair of sails mounted most forward on the twin spire of *Inillien's* hull. Nothing happened. He tried a few other controls, none of which seemed to work.

"Any ideas?" he asked, letting Eesai have her seat back.

"A few." She tried several more controls, some of which had little or nothing to do with control of the ship.

"When was the last time the helm responded?" Alano asked.

"When I turned the power back on to all systems, Captain. As it happens, that's the only control I haven't tried yet."

"Maybe we need to reset once more," he mused.

"Let's try the other bridge controls first."

"What controls? These are the only automatic impeller controls on the bridge."

"Dear Captain," Eesai smiled, "that is certainly true, but our intercom and life-support systems are working and they are not controlled from the helm. Let's see what else works." She turned to face the five other Lano who manned the bridge. "Here's your one-time chance, folks," she announced, letting her smile grow into a grin, "Fiddle about with your controls and report." She turned back to Alano and laughed, "Never thought I'd give that command." A few minutes later it became apparent that all of the other controls were in order. "Try the manual impeller controls?" Eesai suggested.

"Try a T.S.R. first."

"Are you sure?" Any other helmsman might have earned a reprimand for that, but her question forced Alano to reconsider.

"Yes," he decided. "I'd rather not have to land with impellers on manual if we can avoid it."

"Aye, aye, sir. Attention, all hands!" she announced, activating the all-ship intercom channel. "Attention! Prepare for total system reset in five minutes. All power will be off-line for one half hour. Unlike the last time, we will experience both complete darkness and free-fall conditions. Secure yourselves then report." She was about to turn the intercom off when a thought crossed her mind. "Madame Malana Di Masai, please come to the bridge."

"Malana?" Alano asked. "Why?"

"You'd rather she stayed in her cabin? I'll cancel that request."

"No. Let it stand. I just wondered about your reasoning."

"Madame Malana is a generalist wizard. Maybe her presence won't help, but it won't hurt either."

"Good thinking," he commended her.

"More problems, Alano?" Malana asked as she entered two minutes later. "How may I help?"

"Not sure yet, Malana," the captain forced himself to use her first name, "but I, that is my sub-captain, felt that your presence as a wizard would be beneficial."

"I must admit only a layman's knowledge of starships, but I will help where I can," Malana replied. "What's the plan?" Eesai explained. "I see, but if you're going to shut down all systems, then won't you be shutting the helm down as well?"

"All but the main power switch, Madame Malana," Eesai replied.

"Just Malana, dear. I'm off duty now. So there's a trickle current that stays on the switch itself."

"Direct from the engines," Eesai confirmed. "Can't shut it off without disrupting the spell that powers the engines themselves."

"Why can't we shut down the engines? Don't you do that every time you make port?"

"A common misconception, Malana," Alano informed her. "Once started the engines are never completely shut down. We conventionally refer to the operation as turning the power off, but the manuals speak more accurately, using the term 'stand-by' instead. Once an engine is truly turned off, the spell that powers must be cast again from scratch and that can only be done in a shipyard."

"Why is that? Don't you know the procedure?"

"The procedure is a relatively simple one, but we don't have the necessary tools nor the raw materials to make them out of."

"So much for that idea," Malana muttered. "Hope I'm wrong."

"Why?"

"Because I suspect that the problem may be inherent in the engines themselves."

"Then that makes two of us," Alano sighed. "I hope you're wrong too."

"Time, captain," Eesai informed him.

"Right. Malana, we'd better strap in." When they were both secure in their seats he nodded toward Eesai.

"Attention all hands!" she announced, "Total system reset in thirty seconds." She proceeded to count the time down and then on "zero" made the gesture.

The ship went dark and silent. All the little, normally ignored noises that indicated a working ship became conspicuous by their absence. Nobody spoke and as Eesai's ears adjusted, she became aware of the quiet sounds of breathing.

Suddenly, a golden light illuminated the bridge, searing the darkness-adjusted eyes of all in the room. Blinking his tearing eyes, Alano turned to stare at the sphere of golden light that floated just above and behind Malana Di Masai.

"Never could abide darkness, unless I was going to sleep," she explained.

They spent most of the next half hour in near silence, almost whispering when they did speak. Finally, the

time was up and Alano instructed Eesai to restore full power to *Inillien*. She did not bother to count down this time. It would be a warning only the bridge crew could hear, and they had already been warned. A moment later the lights came on followed almost immediately by the hum of the life-support fans.

"All departments, report your status," Eesai commanded over the intercom. Lights on her display flickered and changed until all but one reported perfect working conditions. Eesai frowned at the remaining light. It was from Medical and it was flashing blue; please stand by. "Explain, Medical." It was a request, not a command, but a verbal explanation came instantly.

"I'm still receiving some status reports of my own, Eesai," Doctor Wallo replied. "A couple dozen bruises and maybe a broken limb or two. Nothing fatal so far. I'll let you know soon enough."

"Bruises?" Captain Alano asked. "Broken bones? Everyone should have been strapped in."

"You were young once yourself, captain," Wallo replied, "and free-fall conditions occur so infrequently. Most of the injuries are coming in by twos. You want I should put them on report?"

Alano smiled. "No, just put the fear of the gods into them. Anyone able to stand his or her next watch, gets off easy."

"And those who can't?" Eesai asked.

"Dock them a day's pay each watch until they can." That was only the usual punishment for missing work. The pain suffered would keep the victims from disobeying orders again for the rest of the voyage. "Deploy sails and activate impellers," he commanded a moment later.

"Sails unresponsive," Eesai reported a moment later.

"Manual deployment."

"Engineering," Eesai used the intercom once more. "This is the bridge. Sails are to be deployed manually." Acknowledgement came swiftly, but it was another hour before the brilliantly colored sheets of sky-silk were stretched once more from their titanium booms. "Impellers unresponsive," Eesai said flatly to Alano. "Engineering, can you activate the impellers from there?"

"No response, Bridge," the chief engineer replied. "Running diagnostics. Uh oh!"

"Define 'Uh oh', chief," Alano commanded sternly.

"Sorry, captain. The impellers' generator has shut down. Must have happened during the first reset."

"That explains why the sails wouldn't deploy," Eesai commented, mostly for Malana's sake. "The automatics won't work if the genney isn't at least on standby."

"Chief," Alano asked, "how long to reactivate the generator?"

"Not sure we can, sir. We may not have the right materials on board."

"Why not? Is this another procedure that can only be accomplished in the yards?"

"No, sir. It's just that I've never heard of a genney shutting down. They're installed already active, but I'll start looking into it."

"I may be able to help," Malana offered, rising from her seat. At the captain's nod, she left the bridge.

An hour later, the job was given up for hopeless and Alano gave the hardest order a captain could give short of surrender or abandon ship.

"Activate the distress beacon," he said defeatedly.

Four

"An amazingly empty system, isn't it?" opined Susan Ho, *Meriwether-1's* navigator and pilot as she surveyed the new system with Ito Deshpande.

Ito, a tall young man of Japanese and Indian descent, didn't answer at once. He was too distracted by Susan's long black hair. Most women in space kept their hair short for practical reasons, but she preferred to allow it to grow to its natural limit, nearly down to the backs of her knees, even though that involved binding it securely before entering a free-fall environment. Ito, who stood directly behind the seated Polynesian beauty looking at the scanner screen over her shoulder, was more captivated by the reflection of her face in the surface of the screen.

"Mr. Deshpande?" she asked in a clear voice. Ito, suddenly aware that she was speaking to him, became flustered. Susan politely ignored that and repeated, "I said that it's an amazingly empty system."

"Ten planets is hardly empty, Ms. Ho," Ito replied stiffly.

"True," she allowed, slightly irritated to have to explain, "but have you noticed what's missing?" Ito wrenched his eyes from the reflected image of Susan Ho's face and peered deeper into the screen.

"Looks normal to me," he said at last.

"Asteroids!" she told him impatiently. "Comets! Bits of ice and rock moving around in orbits all their own. If there are over a thousand objects in this system including the sun, planets and their moons, I'll give you half my shares!"

Ito owned only half of a percent of *Meriwether Exploration* and briefly considered trying to prove her wrong, but quickly shelved the idea. Since signing on, he'd never known Sue Ho to be wrong, especially when he wanted her to be.

"Is that possible?" Ito asked.

"Evidently so."

"I mean, could the system have been cleared out artificially?"

Sue looked at him strangely, wondering what trash he'd been reading lately. "I suppose it's possible, but

I doubt it. Any civilization capable of clearing the debris out of a solar system would also be capable of interstellar colonization, so why clear a system out anyway?"

"Extensive mining maybe?"

"Again, why? To mine this extensively, they would have to be trapped in this system. Also we would have picked up their radio signals by now."

"Okay, a dead civilization then."

"Then why haven't we found their ruins on dozens of planets?"

"Maybe we're at the limit of their sphere of expansion," Ito suggested.

"Then maybe we'll find an inhabitable planet here. Hope so."

"It's strange how we've never found other intelligent life," Ito mused.

"It's a big universe," Sue replied, "and the chances of finding an inhabitable planet are small. Only eighteen have been found so far. The chances of intelligent life on such a planet are smaller still. Last I read, the so-called experts are claiming that the odds are a billion-to-one or worse."

"That's a lot of planets."

"Yeah, well, they might be wrong too. Eighteen planets out of a couple hundred star systems; maybe the density of inhabitable planets differs in other parts of the galaxy."

"There's one planet in the life zone of this star," Ito noted. "Is that our first target?"

"Potential colony worlds are the most valuable commodity," Sue replied. She was about to say more when Captain Anspach's voice spoke over the intercom.

"Ms. Ho, we need you on the bridge."

"On my way," she replied. "Ito, continue to operate the scanners while I'm gone. I'm mainly looking for navigational hazards, but anything you find may be of value to our other departments." Ito nodded and Sue got up.

The walk to the bridge took several minutes. *Meriwether-1* was actually a much larger ship than the crew of twenty-five actually needed, but used spaceships did not come up on the auction block every day. This one had served briefly as a cruiser for the Terran Aerospace Force. Rapid changes in ship technology made its engines obsolete in less than five years. It then became a cruise ship for a small, independent company that learned the hard way that they couldn't compete with the big boys. Anspach picked up the *Meriwether-1* for an embarrassingly small sum at a bankruptcy auction. True, she wasn't as fast as the newer ships, but her engines were sound and rated to be good for at least another twenty years with proper maintenance. The new ships' engines were only good for ten years. They were still built as well as ever, but the improved plasma exciters that produced the higher speeds, also ran at far higher temperatures, causing them to literally burn out after about fifty-thousand light-years.

Sue marched briskly down the circular gangway until she reached the hatch to the ship's central access shaft. Inside she stood on the landing of the long circular stairway which also served as the landing for the

elevator. The lift was in use and heading toward the engine deck, five levels downship, so she shrugged and started up the stairs. The Bridge was only three decks up and she flew up the stairs fast enough to make her head spin ever so slightly by the time she reached her destination.

She paused a moment to catch her breath at the top before opening the hatch to the bridge. Finally she pushed the door open and stepped into the semi-circular ship's bridge.

Although it was customary for department heads to alternate shifts so that only one was on the bridge at a time, all were at their stations as Susan quickly made her way to the pilot's seat and relieved the man on watch.

She took a quick look at her instruments, noting that there had been a course correction, before asking, "What's up, skipper?"

"I'd like to know that myself," Anspach replied. "I'll explain as soon as Mr. Isaacs arrives."

"Present and accounted for," Jerry called from the doorway. With his leg still in a cast, he ambled in with the help of a brushed aluminum cane. Sue concluded that he must have been the one holding up the lift.

He paused to look around for a place to sit. There were two courtesy chairs on the bridge where VIP passengers could observe bridge activities during liftoff. *Meriwether* had never entertained such passengers, but they were a standard fixture, left over from her days as a cruise ship when the room had been designed more for flash than utility. Unfortunately the chief engineer, Erich Schwartzwald, and Serafyma, the chief chemist, had taken them. Finally, Jerry spotted a clear space next to the pilot's station where he could sit safely on the counter without fear of accidentally altering their course, ejecting their entire fuel supply, or tripping someone up with his cast.

"Something's come up," Anspach began the briefing after Jerry had put his cane down and settled into place. *Meriwether* had a large conference room on the second deck for just this sort of meeting, but Anspach preferred to use the bridge that was more his office than the comfortable cubicle he used to entertain port officials when ground-side. "A few minutes ago we picked up a strange radio signal." He fiddled with some controls and a soft, eerie wavering tone filled the bridge. "Mr. McGrath, have you completed your analysis of the signal?"

"Aye, skipper," Chen Li McGrath, the communications specialist, replied. "What you hear is what we've got," he shrugged.

"That's it?" Anspach inquired, "just a flat one twenty cycle hum?"

"One eighteen, sir," Chen corrected him, "but it isn't quite flat. According to the computer the signal is pulsing at approximately one thousand beats per second. Triangulation puts it in system at 1.15 AUs from the star."

"It can't be a pulsar," Sue opined. "Pulsars are the remains of supernovas. We would have picked up any mass that size on the gravitometer."

"True, and we should have detected the nebular remains as well." Chen agreed. "Besides, if it were a pulsar, it would have to be the smallest and weakest one on record; far smaller than accepted theory would admit is possible."

"Well," Jerry laughed, "that's one argument in favor of a pulsar." Chuckles all around.

"I don't think it's a natural phenomenon of any sort," Chen said a moment later. "I think it's a distress beacon."

"Someone beat us here?" Anspach asked, not at all pleased.

"It's not a standard distress signal," Serafyma pointed out a heartbeat before Chen could.

"I never said it was a Terran distress signal," Chen replied defensively.

"What then?" she laughed. "Little green men?"

"It's a possibility."

"I've been scanning the system for just about everything," Sue broke in. "I'd like to know why I didn't pick this signal up."

"Not looking in the right direction or at the right time, I guess," Chen replied. "It's a very tight beam and you may not have been scanning at its wavelength."

"What wavelength is that?" Sue asked.

"Just shy of a kilohertz."

"That's low! Why would anyone broadcast on that frequency? I doubt it would be useable ship-to-ground."

"What?" Serafyma asked. "You think it's an alien ship too?"

"Why not?" Sue retorted, "It's more likely than an impossibly small pulsar."

"But aliens?"

"Maybe this is their system and we're the aliens," Jerry pointed out.

"That's all we need!" Anspach grunted. The others nodded agreement.

"I think we're all jumping to conclusions," Serafyma told her colleagues. "Has anyone tried analyzing the signal? Can we make any sense out of the pulses?"

"I ran it through the computer," Chen admitted. "The signal is actually dual in nature. Two notes almost but not quite matched so that they set up a beat frequency. Before you ask, however, there has been absolutely no variance in the frequency of the pulses. The computer agrees that the signal cannot be natural in origin, but there is no proof that there is any message inherent in the broadcast."

"Then a distress beacon sounds like the most likely solution," Captain Anspach concluded.

"That, or they communicate by some method we haven't detected or even thought of," Jerry added.

"We'll work on the basis that it is a distress signal," Anspach retorted. "Terran space regulations require us to investigate all possible distress calls in any case."

"But if it is a distress call," Serafyma objected, "they're not even human!"

"The regs don't make that distinction. Ms. Ho, set a course for the source of that signal. Optimum speed."

"Aye, aye, skipper!" she replied. She punched the coordinates into the computer and then pressed the activation switch. The sight in the main view screen changed as the ship adjusted its trajectory until the sun was nearly dead center on the screen. Then she reported, "Twelve hours to rendezvous."

"That long?"

"We're too close to use the main thrusters, sir. Any faster and we'll be red-lining the secondaries."

"Very well," Anspach sighed. "Let's resume normal watches, but I want every one at stations in eleven hours."

Five

"What an ugly ship," Michti Ki Wisso commented on the extremely magnified image in the viewer.

"Ugly?" Second Sub-Captain Meco Ki Taralano wondered out loud. It was the early morning shift, toward the end of what some might call the graveyard, and as the officer on duty, he had already notified Captain Alano of the approaching vessel. "Certainly different, pilot."

"I'm surprised it can fly," Michti continued. "It looks sort of like something my kid brother built once in the backyard."

"It's not unlike some of the early prototype ships we built over a century ago."

"Nobody ever flew in those, sir," Michti reminded him. "What world is so desperate for its own ships that it can't trade embassy space for one?"

"Maybe they aren't Lano," Meco speculated.

"Oh!" the night communications specialist gasped, "Do you think so?" there was a hint of fear in her voice. Lilla Di Lasai feared many things, especially the unknown and Meco often wondered why she had ever joined the Treloian Space Navy. She seemed more the type who would want to stay home and tend her garden.

"Could be," Captain Alano responded from the entrance to the bridge.

"Captain on the bridge!" Meco announced needlessly.

"Probably are aliens. I don't know of any world building ships like that and it might explain why they haven't responded to any of the hails you sent them," Alano continued. "I relieve you Meco, but please remain for a while."

"Of course, sir."

Eesai entered the bridge the next moment. "What's up?" she asked breathlessly, betraying the fact that she had arrived on a dead run.

"Company," Alano explained, pointing at the viewer.

"What a crate!" Eesai breathed. Michti started to get out of the pilot's chair, but she waved him back. "Stay," she told him, "I'll sit in the second com. chair." So saying she sat next to Lilla and quickly reviewed the communications log for the girl's shift.

"Sir!" Lilla announced, "They're bombarding us with low-level radiation."

"An attack?" Meco asked out loud from the defense console where he had taken a seat.

"If so," Eesai replied looking at Lilla's read-outs, "they must be very fragile beings, indeed. It's very low intensity, similar to... Yes, exactly the same as the waste radiation given off by our distress beacon!"

"Do you think they use radiation to communicate?" Michti asked.

"How odd," Meco commented.

"You've tried the usual channels, I assume?" Alano asked.

"Yes, sir," Lilla replied, echoed by Eesai's nod.

"Try focusing the distress beacon on them," he suggested. Eesai shrugged and made it so.

"They've stopped the bombardment," she reported a moment later."

"All right. Turn off the beacon."

They waited a moment, then, "it's started again, but more spasmodically. Sort of in random bursts."

"Send the pattern back at them and see what happens."

Eesai fiddled with the controls until the distress beacon was turning on and off in the same random-seeming pattern that the alien ship was sending to them.

"They've stopped again," she told Alano half an hour later. "Maybe they do communicate by radiation, but we just don't know the language. The gods alone know what we might have said to them."

"They're moving," Michti informed them.

"Closing on us... Well, not quite on us. Looks like it will be a near miss."

"Arm defenses," Alano commanded, "but hold until I give the order."

"Aye, aye, sir!"

"Blind!" Alano swore, "I wish we could furl the sails. They're vulnerable the way they are."

"They're not doing us much good without the impellers anyway," Eesai reminded him.

"Unknown ship decelerating," Lilla reported. "At the present rate they will come to a complete halt at a distance of two ship lengths."

"Good," Alano breathed with relief. "For a moment I was afraid they were going to strafe us, but at that range anything that could destroy *Inillien* would take them as well."

"We don't know that we're safe yet, sir," Meco disagreed. "Who knows how they think? Could be suicidally xenophobic."

"Where do you get such ideas, sub-captain?" Alano asked, trying to control his disgust at the alien concept.

"Speculative fiction, sir. The genre is full of stories about alien races and their possible psychology."

"I have trouble believing in a suicidal race," Alano replied firmly. "No survival imperative. They would have killed themselves off long ago or at least would never have gone to space."

"Who knows how they think, sir," Meco repeated. He thought of Lilla. "Perhaps going to space is a way of dealing with their fears."

"In which case, they seem to have those fears well under control."

"I recommend we keep our defenses up, sir."

"Of course," Alano replied stiffly. No doubt he would have to trust the strangers' intentions later, but there was no need to ignore the proper precautions. He owed that to his crew.

"Unidentified ship has come to a halt relative to our position," Eesai reported a few minutes later, "precisely two ship-lengths off the starboard beam."

"And three of their own ship-lengths," Lilla added.

"What?" Eesai and Alano asked together.

"Their ship is only two thirds as long as *Inillien*. Therefore their distance can be expressed as two of our ship-lengths for us or three of theirs. Do you think there's a message in that?"

"Might be. If we ever learn how to speak with them, we'll have to ask. Maybe they're just pointing out a mathematical coincidence. What's that flashing light?" As they watched, a bright green light blinked at them from the stubby bow of the strange ship.

"An attack!" Meco exclaimed.

"Hold your fire!" Eesai shouted right back at him. "While it is true that light can be condensed into a weapon, this is too weak to do any harm. Very low power. I suspect that turret it's coming out of is part of a defensive system of some sort, but they must be using it as a signal."

"Yes," Lilla agreed. "I see a pattern; one flash, pause, two flashes, pause, three flashes and so on until they reach nine, then a long pause, I think, and the cycle starts again." They watched for a while and it turned out that Lilla was right.

"Base nine?" Michti mused aloud. "Are they saying that they count in base nine?"

"I think it's base ten," Meco opined, fascinated by the problem in spite of himself. "The long pause is twice the length of the short ones. It would stand for zero."

"Do we have a way to return the signal?" Alano asked.

"We can flash the ship's running lights at them," Eesai offered.

"Good. Send them a series in base eight and we'll see how they respond."

The bridge of *Meriwether-1* erupted in applause after the second repetition of *Inillien's* reply.

"Communication at last!" Chen gloated. The idea of flashing the defense laser at them had been his.

"If only we knew what it means," Sue retorted dryly.

"Frankly," Jerry replied with a grin, "I think they just called us a bunch of ignorant barbarians. We told them that we count in multiples of ten and they replied, 'Any fool knows better than that!'" He laughed at the joke, but only Sue joined him.

"How do you know they correctly interpreted our message?" Erich asked. "Maybe they thought we claimed to have colonized nine worlds, and they replied that they only have seven."

"We're bound to have a lot of misunderstandings, before we can talk to them fluently," Anspach pointed out. "Let's not go out of our way to assume more problems than we have. The real question is what do we do next? Jerry? You're the nearest thing we have to an anthropologist on board."

"Ideally," Jerry began, "I'd like to establish verbal and personal contact with them as soon as possible. We'll learn each other's language much faster if we can trade words, but that might not be possible."

"Why not?"

"They might be breathing something poisonous to us, or vice versa. For that matter, their air could be corrosive to our space suits."

"Nonsense!" Erich denied. "Our space suit material can withstand any known form of abuse."

"Any *known* form of abuse, Erich," Jerry countered. "What we have is an acute case of the unknown."

"Why don't we flash them the numbers again," Chen suggested, "but this time do them in code."

"Code" asked the captain. "What sort of code?"

"Well, we could use the old Morse code numerals, but I've always thought they were a bit clumsy. I can devise a quick one based on Roman numerals also using long and short flashes."

"What would you use for zero?" Jerry asked.

"Hmm," Chen thought. "Well, if one is 'dit' - a short flash - and two is 'di dit', and so on, we can make zero equal two dahs, or long flashes."

"Isn't there a danger of having them mistake 'dah dah' for either ten or fifty-five?"

"We have to start somewhere and they're waiting for an answer from us."

"Go ahead and try it," Anspach instructed him. "Jerry, Achmed, I want you two working on this along with Chen Li."

"Why them?" Serafyma asked.

"Jerry's got a bachelors degree in anthropology and Achmed's a psychologist. Chen's our communications specialist. That good enough for you?" Serafyma nodded, disappointed.

"I'd like to help out too," Sue volunteered. "My duties are bound to be light until we need to move again and I minored in comparative cultures back in college."

"All right," the captain agreed. "The rest of us will get out of your way," he said, pointedly looking at each of his department chiefs in turn. "Call me when you get a break-through."

Six

The initial success in establishing communication between *Inillien* and *Meriwether-1* was followed by two weeks of snail-paced progress. It took several hours for Eesai Di Sonea and Lilla Di Lasai, working together, to understand that the second series of green flashes were the same numerical series that had started their painstaking conversation, but they found the human's code clumsy and quickly invented one of their own that didn't use more than three flashes per numeral.

That, in turn, was misunderstood by the human team who thought the Lano were attempting to teach them an alphabet. When, several days later, they finally agreed to count in base ten, using the Lano code, Eesai began tossing addition problems across the gap between the two ships. Another few hours later, Jerry finally caught on to what her message was trying to convey and replied with a subtraction problem of his own. After that multiplication and division was quickly established and, surprisingly, there was little problem in defining geometry and algebra, but that was as far as it went. Both teams realized that they were heading down a dead-end path.

It was Susan Ho who thought up the idea of transmitting a series representing the periodic tables of elements, but the Lano had no experience with synthetic elements, and doubted their initial correct

interpretation of the message.

Finally, after two weeks of heartbreakingly slow progress, Lilla threw up her hands in exasperation and screamed, "Why don't they just tell us what they want already?" One of the first changes between her and Eesai was the dropping of naval titles. They got in the way and slowed down conversations.

"How do you propose they do that?" Eesai asked. They were sitting in a room prepared for this use. It was normally a small storage room and they just barely had enough space to sit or stretch as needed, but at least they were able to work without anyone getting in their way. From here they could flash *Inillien's* running lights, and talk via intercom to the bridge.

"I don't know," Lilla admitted, "but I'm sure we'd make better progress face to what ever they have that passes for a face."

"Oh, I wish you hadn't brought that up," Eesai replied. "I've been trying to avoid thinking about what they look like ever since they showed up."

"Let's hope they're prettier than their ship," Lilla grinned.

"Amen!" Eesai agreed fervently. "Now how do we go about asking them over for a visit?"

"I take it that engraved invitations are out?" Lilla smirked. "Why can't we just suit up, fly over and knock on their hatch?"

"Ever been in a space suit for more than an hour or so?" Eesai countered. "And who knows what they breath? Hey, maybe that's what they've been waiting for; enough data about us."

"At this rate, we'll all be dead of old age before we can say, 'hello,' to each other."

"Nonsense!" Eesai joked, "we'll die of asphyxia first. That's it! We'll send them a bottle full of ship's air, appropriately marked with lines and stars to indicate the gaseous mix within."

"Assuming we're right about the codes for the elements," Lilla remarked dubiously.

"They can analyze the air in any case. Have Chief Lani prepare a small pressure bottle full of air. Make sure it isn't pure oxygen. I'll go talk to the captain." Lilla nodded and they both left the room.

Alano agreed to the plan a few minutes later in his cabin, but balked when Eesai mentioned that she would be the one to deliver the bottle.

"You're too valuable," he told her, quickly adding, "to the ship. We'll send a crewman with the air sample."

"No, captain," she disagreed, privately glad he hadn't been on the bridge where she might have not been able to argue. "This is part of the job you gave me; understanding and communicating with the aliens. How they react to the way we deliver the bottle may be more important than everything we've done so far. It either has to be me or Lilla."

"Then we'll send Lilla over."

"She's never been outside a ship since basic training."

"You have an answer for everything, don't you?" he commented sourly.

"That's also my job," she laughed. "So the mission is mine?"

"Be careful," Alano sighed. Eesai smiled and rushed off to make the rest of the arrangements. An hour later she was floating gently outside *Inillien*, with the pressure bottle carefully strapped to her chest.

She paused to let her eyes adjust to the view. The stars were points of absolute light, far brighter and sharper than any planet-bound view and more intimidating than they seemed only a few feet away within the protective shell of a spaceship. She made the mistake of turning to her right and looking at the local sun - a fingernail-sized orb of blinding yellow-orange light - and her visor went opaque instantly.

Problems, subcaptain? Alano asked from within the ship.

"Just my own stupidity," she replied. "By now I ought to know better than looking directly at a sun. I'm ready to jump across now."

There's no rush, he reminded her. *Go when you feel ready.*

"Aye, aye, sir," she responded. Her suit would automatically guide her toward her target, but she'd get there faster if she kicked off. Bunching her leg muscles between her and *Inillien*, she took a deep breath and meditated briefly before commencing her leap.

"Clark," Jerry called Anspach from the bridge, "I think you want to get up here."

Anspach, dozing in his cabin, came awake faster than he might have had the emergency siren been sounded. He jumped out of bed, and immediately regretted the action as clouds of dizziness threatened to blanket his mind.

Sitting back down on the bed, he asked, "What's up, Jerry?"

"One of the aliens just got out of their ship. Looks like he's about to pay us a social call."

"On my way!" Anspach replied. He grabbed a pair of deck shoes and bolted for the cabin door, and so it was a half dressed Captain Anspach who entered the bridge a minute later.

"Did I wake you?" Jerry asked. "Sorry, Clark. You probably had the time to dress in your cabin."

"I should have asked. I miss anything?"

"No, Captain," Sue replied. "He seems to be taking his time, getting his bearings, maybe having second thoughts about the neighbors."

"Caution," Anspach grunted. "I respect that. Am I wrong or is he small?"

"It's hard to tell through his suit, but we estimate he's about one point five meters tall. That's pretty short by our standards, but he might be a giant among his own."

"Would you look at that!" Achmed exclaimed. "He just jumped off. Just like that. Do they have that kind of accuracy?"

Sue replied, after checking her instruments, "I'm detecting some faint ion emissions from his suit. He's made several small course corrections in the few seconds since he jumped although even without them I think he would have hit *Meriwether*, just not at our main hatch."

"Is that where he's headed?" Anspach asked.

"Unless he turns. I doubt any human could have jumped that accurately."

"I knew some guys back in the Aerospace Force who could do it," Anspach corrected her. "Show-offs mostly. Some even tried to make a sport out of it until the brass stopped the practice."

"He's decelerating now," Sue announced, "but holding course. Think we should put together a welcoming committee?"

"You, Achmed, and Jerry," the captain decided. "You all are responsible for establishing communication with them. You might as well finish what you started." Sue smiled, grateful she didn't have to use any of her hastily prepared arguments. This wasn't a military ship, it was a cooperative business, but Anspach, as majority stock-holder preferred not to argue with his junior partners.

"Let's go, troops," Jerry said, enthusiastically getting out of his seat. "We got company."

"Break out the champagne?" Sue asked as they left the bridge.

"Might be a hideous poison to him," Jerry replied. The last words Lewis Clark Anspach heard before the hatch closed behind them were, "Do we have a red carpet?"

Eesai was uncertain whether the door-like oblong with rounded corners was an airlock hatch. Certainly, no Lano engineer would design such a crude-looking barrier against the vacuum of space.

Snob! she berated herself as she floated ever closer toward the strange ship. *At least their ship works. That's more than you can say for your own.* A buzzer sounded in her ear and a cursory glance at the read-outs on the arms of her suit informed her that the suit, unprepared to recognize the shape in front of it as a ship, thought she was about to crash into an asteroid. She quickly over-rode the suit's automatic guidance and manually instructed it to slow down. Manual guidance was less accurate than the automatic, and she first touched down on *Meriwether's* hull a few feet from the still closed hatch.

Eesai had hoped one of the aliens would meet her midway between the ships, but she had to admit to herself that they probably hadn't had the time to suit up yet. Now she clung to the side of the alien ship,

marveling at the gentle tug of gravity that kept her against the hull without the aid of her gloves' adhesive grips. There was a small control patch next to the hatch, but none of the familiar gestures seemed to have any effect. She wasn't surprized, of course. There was no reason to expect these people to do anything the same way hers did. Why there was even some variation from one Lano colony to the next.

She rested against the *Meriwether's* hull wondering what to do next. The mild gravity should be sufficient to hold the bottle of air in place until it could be retrieved, but what if nobody thought to look for it? She briefly considered edging around to what seemed to be a large window near the nose of the ship to somehow show the people inside that she wanted them to have this bottle, but then another idea crossed her mind.

She carefully unstrapped the bottle and holding it firmly, use it to tap gently on the airlock hatch. The sound, conveyed through her pressure suit, seemed incredibly distant - no louder than that of a pin being repeatedly driven into a pin cushion. A moment later the flat metallic door opened outward; first rising two inches above the hull and then swinging away on a massive set of hinges.

Eesai looked inside the airlock to find, as expected, a small room, just barely large enough for one or two people with another hatch at the far end with a small window set in it about one third of its length down from the top. Although it had been Eesai's intention merely to deposit the bottle inside and then return to *Inillien* to await a reply, that window proved to be too great a temptation for her. She just had to get a quick look inside the alien ship and maybe catch a glimpse of the aliens themselves.

She entered the airlock and immediately felt the full power of *Meriwether's* gravity. *Is it weaker or stronger than shipboard gravity on Inillien?* she wondered. After a moment she decided that it might be a little bit stronger, but the difference was no more than she might notice between any two habitable planets.

The little window, however, was above Eesai's head and she had to stand on her toes and use her adhesive grips in order to get a peek inside. She set her stomach to be able to stand the sight of these people no matter how they looked. It simply wouldn't do to show revulsion, especially at a first meeting, but Lilla's constant speculations over the last few weeks left Eesai worrying about such things. Her eyes had just cleared the bottom of the window when two human faces suddenly appeared in the window and stared back at her.

Eesai hadn't realized what sort of pressure she was under, but the added shock of this sudden sight was just too great. While nobody ever faulted her for it, she was embarrassed for the rest of her life by what she did next.

She fainted.

Seven

"Ohmigod!" Sue gasped as Eesai slumped to the airlock floor. "Now what?"

"Close the outer door," Jerry told her decisively.

"How will that be interpreted?" Achmed wondered.

"Like we invited him in and he accepted," Jerry snapped as he shot his own hand out to work the outer hatch control. "Much better than if we shoved him back out into space."

"But," Achmed continued as the airlock began to pressurize, "How do we know he can breath our air?"

"We don't, but in case you haven't noticed yet, he brought his own. It's called a space suit, although in his language it's probably 'Irving'." The airlock finished its cycle and the inner door rotated open. "Come on, let's bring him inside. Proper hospitality and all that."

"He's fairly light," Achmed noted. "I suppose we can carry him to sick bay."

"What's this?" Sue asked, noticing the pressure bottle on the airlock floor. "Looks like he was bringing us something. There are some markings on it."

"Bring it along," Jerry told her. "Maybe we're supposed to figure out what they mean." A few minutes later they had the still-suited body of Eesai Di Sonea as comfortably arrange as possible on one of three sickbay cots.

"Vertical lines and asterisks," Jerry mused, studying the markings on the Lano artifact. "Do you suppose this is the same code we've been representing with dots and dashes?"

"Maybe," Sue agreed tentatively, "but which stands for which?"

"Let the computer decide," Achmed told her. "Scan the code in and compare this to the codes we've worked out." She nodded and did that.

"Numbers," she reported a minute later. "It's a list of numbers."

"This could be a pressure bottle and maybe it's full of their air," Jerry surmised. "If that's the case, this could be a label telling us what's inside. If that's the case some of these will be atomic numbers and some will be percentages." He gave the computer some additional instructions and it immediately spat out several lists of possibilities.

"Well," Sue shrugged scanning the results, "it might be mostly nitrogen and oxygen, with a pinch of carbon dioxide and a smattering of other gasses. On the other hand it could also be stainless steel or something like it."

"Why don't we try spectroscopic analysis?" Achmed suggested, obviously looking toward a door that led to his medical lab. Jerry and Sue nodded and he picked up the bottle and took it into the next room. Jerry was tempted to follow him, but instead decided to stay with Sue and the alien.

"Wish we could get a view of his face," he told Sue softly while the sounds of Achmed's industry floated to them from the other room. "This mirrored visor conceals everything."

"Her face," Sue corrected him absently. "At least I'm beginning to think so."

"What makes you say that?"

"Well, it's hard to say with this bulky suit, but I can make out the suggestion of breasts, and a slight flaring of her hips."

"He, or she, isn't human," Jerry pointed out, "although I'll admit some surprise at the similarity of limb to body length ratios. Inside that suit she could be perfectly human. On the other hand their species could display what we think of as breasts in both sexes, perhaps as a food and water storage mechanism."

"Their men could be seven feet tall, for that matter," Sue returned, "or have great horns on their heads for all we know, so there's no reason to think of this person as a male either."

"Blame it on the language we speak," Jerry laughed. "Terrañol is an odd mixture of English, Spanish, Russian, and Japanese, with a smattering of Hebrew and Chinese thrown in for good measure. Somehow we never got over the legacy of a male-dominated society, not to say we don't live in one right now." Sue's retort was abruptly cut off by a helmet-muffled groan from Eesai. "Sounds like our guest is coming around."

Hearing their voices, Eesai realized, even before she came fully awake that she was no longer in space. Her eyes opened and her first view was that of a stark white ceiling. She tried to sit up but gentle hands pushed her back down.

She heard a feminine-sounding voice say something in a totally alien language. The tones, however, sounded comforting and when she turned her head to see who spoke she saw once more the two faces that had so shocked her in the air lock.

Their skin tone was odd. The man was a sort of pale pinkish orange in color, but the woman was noticeably darker. Were they even the same species, she wondered. And they were large - giants! Five feet high in her shoes, Eesai was considered a tall woman among the Lano, but these people made her look like a child.

How long had she been out? Lifting her right arm to read the tell-tales, Eesai noted that she must have been unconscious for a quarter hour or more. Worse, she noticed that she was no longer in contact with *Inillien*. She didn't remember turning the communicator off, but then she did remember that she hadn't spoken to Captain Alano since just before she jumped off. Maybe she accidentally turned it off then. Alano would be blindingly angry by now; she had to report.

She tried sitting up again and this time the two aliens helped her. She was about to activate the communicator when another of these strange people entered the room, carrying the pressure bottle. His skin color was even darker than the woman's, and he too was tall, although not as tall as the other man.

He indicated the bottle and spoke to the others, "A little more nitrogen, a little less oxygen by all of half a percent each. CO₂ about the same and a bunch of miscellaneous gases, none of which we don't breath on a normal basis on Earth if not on the ship. I'd say we have compatible atmospheres."

The language was alien to Eesai, of course, but she didn't think there were any sounds she couldn't duplicate.

The tall man then said something to her, also indicating the bottle. The bottle had been opened and she hoped that the gestures the he made meant that she could breath their air, because she immediately realized that they were expecting her to remove her helmet. Taking a deep breath, she turned off her respirator and cracked the seal on the helmet.

Sue, Jerry, and Achmed, watched raptly as Eesai lifted the helmet to reveal her facial features for the first time. They didn't realized that they were holding their own breaths, until she suddenly expelled the

last of the air in her lungs and courageously took a deep breath of theirs.

The air smelled strange to Eesai, but no stranger than any she'd breathed before. Every ship, every world for that matter, had its own unique aroma. With her second breath it smelled less strange and she knew that she'd not notice it at all in a minute or two. Now what?

She still hadn't contacted her ship. Would these people think her unspeakably rude if she put the helmet back on? She would have to take the chance. She put it back over her head, neglecting to seal it in place, and activated the communicator. She sensed, rather than heard the worried words being directed toward her.

sai. Repeat. Inillien calling Eesai Di Sonea. Report, Eesai. Repeat...

"Eesai Di Sonea here, *Inillien*, sorry about the delay. My communicator was off."

Eesai, Alano's words came at her alloyed with fear and anger, *what are you doing inside that ship? You were only supposed to drop off that air bottle.*

"Sorry, captain. I fear I had a bit of a shock and, well, I passed out. The people here brought me inside. Their air is breathable, by the way. I'd like to stay a while and maybe get to know them."

Since you're already there, I suppose it will do no harm. How long do you propose to stay?

"Don't know. I'll try to be back in time for dinner. In the meantime you might want to have engineering work on a bridge. When I can make them understand, I'd like to link the two ships if they agree."

I'm not certain that's a good idea, sub-captain. There's the matter of security.

"Captain," Eesai protested, "we're dead in space and at their mercy regardless of whether we grant them access to the ship. We've nothing to lose by trusting them."

You're right, he admitted. I assume you intend to remove your suit?

"It's not particularly comfortable and their ship is a little on the warm side," she replied.

All right, but keep the communicator with you.

"Yes, sir. Eesai out." She removed the helmet once more and turned back to the humans. They were waiting patiently and did not appear to be put out by her actions. "Hello," she tried with a crooked smile. "Mind if I slip out of the spacesuit?" Without waiting for an answer she began to unfasten the seals and remove her gloves.

"Would you like some help?" Sue asked, approaching Eesai and reaching to hold the suit as she slipped one arm out. Eesai smiled, hoping it would be seen as the friendly gesture it was. Sue returned the smile and continued to help.

"Incredibly humanoid," Jerry commented as Sue helped Eesai.

"Impossibly so, I would have said," Achmed replied. "Why aside from her skin color and her slightly pointed ears, she could pass as human on any of our worlds."

"She's a bit short," Jerry noted.

"I went out with a lady once who wasn't more than a centimeter taller, but nowhere near as pretty. Now why should an alien race appear so human-like?"

"You have a point," Jerry conceded. "I used to laugh at the people who saw humans as the inevitable result of evolution. I still don't buy the concept, but I'll have to keep an open mind."

"I won't believe in the inevitability of parallel evolution until I can study their DNA," Achmed told him. "I've had experience with extra-terrestrial organisms, you know, and this is the first time I've seen anything that even remotely resembled Earth life."

"So what we have is an incredible coincidence? God! She looks like an elf."

"And a cute one at that."

"Down, boys," Sue growled back at them. "The little lady probably sees us all as great bloody monsters and your drooling isn't doing much to dispel the impression."

"Yes, ma'am," Jerry said with mock contriteness. He was able to hold the expression for half a second before dissolving in laughter.

Eesai heard the sound and laughed as well. She didn't know what the joke was, but it felt good to know these people were "Lano" enough to laugh and the release just plain felt good.

Once out of the suit, Eesai smoothed a few wrinkles in her uniform and then reached into the helmet and pulled the communicator out. It was a small device that hooked over one ear with a flexible lead that snaked down and rested at the nape of her neck. It was long past time to introduce herself.

She put her hand to her head, said, "Eesai Di Sonea," and waited expectantly. Achmed wondered if she was complaining about a headache and automatically reached out to check the temperature of her forehead. Eesai gently shook him off and tried again.

"I get it!" Sue exclaimed. She pointed at Eesai and repeated her name. Then she put her hand over her heart and introduced herself, "Susan Ho," then pointing at the others in turn, "Jerome Isaacs. Achmed MacGregor." She turned to Jerry and asked, "So now we start learning each other's words?"

"As good a place as any to start," he replied. "Ought to get really interesting when we get to the verb 'to be.'"

Eight

Alano made a note in his log commending Eesai's amazing progress in learning Terrañol and in teaching the Terrans to speak Lani. It had been only eight days since she first stepped aboard the *Meriwether* and now the two ships were about to be linked by the flexible and pressurized tube they called a bridge. In only a few minutes he was to step out onto that bridge and float to the middle there to meet the human captain Lewis Clark Ki Anspach.

No, he corrected himself silently. *Drop the patronymic, and don't get insulted if he accidentally forgets to use yours*. That was the one order that both captains had stressed to their crews repeatedly. "Don't take insult at anything they say or do short of physical attack. We don't know their ways and they don't know ours." The gods only knew what translational errors would be made and neither captain wanted to risk alienating the other. Without the humans Alano and his crew were stuck here in the middle of nowhere, and the Lano were Anspach's last chance at making a profit this trip.

Eesai and Lilla reported that they and their human counterparts agreed that the two captains would greet each other in their own languages, even though both had struggled to learn the other's. Then they would both board *Inillien* along with the human contact team for a tour of the vessel. If they still had enough energy left after that, a tour of *Meriwether-1* would commence. Otherwise it would take place on the following day.

"We're all set, Captain," Eesai's voice came to him over the intercom.

"On my way," he replied.

Inillien's airlock hatches were already open when Alano arrived, but *Meriwether's* were still shut. A few minutes later those doors too were opened and the air of the two ships began to mix as the two captains entered the bridge.

There had been no way to rig up some form of artificial gravity in the wide tube so they had to float their way carefully to keep from colliding painfully into each other. Once there Alano offered his hand to Captain Anspach. It was a distinctly human gesture, but the Lano greeting of placing hands over each other's heart would be clumsy in free-fall.

"I greet you," Alano told his counterpart, "in the name of our Commander-in-chief, the Governor of Treloi. Welcome, Captain Lewis Clark Anspach. I, Alano Ki Matchi, Captain of *Inillien*, welcome you." It was a pretty speech Alano thought, but far too verbose and repetitive.

"Likewise," Anspach replied, unable to remember his pre-rehearsed speech. "I'm sure the history books will clean up this speech for me and make my reply at least as flowery as yours."

Alano caught the basic meaning of what Anspach said and smiled. Perhaps he was going to like these people after all. "Welcome, friend," he replied, this time in Terrañol. "Come. I show to you my *Inillien*."

"Gladly, Captain. You speak my language well. I just wish I could get a handle on Lani, but I never was a fast study when it came to foreign languages."

"How many have tried you?" Alano asked as he helped Anspach on board *Inillien*. Once Anspach was on board, Jerry, Sue, and Achmed entered the bridge.

"Languages? Three or four before I finally passed the requirement for my degree, and even so I passed more by luck than skill."

"I not understand," Alano admitted. "Have encountered other peoples you?"

"Non-humans you mean? No. The Lano are the first extraterrestrial, intelligent race we've ever met."

"Then what languages learn?"

"Human ones, of course."

"Speak more than one language humans?"

"Hundreds. Thousands, maybe. Many are no longer spoken, but were in the past."

"Yes. In the old tongue are our oldest records. Change over time words."

"Words change over time, captain," Eesai corrected him as she approached. The other Lano had stayed away from the bridge tube during the official meeting, but like the human contact team, now entering through the open hatch, they were now free to join the meeting. "Subject, verb, predicate. It's not a bad system," she concluded in Lani, "just different."

"Hello, Eesai. Nice to see you again," Anspach tried in poorly pronounced and ungrammatical Lani. Worse all his words were either neuter or masculine. She greeted him in return and then corrected him too, clearly pronouncing the feminine forms of "hello" and "you".

Then Sue closed on Eesai and embraced her in a bone-crushing hug that Eesai had already learned to tolerate. *Humans*, she reminded herself silently, *don't know their own strength*. There was only time to wave briefly at Jerry and Achmed before she had to introduce her new friends to Alano who, in turn, formally introduced them to his other officers. Once that tedious process was over, the grand tour began.

They began with *Inillien's* bridge, where the humans were suitably impressed by the gleaming panels and displays and from there went to the crew's and officers' quarters. The neatness of the Lano work and living areas gave testimony to Anspach's own belief that space-faring slobs had short life expectancies. The biggest surprise came as they left the recreation room.

It was not unusual to find the room unoccupied, especially this early in the ship's day, so it was necessary for Alano to reach over to one side of the door to activate the light switch. The light came on to reveal several small tables, which Eesai explained were commonly used for games, or just sitting around and talking.

There was a blue felt-covered table on the far side of the room that vaguely resembled a pool table with rounded corners and only four pockets. Lilla demonstrated that, when turned on, the pockets moved around the table stopping at random until a shot was made at which point they would move to another location. Jerry wanted to try it immediately, but Anspach insisted on moving on. There were several other games in the room some of which, like darts, were familiar to the humans and others which seemed totally alien.

Sue was the last one out of the room and Eesai unthinkingly asked her to turn off the lights. Sue waved her hand over the plastic patch on the wall in the same way Alano had, but nothing happened.

"Am I doing something wrong?" she asked. Eesai turned back to help as the others continued on toward the ward room.

"Just wave hand downward in front of the patch," Eesai replied.

"Oh. I waved upward," Sue laughed. She reversed the gesture, but still nothing happened. "I hope I didn't break it," she half-laughed.

"Slim chance of that. Maybe you weren't close enough." Sue tried once more, but the lights stayed on. "Hmm," Eesai murmured. "Maybe the switch wore out. We'll renew the charge." She reached out, however, for good measure and waved her hand downward in front of the patch. This time the lights went out. "That's odd," she muttered in Lani. "Let's try that again." she turned the lights on and off several times then had Sue give it a try. Nothing happened. "You have to think about the switch, you know."

"I do? I don't recall having anything else on my mind, but I'll try again." Sue took a deep breath and tried again. There was still no change.

"Strange. I guess your spells must work even more differently than I thought." She used the Lani word for "spells".

"What was that word?" Sue asked, "*Thalu*?"

Eesai nodded. "It comes from *thalirip*. We've discussed that word already. I believe you defined it as 'science'."

"I did," Sue agreed, "so this would sort of mean 'technique,' I guess. I must be doing something wrong."

"Let's discuss that tomorrow," Eesai suggested, shrugging the matter off although it bothered her intensely. "Our *thaliripi* obviously employ different principals."

"Yes. And if we're to help you, we'll need to understand just what you need. Right?"

"Exactly." they walked briskly to catch up to the others.

"We haven't had the time to do extensive analyses of our comparative biologies," Alano was saying in Lani - hastily translated by Lilla - when they arrived in the ship's ward room, "but we have found a few foods and beverages that we can share." The ward room was packed. Every off-duty Lano had found excuses to be there to see the aliens. "However, the one beverage we traditionally use to welcome guests is not one of them. This is unfortunate because the sharing of it is considered as the seal in a bond of friendship." He nodded to Eesai and together they opened a pair of carefully marked ornate decanters and began pouring small portions into fine crystal snifters. "Happily between them, Sub-captain Di Sonea and Doctor Isaacs found a Terran equivalent and managed to provide some for us here today. We call our drink *Shishlik*, but I am informed that yours is called whiskey. The major difference between them is that yours contains ethyl alcohol, which we cannot tolerate, while *Shishlik* is predominantly methyl alcohol, which I understand could be fatal to you." When he and Eesai had finished pouring they formally presented an appropriate glass to each of their guests and the officers present. The off-duty crew persons were allowed to help themselves to the *Shishlik* and most took advantage of the unusual opportunity.

"To a long and happy friendship," Captain Anspach replied lifting his glass. The humans echoed him as one and the Lano looked confused for a moment.

"Thank you, captain," Alano replied in Terrañol. The custom of the toast was new to him, but he took an instant liking to it.

"This is excellent!" Jerry exclaimed on tasting the amber liquid. "Better than the sample I gave you. Whiskey this smooth could bring a high price on any human planet, and the taste and aroma are truly unique. How did you ever synthesize this?"

"A simple procedure, Dr. Isaacs," Alano replied calmly, "Later, perhaps, time we will have show you

to." He caught sight of Eesai's discrete signals concerning his inconsistent syntax and tried again, "Would you like to see our engine room next?" Eesai smiled broadly, indicating to him that he had finally gotten it right.

Anspach replied that he'd been looking forward to that part of their tour and they started off again. Sue, however, held Eesai back for a moment to talk.

"Eesai," she whispered in Lani so as not to be over heard by the departing people, "reason is there that we had this, ah...*ceremony* ," she lapsed into Terrañol, "before the engines we see?"

"You mean why didn't we perform the friendship ceremony after the tour?" Sue nodded taking note of Eesai's syntax. "Strictly speaking our engines are, well not secret, but not something we would show to an enemy. I thought we should have done it before the tour, but Captain Alano wanted to see how you behaved during the first part of the tour."

"So it was a test?" Sue asked, uncertain how to feel about that.

"Not really. That test we all passed the day we met, but Alano wanted to be certain we weren't," Eesai slipped back into Terrañol, "letting the evil djinn out of the bottle." Sue nodded, wondering who had told Eesai about genies.

Unlike the rest of the ship, the engine room appeared to be in complete disarray and Lani Di Ressia, Chief Engineer, was acting her autocratic best when the captain led his guests in. The monumental engines remained in their gleaming glory, but several other machines had been taken apart and spread out across the floor in articulated fashion, leaving only a few safe walkways between them.

"Now hold it right where you are!" Lani stopped them in their tracks. "We've got the drivers out and spread about and if you lot come charging on through like a herd of Rhinolopes, we're never gonna put them right."

"We'll be careful, chief," Alano assured her. In truth he out-ranked her by several levels, but it never paid to upset your engineers.

"Careful? Yah, sure. Careful to ruin all our hard work!" Then she caught sight of the humans and her entire manner changed. "So, how about introducing me to your," she paused to consider a host of adjectives like "handsome, sexy, and large" and then edited them out of her speech saying simply, "guests?"

Alano handled the introductions, noticing that while polite to Sue Ho, Lani was especially warm toward the human men, taking their extended hands in both of her own and holding them like they were prized possessions she wouldn't willingly surrender as she stared boldly into their eyes. After greeting each of them in turn, she agreed to let them tour the engine room so long as they were careful to stay on the marked walkways. Then she took Jerry's hand again and led him off on a personalized tour of the engine room.

"Odd," Alano murmured to Anspach as they threaded their way, through the room, "she's not normally that friendly." He paused, noticing that Anspach was staring at the far corner of the room. "Something wrong?" He followed the human's gaze and saw Malana Di Masai seated at a table and snarling at a pile of machine parts spread out before her. She let a vile swear word escape her lips and than made a contemptuous gesture at the parts, which promptly flung themselves back together into a box-like device that emitted a digital chirp at random intervals.

"No. It's just her hair color. It's gray. Sort of stands out around here." Most Lano had light brown hair. Alano's black hair with a touch of gray at the temples and Eesai's light blond were unusual especially since Treloians did not use any form of artificial hair coloring. Malana was the oldest La on *Inillien* and her once-brown hair was now a distinctive steel grey.

"Malana?" Alano called, "what are you doing here?"

"I told you I'd be helping Lani with her engines, for all the good it's doing," she added sourly without looking up. The machine on the table chirped again. "Oh shut up," she told it. The device promptly fell apart again.

"How..." Anspach started. "Why..." he tried again. "I..." he gave up entirely.

Malana looked up for the first time since the tour had entered the engine rooms, saw the humans and said, "Alano, why didn't you tell me we had made contact?"

"I haven't been able to find you, Madame Malana. Have you really been down here all this time?"

"Except for when she's been asleep," Eesai told him, "and precious little sleep she's had. Malana, we'd like you to meet our new friends." Alano promptly took over and introduced the Terrans to the venerable La, except for Jerry who was still being lead around by Lani somewhere.

Anspach took a deep breath and, still a little wild around the eyes, noted, "I could have sworn I saw that device put itself together and then take itself apart."

"This thing?" Malana laughed after Eesai translated. "No. This little monster might have the ability to turn my mind to jelly, but it can't put itself together."

"But..." Anspach tried to protest.

"I did it," Malana concluded. "I mean what's the use of being *athalua* if you can't use *athalu* or two every once in a while."

"There's that word again," Sue commented dryly and giving Eesai an accusatory look.

"Sounds like magic," Anspach said suspiciously.

"Magic?" Eesai and Lilla asked as one. It wasn't a word they were likely to have heard aboard the exploratory vessel.

Sue and Achmed tried to explain, but their own experiences were mostly based on superstition. "Where's Jerry now that we need him?" Sue complained. "Anthropologists deal with magic as a matter of course."

"Isaacs," Anspach called out, "Where are you?"

"Right here actually," Jerry replied in conversational tones, stepping out from behind one of the gleaming constructs that were *Inillien's* engines. Lani was still clinging to his hand, but looking slightly disappointed.

"Do you think you can define magic for the Lano?"

"I'll give it my best shot," he shrugged and then continued in Lani where he could, "Many differences of opinion there are about magic what is, but it down to comes use there of supernatural control over natural forces. Some tell you will that it involves charms or special incantations, others that the power from within comes or combination of both."

"Sounds reasonable," Malana opined.

"Does it?" Jerry asked, "Okay. There's more. Laws of, damn! I don't know the words. Sympathy and Contagion in Terrañol. Sympathy means that an action performed is symbolic of what you wish to accomplish, and by the use of that symbol, the desired results are produced." Malana nodded agreeably as Eesai translated. "The Law of Contagion states that an object invested with power in one way or another can be used to work magic by touching the subject one wishes to act upon."

"Yes," Malana agreed at last, "those are two of the most basic laws of *thalirip*. It should be interesting to learn what different applications your people have come up with." Jerry just stared at Malana. Like the other humans he had assumed that the term *thalua* was an occupation for which they had not yet found a Terrañol equivalent. The assumption was basically correct, but they never thought it might mean magician or even wizard. The engine room became suddenly quiet.

"There," Eesai said to Sue, breaking the silence, "I knew our *thaliripi* were compatible."

"Eesai," Sue whispered her reply in badly mixed Lani and *Terrañol*, "I'm not sure our technology you can call *thalirip*, but compatible is hardly the term."

Nine

"Absolutely incredible," Malana breathed later during the tour of Meriwether-1, "and you say this entire ship, your civilization even is entirely built without so much as a trace of *thalirip*? Magic?" she corrected herself. The humans had been utterly amazed at how quickly she had picked up Terrañol. It had taken Eesai, Lilla, and the human contact team eight days of comprehensive work to get to the point they were at now, but Malana was able to speak Terrañol with only a faint trace of an accent after only two hours.

"You're all speaking better now, in fact," Jerry noted as he held her back from the main tour to talk a moment.

"Well, she is a *thalua*, a wizard," Eesai shrugged. "Although I do wish I had thought to bring her along while we were learning each other's language," she added ruefully.

"Why didn't you?" Jerry asked curiously. There was no tone of accusation in his voice.

"Generalist wizards are rare," she explained. "Malana is only the second I've ever met and the first one was too much of a snob to have anything to do with me. The rest of us are specialists, much like you humans, and can only perform expertly in our own fields."

"I see," Jerry nodded. "You get used to making do as best you can, so you just never thought about calling for her help."

"That," she agreed, "and even generalists have their specialties. I had no way of knowing Malana would have any particular expertise with language. Frankly, I have not seen her cast more than two or three spells since we picked her up."

"Tell me," Jerry asked as they hurried on to catch up to the rest of the tour. "You're a bit of a generalist yourself, aren't you?"

"I have to be," Eesai informed him, privately pleased that he had noticed her versatility over the last week. "My speciality is navigation, mostly learned from the Treloian Navy - never had the money or the connections for University - but I'm also the first mate aboard Inillien. You pick up all sorts of experience in a job like that, or you should," she concluded, noting privately that the other two sub-captains had never learned much beyond their jobs.

"That's true," Anspach was replying to another of Malana's comments on human technology had said as Jerry and Eesai caught up to the rest on the bridge.

"At least as far as we understand it," Sue qualified. "On the other hand, I wasn't able to do so much as work one of your light switches on Inillien."

"A totally non-magical race," Malana marveled. "You know we used to speculate back in college about the possibility of building a civilization without magic, but it was just one of those meaningless debates undergraduates have."

"Like arguing over which came first," Jerry suggested, "the chicken or the egg?"

"If I understand that correctly, yes. As we had no proof that a civilization was even possible without magic, nor had we experience with any sentient being unable to work the most rudimentary magic, the argument was rather pointless. I suspect that there will be thousands of dissertations written on the subject now. You really are an incredible people. By what I've been taught, you should never have been able to get off the ground. For that matter we've always believed that magic was a part of sapience, and yet here you are, and hopefully able to help us out of our little predicament."

"I certainly hope so," Anspach told her. "At the least, we should be able to tow you to an inhabited world ours or yours."

"That could be a problem, captain," Alano started uneasily.

"Please call me Clark," Anspach replied, hoping to put his counterpart at ease.

"Alano," the Lano captain replied.

"What's the problem?"

Alano looked around the bridge for a moment and then continued, "Well, it's the reaction of my superiors I'm worried about. If I go leading you back to one of our worlds they may say that I acted rashly, possibly endangering every Lano world. Now I know you're going to say that such a fear is unfounded, and I agree, but I would still have to stand before a court martial."

"Actually," Anspach admitted, "I was about to say that was probably sound thinking when confronting a complete unknown. Caution is generally considered sensible from a military view. So then what's wrong

with our towing you to a human world?"

"Similar problem," Sue cut in. "Military security. Some of Inillien's features are classified or something. We were allowed to see the engine room, for example, because we had participated in a Lano ceremony of friendship and alliance. As it turns out we haven't got a chance of understanding the inner workings of what we saw anyway, much less using it."

"That hasn't been determined yet," Malana pointed out. "There may be some few humans capable of employing thalirip, magic."

"Doesn't matter," Eesai countered. "We don't keep secrets from friends, but even if we assume that the friendship of a ship's captain extends to his crew as well..."

"Commonly understood," Lilla put in.

"which is commonly understood," Eesai echoed her, annoyed, "there is no way we could make a similar assumption regarding all humans. I fear Captain Alano could be in nearly as much trouble should he place the secrets of Inillien in the hands of strangers."

"Besides," Alano added, "Wouldn't you have to stand trial if you were to reveal the position of a human world to aliens?"

"I doubt that," Anspach replied. "I haven't been in the Aerospace Force in years. There's not a lot they could do to me."

"They could take away your pilot's license and master astronaut's certificates," Jerry told him.

"So I'd still be the majority shareholder. I'd just appoint Sue as the new captain. She has all necessary certification. Also the situation would be different. Inillien would be unable to lift until alliance had been established with the Terran Confederation."

"Not sure I like leaving the fate of my crew to a bunch of politicians," Alano replied.

"I sure as hell don't like it," Jerry commented.

"And then there's the matter of payment," Alano continued. "As it stands we haven't got any basis for a common exchange."

"Precious metals," Sue suggested. "Rare gemstones. Magnetic monopoles. Interesting artwork even."

"On a military courier vessel?" Eesai replied.

"Well," Alana hedged, "we might have such as cargo on occasion, but this time the transportation of Madame Malana is our only mission. Face it, we have no money and no established credit, assuming your society isn't cash-only."

"We do use credit," Anspach informed him, "and if we could drag you back to Terra one of the major banks would probably back you, but Meriwether's engines aren't that powerful and our fuel tanks aren't full enough to make it much further in than the nearest colony." He paused for a moment to wonder what the Lano would make of a world predominantly populated by baseball fans. "Our best scenario," he continued, "is to help make your ship space-worthy again, if we can, and agree to let our politicians meet

on neutral territory and hash out the treaties."

"And if you can't get our drive working again?" Alano asked.

"Your choice of the other possibilities I guess." Alano didn't look happy. "On the other hand," Anspach continued, "We did mine a small amount of monopoles not too long ago. If they're enough to cover expenses, I suppose we can draw up a loan agreement at competitive interest rates."

"That will probably leave us stranded on The Bleachers 'til the Cubs win the Series."

"Is that a long time?" Alano asked innocently.

"All but a very few, the most faithful," Jerry replied, "would say that means forever."

"What about the most faithful?" Eesai asked, curious about Terran religion.

"Next October."

"Excuse me," Malana asked, "but what are monopoles?"

"Bits of magnetized metal that exhibit only a single magnetic pole," Jerry replied. "Sort of like the realization of a childhood fantasy that you could cut a magnet in half without getting two smaller, but whole magnets."

"I would have said that was impossible."

"Until a few decades ago we would have agreed. The theory behind monopoles goes way back, but toward the end of our twentieth century there weren't many proponents left. Until they were actually found, only a few really believed they existed, but they do and we have a small supply."

"Our drive exciter depends on an induced magnetic field," Malana told them thoughtfully. "The field is normally produced by several complex thali, but we may be able to substitute something based on your technology. I'll have to think about it and consult your engineers."

"They're at your disposal," Anspach replied gallantly, all the while wondering how much monopoles were going for on Earth. Like any commodity their value could rise or drop drastically. "In fact you can see them right now if you like. They can give you some basic instruction on safe handling."

"Good idea. Are they that dangerous?"

"Any sort of power can be dangerous," Jerry told her, "but the trick in handling monopoles is in making sure they stay that way. Monopoles have a tendency to become normal magnets when handled improperly."

"Then there's the other problem," Sue added.

"What's that, dear?" Malana asked.

"As with a normal magnet, like repels like. Only with monopoles are a bit more aggressive about it and if a grain isn't completely secured within its matrix, it'll go shooting off at a somewhat fatal rate; enough to puncture a ship's hull."

"Exciting," Malana replied lightly. "Remind me to tell you about military research sometime. It's almost as thrilling."

Ten

"Damn bloody elves," John Kelly, the senior assistant engineer on Meriwether swore, slipping in and out of a thick Strine accent like an otter crossing a stream. He was a large man with a ruddy complexion and tangled red hair that had half turned to gray.

"Elves? I thought they called themselves Lano," Seamus Mbuti replied perplexedly. Mbuti, on the other hand was of average height, slim build, and nearly black skin. Unlike Kelly, he was fresh out of Case Institute of Technology, but also unlike Erich Swartzwald - equally fresh out of MIT - Mbuti had neither the grades nor the inheritance to hold a chief's berth. That didn't matter to Mbuti; he had never planned on being a senior engineer so soon, but it did matter to Kelly.

"Elves. Lahno. Wot's the bloody dif'rence?" Kelly snarled. Kelly was a bitter man. At forty-eight he knew for a fact that he ought to have been hired on as chief engineer. Money wasn't everything; experience ought to count. Anspach had staked that stuck-up Polynesian pilot to her place in the company hierarchy, why not him? Kelly eventually decided that Susan Ho must be sleeping with the captain when in fact Clark Anspach had just been impressed by the lady's credentials and felt her expertise was more than worth the money he fronted for her. Sue didn't actually sleep with anyone on a regular basis.

"Elves are mythological creatures, Jock," Mbuti informed him.

"Give 'em the duck test, Boots."

"The duck test?"

"If they looks like elves, they's elves."

"I thought elves were supposed to be seven feet tall, slim as a rail, and fair skinned."

"Ever seen an elf before? Compared to you, they are fair skinned."

"If you say so, Jock. What's your gripe anyway?"

"Didn't like her attitude."

"Who?"

"The old bitch elf."

"Madame Malana? What's she done to tick you off? She seems okay to me."

"Uppity bitch walks in here like she owns the place and starts demanding monopolies, like we gots 'em to

spare. Only damned profit this tub's likely to make this trip and she wants them?"

"It wasn't like that, Jock," Mbuti told the senior assistant reasonably. "If the Lano can use our monopolies, they'll be paying market price."

"You bloody drongo! When and with what? They got nothing we want and even if they come up with the cash, they don't have to pay 'til we can figure out a fair dinkum price at whatever rate of exchange can be worked out. I'm tellin' you, Boots, they'll take those monopolies and we'll never see 'em again."

"Captain's too smart to let that happen, Jock. He'll get some sort of security from them."

"Anspach is just an ex-Space Force pilot who never got beyond captain. Probably couldn't take the competition."

"Captain Anspach is a highly decorated veteran of the Audhumbla Disturbance."

"He was a hot-shot fighter pilot. Worked maybe an hour every other day; went out and buzzed one of the Audhumblan orbital defense bases, then came back and got drunk until his next mission. Big bloody hero. Never once really saw what the war was all about, not like the marines. We had to occupy the planet and take their surrender. Only those anarchists didn't surrender. Couldn't really since no one of them spoke for the rest. A bloody business that was."

"You were a marine, Jock?"

"Made it all the way to first sergeant and got my double-deck chip before I retired. Now that's an accomplishment! But Anspach is just an officer who didn't make it, and wot's that got to do with being a businessman? Naught that I can see, specially given how successful we've been so far."

"He's done okay," Mbuti defended his captain. "Problem is we haven't found anything that's worth all that much. Just a double handful of systems, none of which have any habitable planets to recommend them."

"Just my point!" Kelly agreed fervently. "We've found almost nothing and now he's gonna practically give away what little profit we could get from this trip."

"In favor of an exclusive with an entire alien civilization, man? Sounds like a good deal in anyone's book."

"Only if Meriwether Inc. doesn't go down the tubes before we can collect our first royalties."

"What do we really know about these blinding ugly giants?" Sermi Ki Ferditchi, third sub-captain, asked. His light brown hair, curled in an ever hopeless tangle, framed his thin amber face and highlighted his burning yellow eyes.

"We know they're trying to help us," the second sub-captain, Meco Ki Taralano, replied. They were

sitting together in Inillien's ward room over a cup of hot coffee recently imported from Meriwether. "I notice you don't refuse to drink their coffee."

"It's not bad, but that's no reason to trust them blindly. Their chief engineer has been walking through here like it was his ship, tinkering with our engines. The gods only know whether they'll ever work again. I think they're just looking for an excuse to haul us all back to one of their worlds."

"So? We'll be the first Lano to see a human world. That's the sort of thing I joined up for in the first place; strange alien worlds, unusual people. You know what I mean, just between you and me, if you've seen one Lano world, you've seen them all."

"The red oceans and forests of Bisceloi are pretty different," Sermi pointed out.

"Visually, yes, but the cities all look alike. The people are always the same. Even the money looks alike."

"These people are too different."

"Maybe," Meco conceded, "but I doubt we know them well enough yet to be certain. Do you really think they're ugly? Lani seems to go all moony-eyed whenever they get mentioned and she seems to be driving Jerry to distraction."

"She's been playing with her engines so long she can't appreciate a real man."

"Say, weren't you and Lani seeing each other before we landed on Cereloi?"

"We talked a few times and had a date or two, but it never went anywhere. She's too cold for my tastes."

Or just not quick to warm to eager young puppies, Meco thought to himself. This was Sermi's first voyage and he was still much too stiff and formal, playing everything strictly by the regs and expecting everyone to be the same way. It got on folks' nerves. Aloud, he said, "Well, I'll hold off on making a final judgement on these humans, but I must admit I'm inclined to think well of them. They're friendly, out-going, and have been quite generous."

"Yeah?" Sermi countered. "What's it going to cost us?"

"Malana," Achmed chided her, "if you're going to insist on pushing yourself that way at your age, you're going to have to expect these things."

"I assure you, doctor," Malana insisted, sitting up on the plain examination table and putting her light silk blouse - a present from Sue - back on, "that I had no reason to expect to suddenly go flying across the engine room."

"He meant the soreness and stiffness you feel from the injury, madame," Inillien's doctor, Wallo, informed her. They were treating their all too cranky patient in Inillien's sick bay. Achmed had been

relieved to discover that very little magic went into the treatment of common injuries. The Lano preferred to let their bodies heal themselves where possible, helping them along with simple antiseptics and bandages. They used magic only when absolutely necessary.

Since casual contact had been established, Achmed and Wallo had been spending their days together learning each other's medical techniques. So far, the greatest difference in their nonsurgical techniques was in the chemical composition of their medicines. Their first discovery was that ibuprofen was a popular painkiller to both races, but that aspirin was a strong hallucinogen to the Lano and that acetaminophen, long disused by humans, did nothing but leave a bad taste in a Lano mouth. Other medicines tended to be poisonous more often than not, but Achmed and Wallo continued to compile dual species cross-references.

"It happened yesterday," she grimaced. "I used to heal faster than that."

"You also used to be a young girl, capable of breaking every heart in Larulien with a well-calculated sigh."

Malana affected a hurt look and asked, "You mean I can't anymore."

Wallo laughed and replied courteously, "I meant that now the petty conquests of a collection of shallow lieutenants are probably beyond your consideration."

She smiled and patted his cheek almost fondly. "You know, we might just make a courtier out of you yet."

"No blinding way!" he replied, laughing again at her suggestion.

She got back to the subject, "So is there nothing you can do for my back?"

"There's no bone nor cartilage damage, just a few minor bruises."

"They don't feel so minor from my side of the pain. Come on, a simple healing spell?"

"That could eventually lead to other complications," Wallo warned her, "and you know that or you would have healed yourself already. You know those spells better than I do."

"I'm not an expert in that area and one does like to get a professional opinion."

"Well, in my professional opinion you should take a few days off, but you probably won't, will you?" She smiled false guilelessness at him. "I didn't think so," he muttered sourly. "Very well. Three fifteen minute sessions in the Soma today and tomorrow. After that I'll examine you again."

"The Soma? Is that all? It's just a general health spell."

"Exactly. That's all you need."

"If you'd rather, you may have a session or two in one of Meriwether's Soma units," Achmed offered. "I'd have to deactivate the drug option, but the physical rather than magical massage might help."

"Thank you, doctor," Malana replied warmly. "Perhaps I shall, but right now I'll use one here." She let herself down from the examination table and stepped into the next room. A moment later the two doctors

heard the Soma door close followed by a low hum, indicating that the unit was in operation.

"Tough little lady," Achmed remarked lightly.

"Indeed," Wallo agreed. "Always has been."

"You've known her a long time, have you?"

"Oh yes," Wallo chuckled. "Back at the University, I had a course in political studies with her in my junior year. We spent a fair amount of time together before our careers took us in different directions. That was a long time ago - forty-five years or so by your reckoning if I understand correctly," he added after thinking it out. "That was one of the toughest classes I ever had to take, but I must admit that, unlike most high-born, she never held my lack of status against me."

"Lack of status?" Achmed echoed.

"You have noticed that masculine names among my kind usually include the word 'Ki' in the middle? It means 'son of'. 'Di' means 'daughter of' by the way. My name is simply Wallo. On formal occasions I might be called Wallo Bi Lano, but 'Bi Lano' just means 'born of the Lano'. It's a polite way of saying, 'started out worthless.'

"We inherit our rank and status from our parents. Later, of course, our own accomplishments mean more than our inherited status, but as a foundling child I had no such head start. A bastard child is usually given the benefit of the doubt and is accorded a sort of neutrality. A foundling, on the other hand, has negative value since it is tacitly assumed that even his parents didn't want him.

"It takes a lot of money to get a higher education so most who attend and teach tend to be fairly highly ranked," Wallo continued, "but I was smart enough and lucky enough to get a scholarship. Even so, I was shunned at first by many of the students, and faculty members went a bit harder on me. Class consciousness is a difficult thing to lose."

"So Malana cut you some slack?" Achmed asked.

"Cut me some slack?" Wallo repeated. "Interesting phrase. No, I wouldn't go so far as to say that she made any special allowances, just treated me like she would anyone else, on my own merits not those I may or may not have inherited. She almost managed to talk me into a career in public service, but I wanted to be a doctor, so here I am."

In the next room, they heard the Soma turn off and the door open up again. A moment later Malana entered Wallo's examination room and announced, "I feel much better now. Oh well, back to work!"

"Knock, knock!" Lani called out happily as she opened the door to Jerry's cabin. As the second greatest shareholder in Meriwether Explorations, he rated a small suite - a private bedroom, bathroom, and an office. "Anyone home?"

There was no answer so she slipped in and closed the outer door behind her. The office was a small room but it comfortably held Jerry's desk, three chairs and a wall covered with full bookshelves.

Looking around she saw a pile of papers on his desk next to one of those mysterious computer terminals the humans seemed so dependant on. The Lano had spell devices used to calculate course adjustments and others to make note of the consumption rate of nonrenewable onboard resources. Navigational recorders kept track of their current position in space and sensors reported a wide variety of conditions both in and outside the ship, but the Lano had never felt they needed an omnibus device comparable to the humans' computer. Chief Erich had tried to explain how they worked to her, but she had been too busy enjoying the large man's proximity and comparing him to the other human men to listen all that closely. It was all Thalirip anyway, wasn't it?

Jerry was nowhere in sight, but she noticed over one hundred holographs and several pencil sketches pinned to the wall beside Jerry's desk. The holos were pinned on in layers. The ones closest to the wall seemed to be of asteroids and strange, alien worlds, sometimes with humans in the pictures, but never as the subjects. Over these holos, however, pictures of Lano had been attached. One of two of the images had been posed for, but most were just people at work by themselves. or with others of both species.

The pencil sketches, however, were something else. They were all portraits. One was a dual portrait of the two captains side by side. It was an interesting study in contrasts, Lani thought. Another compared Sue Ho and Eesai in profile, face to face, but in spite of the obvious physical differences, Jerry thought they had a lot in common and it came out in his drawing. They almost looked like sisters. To Lani's surprise, she found a portrait of herself featured as the centerpiece between the rest.

Does he really see me like that? she wondered as she studied herself through Jerry's eyes. The La in the sketch seemed to be yearning for something unreachable. Her eyes were just a little too wide and her lips gave the impression of being in the process of forming a kiss. She wrenched her eyes away from the portrait, aware that she had been starting to imitate the expression it depicted.

Then she quietly opened the door to Jerry's bedroom and peeked inside. The room was dark but she instantly noticed that Jerry was asleep on top of his bed. The poor dear must have been exhausted, Lani thought for he was still completely dressed. She was about to shut the door quietly again when it occurred to her that she really ought to cover him up at least.

There was a light blanket that had been kicked to the floor, so she picked it up and draped it over the sleeping anthropologist. He stirred and let out a soft groan as she did that. When he settled back to sleep she started to leave the room, but as she reached the door, she looked back at him. He was so appealing, and really what would be the harm? So instead of leaving the room, she merely shut the door and gently climbed into the bed with him.

He grunted an almost incoherent, "Huh?" but she shushed him, wrapping one arm around him. He fell asleep again almost at once as Lani lay there almost breathing him in.

Human men all smell good, she thought happily, but Jerry smells best of all!

"Lilla," Eesai asked on noticing the younger La's discomfort, "what's bothering you?" They were in the ready room near the airlock bridge between the two ships and slipping into emergency pressure suits. The suits carried only fifteen minutes worth of air, but except for the first meeting between the captains they were required by anyone crossing from one ship to the other. Safety first.

"Does it show?" Lilla asked, sealing the front of her suit.

"With big bright lights and fireworks to boot, and it seems to get worse every time you have to go over to Meriwether."

"Sorry. I'll try to keep my fears to myself," Lilla replied, licking her dry lips in a vain attempt to still her terror.

"Fear? Fear of what? The humans? They're just very nice people, most of them, even if they do look a little strange."

"It's not that. Well, maybe that's part of it. I've never been particularly comfortable in strange territory. That's part of why I signed up for the courier service. Everything's written out for us in the manual and we never go exploring. Just a nice, comfortable job with enough variety to keep from suffering mind-rot. Then this had to happen. Aliens," she shivered.

"People," Eesai corrected her, "like you and me."

Lilla shook her head and shivered. "Aliens," she repeated. "I keep trying to tell myself that they're like us. On the conscious level I've even convinced myself of that several times, but they're so big!" She shivered again. "And just when I start getting used to them, they say or do something that drives home just how different they are."

"If you feel that way about them," Eesai asked, "why haven't you requested to be taken off this assignment? Sermi has almost nothing to do with the humans these days."

"Sermi's a fool," Lilla snapped, then looked embarrassed at her outburst. "He hates them just because they aren't Lano. He's like their second engineer, Kelly. He hates us because we're not human. I try to avoid them, but I don't hate them. They do scare me, however, and my Mom always told me I should confront my fears head-on."

"Get to know them better," Eesai assured her, "and they won't bother you anymore. You might even come to like them. You seem to get along with Sue quite well."

"I like Sue," Lilla admitted nervously. "She's sort of like everyone's sister. I can almost forget that her skin is so pale and that she towers over all but a couple of Lani's engineers."

Eesai chuckled. "Maybe that's why Lani likes the human men so much."

"What?"

"She hand-picked her engineers, you know. Four of them are muscular giants, nearly six feet tall. I guess she likes big men. Now along comes Meriwether and most of the men are tall and muscular by our standards. She says they smell nice too, although I've never noticed much difference."

"Some people like the unknown," Lilla murmured. "I just have to face it."

"Well, if you have to, let's put on our helmets and go. The sooner I can take this suit back off again, the better."

Lilla nodded her agreement.

Eleven

"All right," Malana sighed. "Button it up, plug it in, and we'll try again."

"Yes, ma'am," a Lano engineer replied, and started assembling the black box device Malana and Erich had cobbled together.

"What do you think, Erich?" she asked as they got out of the way.

"I don't fully understand your magic, Malana," he replied, "but from what you tell me, this should work."

"We couldn't have done it without you," she replied. "I never would have guessed that we could manipulate the polarity of the monopoles, nor that the effect would be so... so out of proportion to the normal magnetic field strength. To think that a single ounce would be enough to power this entire ship, it's absolutely amazing."

"The discovery of monopoles created a small revolution in our technology," Erich conceded, "although none of our devices on Meriwether are up-to-date enough to use them."

"Why not? I'd have thought an exploration ship needs the very best equipment."

"It does, but we put our money into sensors and analyzers. Monopoles are mainly used in propulsion units and other power applications, and our old fashioned engines move us while generating sufficient power for our needs, even if they aren't anywhere near as efficient as the newer drives."

"That sounds reasonable," Malana allowed, "although I have a few ideas of ways monopoles could be used in some sensors at least."

"Really? Tell me about it. Successful inventions bring a lot of money and while I'm obligated by my contract with Meriwether, Inc, to sell anything I come up with to the company, we'd still get a high initial price and generous royalties."

"Let's discuss it later over cocktails," Malana suggested.

"But if this works, won't you be leaving right away?"

"Inillien won't leave for at least a day in any case, and if Captain Anspach will have me, I believe I would like to travel to Earth."

"Earth? Why?"

"To begin negotiations for treaties and trade agreements, of course. That's my real specialty, you know. I'm an ambassador and an arbitrator. Oh good," she said suddenly. "There's Lani. I hoped she'd come on duty before we tested the drive. I tried contacting her in her cabin, but she was nowhere on Inillien."

"That's odd, she left my engine room hours ago. Said she was just going to see Jerry about something and then come back here. Wonder what's got her so down."

"She went to see Jerry?" Malana smiled. "That explains her depression. She's frustrated."

"Huh? You mean she and Jerry were..." he trailed off. Lani was cute, most Lano women were cute to Erich, but he felt no sexual attraction to any of them.

"I mean she and Jerry were not," Malana replied. "That's something Sue and I discussed early on. Our two species may look alike, but we aren't anatomically compatible. We just don't fit."

"I'm surprised it even came up. No offense, but to me Lano women may be physically attractive, but they have all the sex appeal of a grapefruit."

"We're totally alien species to one another," Malana pointed out. "Why should there be any attraction?"

"Why do we look so much alike, for that matter?" Erich asked. "That's been one of the big questions since we met."

"Why not? Bipedal motion and hands featuring opposable thumbs is obviously a viable form for sentient life."

"Maybe, but there were primitive creatures with opposable thumbs millions of years before the first men walked the earth. For that matter, man's immediate ancestors walked erect long before they learned to make tools or use fire. Sentience developed later. Much later, and there are theoretical models for other, just as likely sentient forms."

"Then perhaps it's best we ran into each other before encountering something truly alien," Malana laughed. "Poor Lani," she said sympathetically as the despondant engineer approached. "Was he at least understanding?" Lani looked at her sadly, determined not to cry and managed not to even as Malana hugged her comfortingly.

"It's not fair," she complained. "He smells so good. There just must be a way!"

"Then maybe you'll find it," Malana told the younger La. "In the meantime, however, we're about to test the new exciter. Is that nearly ready?" she asked the assistant engineer who was just inserting the box into its slot in the drive shaft."

"Just have to strap it in, ma'am," he replied. "There," he said a minute later.

"Care to do the honors?" Malana asked Lani.

She nodded and activated the intercom, "Engineering to Bridge. All systems ready for exciter test. Do we have go?"

"Again so soon?" Alano's voice filled the air in the engine room. Surprise was quickly brought under control and he replied, "Affirmative. Test at will."

"Aye, sir," Lani replied with her hand hovering over the activator, "Test commences now." She made a spell gesture over the panel and all hell broke loose.

Sue and Serafyma stood just inside the airlock, waiting to greet Eesai and Lilla. Traffic between the two ships had become routine and neither ship continued to post security guards by the airlocks, but Sue liked to meet Eesai at the lock when she knew her friend was coming over. Eesai particularly appreciated Sue's courtesy because Sue insisted on wearing an emergency suit too, even though she didn't have to. It was a nice gesture and a very Lano one that Sue had picked up on almost from the start.

Sue also insisted that if she had to suit up, so did anyone else who was with her, so both she and Serafyma were fully suited as Eesai and Lilla swam into view and floated through the tunnel.

Suddenly the tunnel stretched off at a sharp angle and broke off near the Inillien's end. Meriwether rocked violently beyond the ability of the Matsuya-Tron field to compensate and the airlock door snapped shut behind Sue and Serafyma even as the sudden evacuation shoved them into the wildly twisting tunnel.

Someone was screaming in Sue's ear, and she realized it was Serafyma who was also clinging to her for dear life as they floated towards the mouth of the tunnel. Sue wrenched herself free, and unable to slap her companion out of hysteria, settled for locking her hands around Serafyma's upper arms and giving her a quick shake. The action calmed the other woman down and she stopped screaming.

"Serafyma," Sue asked, via the suits' radios, "Are you all right?"

"I think so," she gasped. "What happened?"

"Haven't the foggiest, but I think one of the ships suddenly flew off." Sue twisted about and grabbed onto one of the wire ribs of the bridge, bringing them both to a halt. Serafyma followed suit and looked around.

"Without warning?" Serafyma asked. "At least we're still attached to Meriwether. Oh my God! Where's Eesai and Lilla?" The mouth of the tunnel was close and all they could see through that end were stars.

"Maybe they're with Inillien," Sue said uncertainly. "Meriwether," she said, activating her suit-to-ship communicator, "This is Sue. What's going on out here?"

"Inillien just took off like a bat out of Hell, with the skipper and Erich on board, I might add," Chen informed her. "Where are you anyway?"

"Outside," Sue replied, then sarcastically added, "Serafyma and I decided to take a brisk stroll around the ship."

"Is that you floating around at four o'clock."

"Negative. We're in the tunnel. That must be Eesai and Lilla out there. Commencing rescue procedures. Send back-ups."

"You got it," Chen agreed and began issuing orders that Sue and Serafyma paid only the vaguest attention to.

Together, the two women made their way to the ragged mouth of the tunnel and looked out. The tunnel was still waving back and forth, but the flexible, pendulum-like motion had abated greatly.

"There they are," Serafyma pointed at two dwindling figures. "I'll go first." That was reasonable; she had more EVA experience than Sue did.

"Careful," Sue warned Serafyma as she eased herself out of the tunnel. "Some of these edges are pretty sharp and these suits aren't all that strong."

"Don't worry," came the reply even as a sharp bit of wire passed within an inch of Serafyma's leg. "I know what I'm doing."

Famous last words, Sue kept the sour thought to herself and then eased herself out of the tunnel. The humans' suits all had attitude and propulsion jets. Only a few of the Lano suits came so equipped and none had been used since the bridge had been installed. However, using the humans' suits' propulsion units would reduce their air supply. Timing would be critical.

Sue, keeping one eye on Eesai's and Lilla's tumbling forms and another on her air supply, stopped using her jets when she realized that she and Serafyma were visibly gaining on their targets. Time slowed as they drifted away from Meriwether and the next three minutes took forever to pass until they finally caught up to the two Lano.

Sue pressed her helmet to Eesai's and asked, "How are you?"

"We're both fine," came the distant sounding reply. "Thank the gods your suits have propulsion."

"They do," Sue replied, "but I'm not sure we have enough left to get back now. The jets use up our breathing air."

"Not a problem," Sue heard Jerry's voice over her radio. "just hold tight and I'll pick you up in a minute or two with the pinnacle." Sue looked back at the ship in time to see the pinnacle detach itself and head toward them.

"There, there," she heard Serafyma saying. "You're going to be all right. See? Here comes Jerry in plenty of time." Sue glance over to see Lilla clinging tightly to Meriwether's chemist. The frightened La didn't completely let go until well after they were safely on board Meriwether-1.

Twelve

"Affirmative," Alano replied with a here-we-go-again grin directed at Captain Anspach. "Test at will." After the first dozen failed attempts, the Lano captain had adopted a laid-back philosophy. Between the

two ships there were plenty of consumables - air, food, and energy - to keep them comfortable for a year if need be, although he had to admit that their diets would lose anything resembling variety over the second six months. He cut off the intercom and turned back to Anspach. "Freshen that coffee for you, Clark?"

"Please," Anspach nodded from an overstuffed chair.

A moment later Inillien lurched wildly, shoving Anspach deeper into the padded chair and throwing Alano halfway across the room to be intercepted only by the apricot-colored wall. The duroglass coffee pot bounced off the wall as Alano's grip slackened and it fell to the floor where the steaming, dark brown liquid soaked into the self-cleaning carpet. The Lano captain slid, semiconscious, to the floor.

"Alano?" Anspach called as he jumped out of his seat. The ship's violent acceleration had lasted only a moment, but that one moment, occurring without warning, was enough.

Alano groaned as Anspach approached. Then every lesser noise was drowned out by the red alert siren that screamed throughout Inillien. Almost immediately a dozen calls came over the intercom. Anspach tried to answer them and to call for help for his friend, but the on-off switch, like all others onboard, was activated by Lano thalirip.

Instead, he shoved the cabin door open. Thank God they use doorknobs, he thought. "Hey, you!" he called to a panicked-looking La. "Come here and work the intercom for me." The young man, relieved to have someone telling him what to do, came immediately and on seeing his captain, called first Doctor Wallo and then the bridge.

Sermi Ki Ferditchi, third sub-captain and officer on duty on the bridge, immediately drew the wrong conclusions and assumed they were under attack. He sounded the alarms and gave orders he had always fantasized about giving.

"Arm all weapons!" he commanded. "Lock on the human ship!"

"I doubt that I can, sir," Michti Ki Wisso said uncertainly, "Meriwether is not on any of our instruments."

"What?"

"Aye, sir." Michti confirmed. "In fact we seem to be moving away from that system at twenty point oh one seven hadra." There was a note of awe in the pilot's voice. Standard cruising speed was ten hadra and the speed record for a racing sloop was less than fourteen.

"Nonsense!" Sermi scoffed. "There's not a ship in the fleet that can go that fast, even theoretically."

"Obviously we're using the wrong theories, sub-captain," Michti replied, "because we're at twenty point oh two and accelerating. See for yourself."

Before he could do just that, however, calls started coming into the bridge with damage reports and he

made some calls himself to the Captain's cabin. When a reply finally came that the captain was one of the two dozen injured, Sermi, convinced this was some sort of trap, ordered the arrest of all humans on board.

"What the blinding hell is going on?" Meco Ki Taralano stormed as he got to the bridge. He was looking a bit bruised and his uniform was torn, but was otherwise all right.

"We're under attack," Sermi replied.

"We are not," Michti contradicted him. Sermi was four years Michti's junior and in the Space Navy those four years were critical in the knowledge of what he could and could not do. Disagreeing with a panic-crazed junior officer was high on the list of things he shouldn't do, but could get away with. Meco turned to the pilot. "He thinks the humans are attacking us, but that just isn't so. We're light-years away from them and headed away at record speed. Really record speed!" he added pointing at his display.

"Fascinating," Meco murmured after glancing at the pilot's board. "What are the damage reports?"

"Damages are light, fortunately," Michti reported, "although nearly half the crew suffered minor abrasions and contusions, the captain was knocked unconscious, and Wallo suspects there may be a few broken bones, but he's far too busy to report at the moment."

"Understandable. Can we bring the ship about and head back to Meriwether?"

"Aye, aye, sir," Michti responded and started fiddling with his instruments. "Decelerating now. We should be back within the fidrel."

"Thank you, pilot. Proceed. Sermi, calm down and take us off red alert. I'm going to find out what happened."

Meco walked purposefully off the bridge and headed for the lift shaft. The shaft was otherwise occupied, so he used the circular stairs to get to the engine room near the stern of the ship. Expecting to find chaos, he opened the door carefully. Instead, he found Malana calmly administering first aid to most of the engineers.

"It was all my fault," Lani admitted dejectedly, sitting on the floor with her arm in a sling. "I didn't realize that the engines were still power-linked to the sails. They should have automatically disengaged when the exciter failed, but I still should have checked."

"Yes, you should have," Meco agreed, "but I probably would have made the same mistake. We expect automatic features to work automatically."

"I would have expected Serafyma to pull a stunt like this," Erich laughed, seated next to Lani. "She's Meriwether's token... What's the word Jerry uses? Klutz! That's it. She's our token klutz."

"What's a klutz?" Lani asked in spite of herself.

"Somebody who's just naturally clumsy," he explained.

"Odd that I never picked up that word," Malana muttered nearby.

"That's because it isn't a Terrañol word. It's from a much older language called Yiddish. Aside from a

word or phrase or two nobody on Meriwether speaks it but Jerry and even he doesn't claim to be fluent."

"Still any language with a special word for a clumsy person ought to be worth learning," Malana opined. "I'll have to talk to Jerry about it."

"How badly was everyone hurt?" Lani asked Meco hesitantly.

"I don't think anyone died," Meco replied. "There seem to be a lot of minor cuts and bruises, and the captain seems to have been knocked out."

"Oh dear," she fretted.

"I'll be stopping by sick bay next. Are there enough healthy people to run Engineering?" he asked Malana.

"Lani's the only one with a broken arm and her assistants can hold on until the next shift. In fact the only ones who need to get to sick bay right away are Lani and Erich."

"Erich? What happened to you?"

"Bumped my head against the engine shaft," he replied gamely.

"Left a dent in it too," Lani grinned for the first time.

"Malana thinks I'm okay but she wants Doc Wallo to check me out for concussion," Erich concluded. "Sorry about the shaft, though."

"All right, if you're ready I'll go with you, just in case."

"I'm coming too," Malana told him. "Lani needs your help more than Erich does. She twisted her ankle as well."

"You've done well," Alano commended Meco in the captain's cabin not too long after, "and I'm going to put that in the log, but Sermi and I are going to have a long talk about keeping one's head in a crisis. Thank the gods Michti kept his wits. Would you go and take command up there, please?" Meco nodded and left. "And, Chief," Alano continued to Lani, "I don't think I'll bother to put a reprimand on your record."

"Thank you, captain," she replied gratefully. Then, "Why not?"

Alano chuckled, then grimaced and held his taped ribs with the one arm that hadn't been broken. "Well, for one thing it was an understandable mistake and I wouldn't want to detract from the glory of having been chief engineer on the first ship to break twenty hadra."

"You're kidding, right?"

Alano shook his head. "Michti told me as soon as I was well enough to contact the bridge. Congratulations all around. I assume you'd like to announce it to your people."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, but Malana and Erich did more than I did."

"With your permission and supervision," Malana told her. "And don't down play your role. You made several key modifications to our initial attempts without which we might never have succeeded."

"Then it was a team effort and you and Erich deserve equal credit."

"Then remember to put our names on the paper you're going to write about the new exciter," Malana told her gently.

"Paper?"

"Of course. You'll want to publish it in one of the trade journals."

"But I haven't written a paper since I graduated."

"Sorry, but neither Erich nor I will be around to help out. I spoke to Captain Anspach a little while ago and he agreed to give me passage to Earth."

"Madame Malana," Alano said formally, "I am officially responsible for your safety until you arrive on Treloi. Why haven't you told me about your plans until now?"

"Haven't had a chance and I didn't want to bring it up until I was certain I had a ride."

"I can't allow it," Alano told her stubbornly.

"You can't stop me," Malana told him defiantly. The hell of it was she was right. He was responsible for her, but she out-ranked him.

"Then Inillien will take you to Earth."

"Captain Anspach won't give you the coordinates and I won't ask him to. And," she added thinking of the obvious retort, "you won't make any friends if you follow us there."

"Will you allow me to assign one of my people to you for your security?"

"That depends on who you have in mind," she told him.

"Chief of Security Kollé Ki Marka," Alano replied firmly. If he was going to send a body guard it ought to be the strongest La onboard. Kollé stood almost six feet tall and was as strong as any human they had met and, even better, unlike Lani's engineers he was a trained fighter.

"Out of the question," Malana told him flatly.

"What do you mean, 'Out of the question?'"

"Just that. I will not be followed around on an alien world by a gorilla while I'm attempting to open negotiations."

"Gorilla?" Alano asked, awash to the term.

"An Earth creature, I understand. Very large and very strong, distantly related to humans, but not sentient."

Alano wanted to tell her that Kolle was quite intelligent, but he was interrupted.

"Coming up on Meriwether, sir," Michti's voice sounded over the intercom.

"Good," He replied. "Let me know when we've docked again."

"I'd better get back to Engineering," Lani said suddenly. "I can still supervise even with a cane and my arm in a cast." She left before Alano could say otherwise.

Then he turned back to Malana and realized that he had lost ground during the break in their argument. "Who would you rather have?" he asked at last.

"Eesai," Malana replied. "She's smart and pretty. She likes humans and they seem to like her as well. She'll serve as well as security and better as a secretary, which I need more than protection anyway."

"Eesai's my first officer. I can't spare her." Alano thought he could be as stubborn as Malana. He was wrong. It took another day to argue it out, but in the end Malana got her way.

Part II Can We Talk?

One

The two captains had decided to have one last quiet drink together before going their separate ways, but their crews had other ideas and a large impromptu party broke out in Inillien's wardroom.

*

"Oh Eesai," Lilla gushed in one corner. "What an assignment! I wish I could be going with you."

"That's not the way you were talking the other day," Eesai pointed out.

"I was silly," Lilla admitted, "and you were right. They're people just like us." She leaned closer and said in conspiratorial tones, "Serafyma and I want to take the oath of adoption. We'll be sisters. Will you witness?"

"Of course, and congratulations! When?"

*

"Jerry," Lani greeted him warmly, wrapping her arms around him as well as the cast would allow and kissing him passionately. After a few moments of hesitation he returned the gesture and the emotion. "When will we see each other again?" she asked dreamily when they finally broke the embrace.

"That all depends on what happens on Earth and Treloi," he replied cautiously.

"And on my next assignment," she agreed sadly. "As chief engineer I go where my ship goes, but Meriwether can make regular trips to Lano worlds, can it not?"

"Assuming we're granted the permits, we'll be in on a regular basis. Merchanting is more of a sure thing than exploration."

"Good. Kiss me again," she slipped a small oblong object from out of a belt purse and then wrapped herself around him again. "Mm, nice!" she murmured when they were done. Here, this is for you." the oblong turned out to be a three-dimensional portrait of Lani encased in glass. "It will help you remember me," she concluded. "See this contact patch up here? Just touch it and..."

*

"I notice a few conspicuous absences today," Anspach observed to Alano.

"Likewise. I thought it would be best to have certain malcontents on duty while the rest of us are saying our goodbyes."

"We do think alike," Anspach agreed. At that moment Sermi Ki Ferditchi was pulling his second shift on the bridge, along with anyone else Alano was not completely sure of how they felt toward the humans. Anspach had likewise arranged to have John Kelly and several of his cohorts on duty running through a last-minute check list aboard Meriwether-1. "You know," Alano continued, "the Trelendir aren't likely to grant you the exclusive trading rights you're asking for."

"I'd be surprised if they did," Anspach laughed. "But I have to start haggling somewhere."

"Haggling with the government," Alano mused. "It's an interesting concept. I doubt any La has ever tried it."

"I'll settle for something equivalent to preferred trading status, say maybe tax-exempt for a decade or two, or maybe exclusivity concerning certain trade items. Why? Don't you think such a ploy will work?"

"Can't honestly say," Alano admitted. "It's never been tried - not with a government. Dickering is a standard procedure on many worlds in the marketplace, but trading permits are fairly well set. Governments negotiate with governments. Individuals negotiate with individuals."

"Those permits are for citizens of the Trelendir," Anspach replied. "You told me that yourself. This is an entirely different situation, or might be anyway. Meriwether, Inc. is a corporation, not an individual."

"It might be different," Alano agreed, "but there's no telling what the politicians might say, or how they'll react to no longer being the sole masters of creation."

"Tell me about it," Anspach chuckled ruefully.

"Well, I'll do what I can for you there," Alano promised.

"It might help if you point out that I've already extended them credit in the matter regarding those monopolies."

"It probably will, although they'll want to pay you back in permits and such. Are those monopolies really that expensive or is that just another ploy? We only used ten percent of your cargo."

"Really they are. I expect they'll want to check that with the Terran Commodities Exchange before they pay, and they may take as long as they need, as long as they're willing to pay interest after our next rendezvous. Considering the marked improvement in ship speed, they're getting a bargain at twice the price."

"Excuse me, captains," Eesai interrupted the conversation, "but we'll need you two for a short ceremony."

*

"We've already moved your things to Meriwether," Sue informed Malana. "I hope the accommodations will be up to your standards."

"I'm sure they will be, dear," Malana replied, patting Sue's hand like an old aunt.

"Actually we made up a suite out of two ordinary cabins with an adjoining bathroom. Eesai will have a similar arrangement just across the hall from you."

"That sounds lovely, dear. We're not putting anyone out, are we? I can only use one room at a time after all."

"Not at all. For its size, Meriwether is actually understaffed. It used to be a military cruiser with a crew of over one hundred. Most of the crew's quarters have been converted to cargo bays, but we left enough private cabins for a crew half again our size. Now is there anything else you'll need before we leave?"

"No, dear," Malana replied serenely. "Why don't you just enjoy the party?"

*

Serafyma Ivanoff and Lilla Di Lasai stood facing each other within a thick ring of onlookers and formally adopted each other into each other's families. The union was sealed in the Lano tradition by Captain Alano and a formal document of adoption, legally binding within the Terran Confederation, was hastily drawn up and sealed by Captain Anspach. The bond was also witnessed by Eesai and Sue, who observed that perhaps they should have conducted the ceremony while floating freely in space. Laughs all around; everyone knew about the rescue following Inillien's abrupt departure. Then the circle of well-wishers closed in to congratulate the pair.

*

The party was beginning to wind down and Captains Alano and Anspach found themselves face-to-face once more with drinks in their hands.

"Until we meet again, Alano," Anspach toasted his friend.

"One year as you call it, Clark," Alano confirmed. Then, as one, the two men drained their cups.

*

"Here's hoping we meet again, Doctor Wallo," Achmed toasted his colleague with only a slight amount of slurring.

"Indeed, Doctor MacGregor. Perhaps next time it can be on Treloi. There is a place by a small waterfall that you would find as pleasant as I do, I'm sure."

"Or on Earth," Achmed replied. "Here's to future meetings." They each drank his own carefully marked drink. "Tell me," he continued. "How do you think the Lano people will view us. I noticed that not everyone onboard Inillien was particularly happy to see us and I must admit that there were a fair number on Meriwether who would be just as glad had we never met."

"Xenophobes," Wallo noted in Lani. "Those afraid of people who are different." Achmed nodded. "Miss Ho told me, not too long ago, about an ancient Terran curse, 'May you live in interesting times.' My friend, I see interesting times ahead for both of us."

"Well then," Achmed raised his glass once more, "here's to interesting times!" Wallo shrugged and finished his drink.

Two

"Farewell and Godspeed, Inillien," Chen Li said fervently into his microphone as the two ships moved apart.

"May the gods bless you until we meet again, Meriwether," came the reply over the recently established radio link.

"Interstellar drive ready," Sue reported, "and Inillien is safely away."

"Then we might as well be too," Anspach replied, with a touch of sadness. "Out and away."

The low hum of Meriwether's engines filled the ship as the Matsuya-Tron field built up potential. Then the ship became suddenly quiet and the view of the surrounding stars dimmed as the ship slipped off the confining laws of Einsteinian space and moved forward toward her destination at what the general public still called trans-light speeds.

The vista on the view screens and through the portholes did not quite shift visibly but the ship was moving at three light-years per day and would be home within the month.

"Drive engaged and course laid in," Sue reported. That wasn't anything the captain did not already know, but as an ex-military man, he preferred running his ship by the book.

"Thank you," Anspach replied, then turned to his two guests. "Madame Malana, First Sub-captain Eesai, welcome aboard. As it happens you're the first two passengers we've ever carried. I believe it is customary to invite you to my cabin for a quick drink to celebrate the beginning of the voyage. Would you care to join me?"

"Of course, captain," Malana replied politely, all the while thinking that she had already had too much aboard Inillien. Oh well, she thought, when on Quorloi...

Jerry was also on the bridge as well, mostly because there was room and he didn't have anything else to do at the moment. At Anspach's nod, he joined them in the captain's cabin.

Anspach was promptly deep in conversation with Malana regarding Lano customs and the likelihood of doing business in the Trelendir, which left Eesai and Jerry in search of a conversation.

"I've been meaning to ask," Jerry admitted at last, "just what does Inillien mean in Lani?"

"It's a very old word," Eesai replied, "not commonly used in modern Lani. But I believe it means 'adventure.'"

"Not quite," Malana spoke up, having overheard them. "The word carries overtones of something monumental. A more accurate translation would be a 'great undertaking' or some such."

Jerry thought of something and chuckled suddenly.

"What's so funny?" Anspach asked before either of the Lano could.

"It's a long story," Jerry replied unhelpfully, "from the late Twentieth Century. You'd have to be a science fiction fan to get it though."

"Science fiction?" Eesai asked as Malana and the captain returned to their own conversation.

"Yes," Jerry replied, "A type of human fiction. Definitions vary as they will, but many will tell you it deals with technology and its effect on people. That definition ignores whole sub-genres, I suppose, but it will do for now."

"We have stories that deal similarly with magic."

"We would classify that as fantasy," Jerry informed her in mid-sentence.

"But I don't recall anyone singling them or any other sort of story out as a special form of fiction," Eesai concluded. "It's either fiction or nonfiction, isn't it?"

"Remind me to tell you about docudramas sometime," he replied. "I guess that's just another difference between us. Humans, or at least humans of the modern culture represented by the Terran Confederation, like to classify just about everything. In this case it helps us find the sort of stories we enjoy reading."

"Normally I'd think such over-organization was the product of a diseased mind," Eesai admitted carefully, but when you put it that way, it does sound reasonable. Do you have any of this fiction on board?"

"I have a modest collection in my cabin," Jerry admitted. "Interested?"

"Well, I have been trying to learn how to read Terrañol, but all Sue's been able to provide me with are some of her technical manuals. It's interesting, I suppose, but dry, and the jargon is hard to follow. Perhaps a story or two will help me learn faster or at least keep me from nodding off."

"Let's go then," he suggested. They were midway to his cabin when a thought struck him. "I'd better warn you. Over half my collection - some of the best stuff - is in English and printed on old-fashioned paper. Terrañol is about half derived from English so, at best, you'll probably be able to struggle through the descriptions on the book covers. I'll start you off on some of the newer works, but if you see something that interests you, we can scan it into the ship's computer and have it pump out a translation."

"Then you could translate it into Lani?"

"Of course, the computer speaks Lani as well as you do, but I thought you wanted to learn Terrañol."

"Oh yeah. Forgot about that for a moment, but some of the publishing houses on Treloi might be interested in purchasing the rights to human fiction. That could generate money for Meriwether, couldn't it?"

"The older stuff is public domain," Jerry replied, "and the newer works mostly belong to the authors, but I'm sure they'll be glad to hear about a new market anyway. Here we are." He paused and held the door open for her. "You'll have to excuse the clutter on my desk, I'm still working with my notes to get an article about the Lano slapped together for American Anthropology before we reach Earth. Here are the books." He indicated the left-hand wall.

"There are so many here," she noted, seeing the entire wall full of books. "What do you suggest?"

"Well, most of these are technical books and manuals - geology mostly and a few anthropological texts - all just as dry and stuffed with jargon as Sue's navigational manuals, but you'll find the fiction on the top two shelves." He studied the selection for a moment and then pulled down a dark blue, rectangular block and handed it to Eesai.

"Down Time Ltd." she read questioningly aloud. "Is it as exciting as the artwork on the cover?"

"That depends on how you feel about it, but the cover art tends to be a bit sensationalistic. Grabs the eye and makes you interested in reading the story."

"What sort of story is it?"

"Actually it's three novels in a single volume. A set of amusing and satirical tales concerning the employees of a time travel agency."

"Time travel, Jerry? Nobody can travel through time," she informed him.

"True enough," he agreed readily.

"Then why write stories about it?"

"People tend to fixate on the question, 'What if?' Such stories often deal with alternate histories - time lines where certain key events never happened or fell a different way. Haven't you ever wondered how your life might have been different if you hadn't decided to learn astronavigation?"

"Who decided?" she retorted. "I took an aptitude exam and the Navy started training me."

"How about some key event in history, a pivotal battle in a war between two evenly matched armies. One side wins and you have history the way you learned in school. What would have happened if the other side won?"

"There was such a battle not too long ago on Cereloi," Eesai admitted, "an attempted coup by a council of military officers. They eventually lost, but if they had won, they would have seceded from the Trelendir."

"Then what would have happened?" Jerry asked pointedly.

Eesai shrugged. "It's never happened, but I suppose the Trelendir would have put the pressure on until the members of the revolutionary government withdrew in favor of duly elected officers."

"Officers?"

"Every La has a military rank," Eesai replied off-handedly, "not that everybody serves, but rank determines one's pay even in the civilian - or as we call it, the inactive - sector. Promotions include a change in rank as well."

"Now why didn't I know that?" Jerry wondered aloud, mentally making a note to totally scrap the current draft of his article."

"You never asked the right questions, I guess," Eesai replied, turning the book over to study the back cover. "Most of your questions were centered on lineage, inheritance and preferred marriage customs."

"And religion," Jerry reminded her.

"And religion," she agreed, "but all that has little to do with rank once a La reaches the age of majority."

"Rank is not inherited?"

"Not in theory, but in practice a high-ranked officer's child almost never starts out lower than the equivalent of a second lieutenant. The system dates back three hundred years to our pre-colonial period. There was a pan-global war and absolutely everyone was enlisted. Once the system was in place it just never fell out of use."

"Sounds very authoritarian and inflexible," Jerry opined.

"We're used to it, and actually it's very flexible. Anyone with the ability and willingness to work hard can advance him or herself. Also all our commanders are elected. Nobody gives orders like Captain Anspach does, merely because he owns the majority of a business. Now that was a hard concept to grasp," she laughed.

"You mean Alano was elected as captain of Inillien?"

"That's right. The navy gives a crew a list of available and qualified people and they choose for themselves who they wish to follow. I was part of Alano's ticket along with the second and third sub-captains."

"How do you choose an admiral or a general?"

"Same way. Those who are qualified in number of years with command experience run for election for a five year term at the end of which they must either retire or be re-elected. We do it the same way for our civilian government, just like you do." Having finally exhausted the possibilities of the book's cover, she opened it to discover only two thick slabs of matte off-white plastic. "Short story?" she asked.

"The text is stored electromolecularly and retrieved by the manipulation of subatomic scale Matsuya-Tron fields."

"Really?" Eesai asked, feigning interest, "What's that mean in Terrañol?"

Jerry gave her an embarrassed grin and took a mental step backwards. "It means you have to turn it on. Just slide this switch here on the upper edge of the left screen. That gives you two pages - left and right - just like in an old fashioned book."

"Like Sue's manuals," Eesai concluded.

"Right. Technical manuals are usually updated every time we make port, so they're still printed on paper and mounted in loose leaf binders. The old manuals are recycled."

"How do I turn the page?"

"Just touch these little triangles at the bottom outer corners and it will either go forward or back one

page. Hold your finger down if you want to turn a lot of pages and it will turn quickly after a few seconds. This little red square at the inner top is your book mark. When it is activated like it is now, as indicated by the fact that it is solid, the book will automatically start where you left off. If for some reason you don't want to use it, press it briefly and it will become a hollow square signifying that the bookmark feature is inactive. Press and hold it for three seconds and you'll find yourself at the title page, which is the front of the book. Understand?" Eesai nodded. "Now before you start reading, I'm curious. What sort of pressure would the Trelendir have put on Cereloi?"

"Actually no colony has ever attempted to leave the Trelendir since its founding over two hundred years ago, so I could be wrong, but I believe economic sanctions would have been attempted first, probably an embargo backed up by a naval blockade. To tell the truth, I doubt it would have worked. Cereloi is a self-sufficient world so the Trelendir would have been forced to use military force and that would have been unfortunate."

"Why not let Cereloi go its own way?" Jerry asked.

"Many of us have family on Cereloi, Jerry, and we don't like the idea of their living under a nonrepresentative government. The revolution wasn't on the part of the people, it was intended to enslave them. We haven't had kings on any world in a thousand years and none of us want them now. We'd expect the other worlds of the Trelendir to do the same for us."

"All right. I'd like to talk more about your governmental system later. It sounds like I've been ignoring a major facet of Lano life."

"Anytime," Eesai agreed easily. "You'll also want to ask Malana. She can give you a real first-hand perspective on Trelendir politics. What's this?" she asked, spotting Lani's glass-encased portrait sitting at one edge of Jerry's desk-top clutter. "Did Lani give this to you?"

"Why yes she did," Jerry replied. "At the farewell party as a matter of fact. Is there a problem?"

"Maybe not," Eesai shrugged and picked the portrait up and touched the sensor at the top. She was instantly assailed by the dual passions brought about by the kiss Lani and Jerry had shared when the picture was presented. "Wow!" she murmured dreamily a minute later as she finally released her finger from the contact. Then she shook her head violently and corrected herself, "Uh oh!"

"What's wrong?"

"Jerry, do you feel anything when you touch this sensor?" she asked suspiciously.

"Uh," he replied, turning several shades of embarrassed. "Well, yes. It's some sort of magical recording of our last kiss."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to intrude on something this personal. Frankly, I didn't think Lani had charged it. You tested just as negative on magical abilities as the rest of Meriwether's crew so it would have been a waste, but somehow she managed to work it so you could feel it too and I think she amplified it a lot! Unless there's more to you humans that I think," she added with an appraising look at Jerry. Then she blinked and brought her emotions back under control. "I don't suppose she explained the significance of this gift, did she?"

"She said it was to remember her by."

"It means considerably more than that. A Lano woman gives a sensory portrait only to the man she intends to mate. If humans and Lano could actually engage in interspecies sex, she would have suggested you follow her to a more private location so she could record that. Your acceptance of the gift is a conditional agreement to her proposal."

"Conditional?"

"Assuming her family agrees and that's not usually a problem. Of course, these portraits are usually exchanged so that you each have a copy of the experience, but if I know Lani Di Ressia, she took care of that for you. Jerry, I think you're engaged."

Three

The voyage back to Earth proceeded smoothly and without incident. Erich reported just prior to their entry into the Solar System that because they had come straight back rather than puttering about in either the system in which they had met the Lano or another as they had originally planned on their way toward the Bleachers, the engines had a good chance of passing their next inspection so long as they didn't go out of their way to antagonize the inspector.

As required, they heaved to at the line of navigational buoys just inside Saturn's orbit and radioed for permission to approach the inner system. Not wanting to spoil the surprise, Anspach made no mention of his two passengers.

They waited almost three hours for the reply from Port Luna with permission and, more important, navigational data. Traffic in the asteroids and the rest of the inner system could be heavy at times and the flight controllers on Luna were often too far away to make instantaneous corrections unlike those who guided ships down to Earth.

Meriwether-1 slid smoothly into her assigned launch/landing bay and waited while the triple hatches closed above them and the bay was pressurized. Once that had been done, Anspach ordered that the airlock doors be opened and the access ramp extended. It was another two hours before the customs officials bothered to show up, leaving everyone trapped onboard.

"Took you guys long enough," Anspach grunted at the two bored-looking men as they finally walked across the boarding ramp. He had been waiting there with Ito Deshpande ever since the airlock door had been opened.

"Sorry, Clark," one of them, a tough-looking, gray-haired man who walked with a slight limp, replied, not sounding sorry in the least. "Lucky Jack Orbach's Celestial Lady came in loaded with monopoles and starstones just before you and we had everyone on inventory." Jack Orbach's company had been out twenty times now and had come back every time with huge, valuable strikes and planetary systems to claim. In contrast, Meriwether, Inc. had gained a reputation as the hard-luck boys of the business and, behind his back, Anspach was called "Crazy Clark" by the customs people, a name coined by the man who had spoken. They were old antagonists and had been sparring since they both served in the Aerospace Force.

"I see," Anspach replied coldly. "It must have been terrible for you, Jim, to have your staff reduced to

just you and one assistant." James Twoblackrocks usually had come out on top in such mind games, although Anspach prevailed more often than not in physical activities. Here in the civilian system, however, they had no base gym to slug it out in and Jim used his advantage to relentlessly dig at Anspach's repeated failures. This time, however, Clark Anspach was not about to give Jim so much as an inch.

"Hah!" Jim laughed. "They're still working on the Lady; will be for hours to come. I just decided I could use a break, so I came over to check you in. So what have you got this time?"

That hurt because, although Anspach wasn't likely to show how he felt, they had come up nearly dry the last two times in. "A few monopoles," he replied casually, "and a pair of passengers."

"Passengers?" Jim's eyebrows rose dramatically. "Good idea. That's got to pay better for you than prospecting," he remarked nastily.

"Oh," Anspach continued, feigning forgetfulness, "and a couple of systems claims."

"Of course," Jim replied.

"And an exclusive trade claim with the Trelendir."

Jim started. His face screwed up as he tried to remember who was captain aboard Trelendir. "Don't think I recall a ship by that name. Colonials?"

"Sort of," Anspach replied.

"You'll need a notarized document from them to make such a claim stick." Then a clue clicked into place. "Unless those passengers you got are representatives."

"They are. You want to meet them first or count the monopoles?"

"Boris," Jim said, turning to his assistant, "go measure the monopoles and arrange to have them registered with the Exchange." Boris nodded.

"It will show you the way," Anspach told Jim's assistant, and the two younger men disappeared into the bowels of the ship.

"Where's Jerry?" Jim asked as he and Anspach headed up ship. "Doesn't he usually handle cargo registration?"

"His business with our passengers takes priority over a few ounces of monopoles," Anspach replied.

"Why? Are you buying mineral rights from them?"

"Maybe," Anspach replied unhelpfully. Jim gave him a hard glare so he added, "We're still negotiating."

Jim sensed a mystery and was doubly annoyed at both that and the fact that Anspach had chosen to climb the stairs rather than take the lift. "So where're they from?"

"Damned if I know," Anspach replied truthfully, knowing it would irritate Jim still more. "They won't say."

Jim stopped in mid-step to stare at Anspach. "Then where'd you pick them up?"

"A small unnamed system about five parsecs due west of the Bleachers." By "west" he meant galactic west, but almost nobody ever used the entire phrase. "Are you coming?" Clark asked, continuing on.

"What the hell were they doing way out there?" Jim asked, hurrying to catch up.

"Going from one place to another, I imagine," Anspach replied serenely. His fish was firmly on the hook. Now he only had to reel him in. "Their mains broke down and we helped repair them. Naturally they were grateful."

"Clark, there aren't a lot of causes of total engine failure that a tub like Meriwether, any ship for that matter, can correct."

"We sold them some of our monopoles," Clark explained, "and after a bit of farbling, that put them right."

"Wait a minute!" Jim exclaimed suddenly, pulling at Anspach's arm. "There's not a ship outside the Force that has a monopole drive. No colony has one. I'd know!"

Clark gave him an "If you say so it must be true" look, but otherwise said nothing.

"Oh, I get it," Jim concluded, not getting it at all. "Some secret military mission you can't talk about, right?"

"You know," Clark replied, infuriatingly calm, "I never even asked."

"Of course not," Jim agreed hastily and shuddered involuntarily. "That's a good way to earn a one-way ticket to Satan's Forge. Can you tell me which ship it was?" he asked conspiratorially.

"I don't suppose that would do any harm," Anspach admitted grudgingly.

"Well?"

"Well what?" Clark asked, not so innocently enjoying himself.

"The name of the ship," Jim reminded him as they reach a landing and left the stairwell.

"Oh, that." Anspach paused to open the door to the ward room where the others waited. "Inillien."

"Gesundheit," Jim replied dryly. "Must have been using a code name. No Inillien registered in any of my books. I'd remember it." It was true Anspach realized. Jim's memory was eidetic; he could visually remember every word he ever read. Back in the Aerospace Force Academy in Sydney he used to win beers by being able to recite any passage from the Cadet's Manual, Bible, Encyclopaedia Britannica, or War and Peace. Then Jim got his first view of Malana and Eesai. "What the hell?" He blinked and then started to laugh. "You got me, Clark, old boy. Took you long enough."

"Excuse me?" Anspach asked.

"The phony aliens!" Jim laughed. "That's a good one. Really had me going there. Never thought you had

it in you."

"I beg your pardon!" Malana replied indignantly.

"I didn't have it in me," Anspach answered at the same time.

"Alien I may be," the self-appointed ambassador continued, "but I assure you there is nothing phony about me." Jim took another look at her and Eesai and started laughing again.

"I suppose you could turn him into a fliniel," Eesai suggested mildly.

"Don't talk dirty, girl," Malana told her with a wink, "We don't do that sort of thing." She paused to look appraisingly at Jim and then added regretfully, "Anymore."

"Crew members in make-up?" Jim asked Anspach between laughs.

"No," Clark replied simply. "Not really. I present Madame Malana Di Masai, senior member of the Treloian Consular Service." They had decided that was the safest way to introduce her. It would identify her as an ambassador without portfolio without implying the full negotiation powers she had not been formally granted. "And her assistant, Eesai Di Sonea, an officer of the Treloian Space Navy."

"Oh yeah?" Jim laughed again. "Treloian? Say something in Treloian."

"Take me to your leader," Malana dead-panned in Lani.

Jim blinked. "What?" She repeated the sentence then translated it for him. "Pull the other one," he scoffed, reaching out to pull off what he thought were false pointed ears.

"Ow!" Malana complained and with a casual seeming gesture flung Jim ten feet back where he slammed hard against the wall.

"Never tug on an elf's ear, Jim," Jerry laughed from the doorway.

"That's taking the joke too far," Jim retorted seriously. "The penalty for striking an officer of the customs service..."

"Is piddling compared to what that same customs official set himself up for by attacking the representative of a foreign government, Jim," Sue, standing next to Jerry, interrupted. "Are you certain you want to start throwing charges around or would you rather apologize and start over again?"

When in doubt stand on protocol, Jim thought fuzzily to himself. Let someone else decide whether they're for real. "My apologies, madame ambassador. Uh, may I see your passport, please?"

"On the table with the others," Anspach told him, "But I don't know how you're going to stamp it."

Jim looked at the table. As usual there were about twenty small aqua-covered booklets, all open to the next blank ready for Jim to stamp them back into Terra/Luna territory. However, just between Anspach's and Jerry's passports were two thick sheets of highly polished wood into which a gold and crystal medallion had been set. There was also a Lani inscription inlaid in gold on each of them, identifying the owner.

"These are passports?" he asked.

"Told you there'd be trouble," Sue commented to Eesai.

"Even if I accept them as such, how am I supposed to know they belong to you?"

"They glow when in contact with the owner," Malana replied, reaching out to put her index finger to the wood of her passport. The inset medallion began to emit a pleasant golden light. Eesai followed suit and produced the same effect with hers.

"Neat trick," Jim admitted. "But I'll have to cut an entry visa for you before I can let you leave the ship. Shouldn't be more than half an hour." He quickly stamped the normal passports, made a notation in a small notebook of his own regarding Malana's and Eesai's name and then hurried off to have their probational visas prepared.

"Damn!" Anspach swore at last, once he was certain Jim was out of earshot.

"What's wrong?" Sue asked.

"I was just thinking that maybe we should have stopped off at the Bleachers after all. I hear they grow some really good tobacco and he never once asked us if we had anything to declare. We could have had it all duty-free."

"We'll just have to keep that in mind the next time we accidentally bump into a foreign space ship and haul their ambassador back to Earth," Jerry told him seriously.

"Next time?"

Four

At 04:53 Greenwich Mean Time all across the capitol world of the Terran Confederation holovision screens suddenly stopped what they were doing, regardless of whether they had been turned on or not, and displayed this message;

INTERWORLD NEWS NETWORK

SPECIAL REPORT

"We interrupt our regular schedule," the highly trained, professional voice intoned with just a trace of urgency, "to bring you the following special report."

Every screen on Earth remained that way for precisely thirty seconds before dissolving into a pleasant view of a deep blue sky dotted with puffy white clouds. There was an oddly shaped dot just off-center that seemed to be growing larger. In the background, viewers - those who hadn't used this as an opportunity to grab a fresh bag of popcorn or whatever - could hear the light sounds of a faint breeze whispering gently through unseen leaves and the occasional chirp of bird song.

After feasting the viewers' eyes on that unedifying view for almost a full minute, the network allowed the voice-over to return and explain what was going on.

"This is Peter Evans, Interworld News, reporting from Port Wallaby, outside Sydney where just a few minutes ago we learned that Terrans have contacted the first, known, non-human, sentient race.

"That dot in the center of your screen," he continued, "is the Meriwether-1." He pronounced that name very carefully, consciously aware that his speech might later be deemed of historical significance, merely for having been the one to announce this news to the world. He had beaten out every other reporter in order to get this assignment; two he managed to get drunk, three more he bribed with everything but the promise of his first born, and one he quite literally beat out, by getting to an elevator and shoving her out of it just as the doors closed. This was nothing new. At least two or three stories came down every week that set the press corps off in a reaction not unlike a quart of type A poured into a shark tank. The winners always made their reports with thoughts of deathless prose and prestigious awards dancing before their eyes. This time it was just his turn.

"A small, obscure exploration ship of an equally small and obscure company," Peter Evans continued, "until today!" He consciously added that exclamation point with relish. "For aboard that ship are the first true aliens who will ever step forth on a world of the Terran Confederation." This was not literally true since every man, woman, or child who ever visited a world other than Earth could be called an alien, but one's alienness is rarely something that is recognized in the first person.

The camera panned down to show Evans - a tall man with wavy, dark brown hair who had his temples intentionally bleached and colored gray to give him a professionally mature look. The landing area of the space port could be seen behind him. In the distance there were several ships of various shapes and sizes sitting on paved landing pads and as Evans paused, a large supersonic sub-orbital plane landed on a runway that ran the length of the port between the landing pads. In the foreground, directly behind Evans, was an empty landing pad on which a broad red carpet had been rolled out. A dual line of security police stood along either side of the carpet ostensibly to keep the crowd back, but since the crowd had been hastily assembled by eager blazer-clad teenagers - pages for the Confederation government - using bored and waiting passengers who had been given no inkling as to what was going on, there was very little chance of their trying to break through the security line.

When the impromptu crowd had arrived to stand in some proximity to the red carpet, they found that a small brass band had preceded them and was standing around looking just as bored as the passengers were. For entertainment, they were able to watch half a dozen workmen putting the finishing touches on a hastily erected platform draped with banners in the colors of the Terran Confederation. Finally, just before the cameras had turned on, a plastic decal bearing the seal of the Vice President of Terra was applied to a rostrum and a group of harried-looking politicians walked briskly up the steps onto the platform in time to watch the descending ship, along with the rest of the world.

"History is being made today," Peter Evans commented once the sound of the rocketplane diminished sufficiently, in case his audience may have forgotten that over the last sixty seconds. "In just a few minutes that unassuming survey ship will land at the end of this red carpet, its airlock doors will open and we'll get our first view of an intelligent extra-terrestrial." He paused again to listen to the voice in his ear. His director was telling him to shut up because they had finally found someone willing to claim to be an expert on alien creatures. "Doctor Meinzig is on hand with our own Tina Levalle. Tina?"

"Thank you, Peter," Tina replied as the screen revealed her to be a perky blond dressed in a bright violet network blazer that somehow was the perfectly wrong color for her and just about everyone else working for Interworld News. Who it was perfectly right for was Marlys van der Hess, the hapless lady

Evans had shoved out of the elevator. However Marlys had twisted her ankle in the fall so Tina, who let the main stampede of reporters take each other out, got the nod for interviewing the token scientist. "Doctor Meinzig holds the seat for Xenobiology at Sydney University. Thank you for being with us today, doctor. So far no holo images of these Lano as they call themselves have reached us. What can we expect of these aliens?"

"That is very hard to say, Tina," Meinzig replied stiffly. "We know so little about them. All I've heard so far is that they breath essentially the same class of air we do and that they are basically humanoid in shape."

"So they should look something like us?"

"Oh, I doubt that," Meinzig denied the possibility. "Even here on Earth we see many differences between creatures who fill the same basic ecological niche, although in different realms, so there is no reason to expect these Lano to have more than a passing resemblance to us."

"Why not?" Tina pressed.

"Evolution just does not work that way, Tina. There are many responses to a change in one's environment. More often than not it means extinction for a species, so only those that are adaptable survive. Adaptations, we have found, however, can go in many directions. A previously carnivorous creature might, in a time of shortage, start eating seeds and fruit as well. In time those members of its species best suited to an omnivorous diet would survive and pass that trait on to their young.

"In the case of sapience," Meinzig continued in spite of several discreet attempts by Tina to get a word of her own in, "most paleoanthropologists agree that the development of some form of manipulative appendage is an essential prerequisite to tool using, but research has found, in fact, that our Hominid ancestors stood and walked erect for millions of years before they first started manufacturing tools and the first primates developed hands with opposable thumbs still more millions of years before that. So clearly intelligence was an evolutionary development to pressures that had nothing to do with the development of our post-cranial skeleton."

"Our what?"

"Everything from the neck down," he explained with a gesture. "Now while the humanoid body shape is a handy form in which to develop sentience, it is far from the only one that has been theorized."

"But the Lano are humanoid, doctor," Tina reminded him.

"Hmm? Oh yes, so they are, but they probably will not look human."

"So we should expect what? Green scales and bug eyes?"

"That's a distinct possibility. Just think of what might have happened had the dinosaurs not died out."

Tina got the third signal from the director to cut the interview off, before they had to get cut off forcibly so she merely replied, "Thank you very much, Doctor Meinzig. We now return to Port Wallaby. Peter?"

There was another brief pause while Tina sat with a frozen smile for the camera and the xenobiologist fidgeted, both waiting for the little red light to go out. Then the screens showed a much better view of the descending spacecraft while Peter Evans blithered on.

By now literally billions of viewers were calling the network to complain about having their screens turned on forcibly and several thousand lawyers began to look into the possibility of a class-action suit against the network and the government over this blatant and uncalled-for invasion of privacy.

In Rome a young priest ran pell-mell down a hallway of the Vatican, narrowly avoiding the wanton destruction of several priceless artifacts in his rush to wake up Pope Leo XIV. His Holiness was going to be called on to make a statement regarding the Church's official position concerning these aliens as soon as the newscast was over. Never mind that the skies over Vatican City were still dark and that his Holiness almost never woke up before eight. Pope Leo, like most of his predecessors, was an elderly man, but he had been a relatively young sixty-two twenty-nine years earlier when first elected to the Holy See. His youth-like enthusiasm had brought the Catholic Church firmly into the middle of the Twenty-second Century, but in the last few years his vigor had waned in inverse proportion to his age. Only an utter emergency like this would justify waking him up.

Several hours to the west, another clergyman was up late and staring at his holo screen through bloodshot eyes when the show suddenly turned to the view of the sunny Australian sky. As it became apparent what was going on half a world away, the Reverend Thomas E. Stump promptly forgot all about the nasty headlines he had been generating for over a month, most of which lay in a heap on the table in front of him.

He forgot about the three million angry contributors to his "People Who Share" ministry who, on learning that most of their generous contributions were currently raising young interest bonuses in a numbered Swiss bank account instead of feeding those poor unfortunate children on the failing colony of Kirinyaka, were now quietly contemplating whether the best Christian course of action against him should be a holy crusade or if they should skip all the rhetoric and simply strap him to a wooden stake and chant, "Burn, baby, burn!"

He forgot about the slip of paper from his wife's lawyer informing him that, after due and proper consideration, the overly made-up old bag was suing him for divorce on grounds of adultery and mental and physical cruelty. That notice was newer than any of the headlines and sat on top, although Stump fully expected it to be buried under more headlines before the day was out. Patty Stump wanted one hundred percent of the marital assets and seventy percent of what was left of the ministry. Worse - he had spoken with his own lawyer earlier this evening only to learn that the bitch would probably get it.

He completely forgot about that pleasant bit of fluff he'd been "riding to Heaven" in bed for the twentieth time next to what he thought had once more been his drugged and comatose wife. Since being exposed to the public by the videotape Patty had arranged that evening, the girl had appeared on dozens of talk shows to both describe how Stump had coerced her to his bed and to flog the brand new book she had supposedly written and to announce her new career as a movie actress. Strangely enough her charges were the only false ones the Reverend Stump faced. She had first seduced him and insisted on their peculiar sexual venue. The problem was that once she went public a dozen other young women from whom the charges were true joined in her chorus.

He even forgot the bottle of fine Kentucky "Bottled in Bond" that had been his constant companion these past four hours. It remained clutched in his hand, but for the first time in almost five weeks he really did not feel like a drink.

Aliens? Non-human people from some unknown planet? Fascinating! Now, how could he use that to his advantage? Unthinkingly, he took another drink and leaned forward to pay closer attention.

Meriwether-1's dull gray body hovered thirty feet above the landing area, while the heavy steel legs slid out of their storage bays. The ship lowered herself gently to the pavement. As her engines were shut down their throb was replaced by the creak of the landing gear's shock absorbers. Before that sound had finished echoing across the spaceport, the band struck up a rousing rendition of "The Colonel Bogie March." They finished the piece twice and were half-way through the second repeat before the ship's boarding ramp was extended and the airlock door opened.

Eesai took a quick peak out the airlock door and quickly backed out of sight. The crowd and the noise baffled her and she started taking her job as bodyguard very seriously.

"What's going on out there?" she asked worriedly, her face lightening to a jaundiced yellow.

"Relax, Eesai," Sue said calmly. "It's just an official reception. James Twoblackrocks must have radioed ahead that you and Malana were onboard as foreign emissaries. I notice you only got the Vice President out to greet you, so it can't be all that serious."

"Who are those men in the bright uniforms and with the strange weapons?" Eesai asked, timidly poking her around the edge of the airlock.

"It's a brass band. Those 'weapons' are musical instruments."

Eesai listened for a moment. "Are you sure?" she asked.

"It's a matter of taste," Sue replied, wrapping her words in a gentle smile.

Eesai turned around to face Malana and reported, "I think it's safe. Just some strange formal greeting ritual. You should have warned us this would happen," she added accusingly to Captain Anspach.

"I never expected them to make such a big deal of this," Anspach admitted.

"Captain this is the first official meeting between two governments. Why wouldn't they make a fuss over us?" Malana asked.

"It's more their style to keep your presence here a secret until they know what you want and then stage an official arrival for the press a week or so later. I guess we took them too much by surprise so they didn't have time to think."

"Too bad we can't do that around tax time," Jerry commented from behind. "In the meantime, I don't suppose we ought to keep the Vice President waiting."

"Why not?" Sue laughed. "He ought to be used to it by now."

"This profound respect for your leaders is, uh, educational," Malana said dryly.

"If you can't laugh at a politician," Sue retorted, "who can you laugh at? Still, I suppose we've kept them waiting long enough."

"Sue and I will go first," Eesai said firmly, "for your protection, Madame Malana." Malana nodded. "Then you and the captain and finally Jerry. Wish we had another La to balance off the act," she added.

"You've been around Sue and Jerry too long, dear," Malana teased her. "You're starting to talk like

them."

"When on a strange planet, it's always a good idea to adopt the habits of the locals," Eesai quoted from the Treloian Space Navy Manual.

"I knew I'd regret writing that someday," Malana sighed. "Very well, girl, do as you wish, but don't blame me if Alano is put off by these new habits of yours."

"He'll just have to accept me as I am," Eesai grinned back at her. "Shall we?" She nodded toward the ramp. Malana agreed.

"What's about to happen?" the ambassador asked Anspach quietly as they proceeded down the ramp.

"I imagine Mister Kassinov - that's the Veep's name, Guillermo Kassinov - will speak for a few minutes and essentially say nothing. He's a bit shallow, but he's got decades of political experience. You, in turn, will be expected to do the same. Nobody will say anything meaningful until they can get you somewhere private, so just smile for the cameras and make the people like you."

And that was pretty much the way it went. Everyone smiled, nobody actually said anything and the political commentators practiced their art of interpreting nonsense for several hours longer than it took to play out the actual event.

As usual, most of the speculation proved to be definitively inaccurate.

Five

Malana immediately decided to co-opt Jerry and Sue to act as part of her legate staff in the form of native guides, although her real motive was to keep a pair of friendly and familiar faces around for both her and Eesai. This was just as well since the penthouse suite she had been given at Confederation expense, was too large for Lano standards. It wasn't that Lano preferred to live in cramped quarters, but they did not mind or rather they welcomed the availability of stimulating conversation and activity of their peers. Two Lano in the magnificent suite would have felt hopelessly alone, but with Sue and Jerry sharing the space this feeling was reduced to a manageable level.

Eesai had been shocked to learn that nobody who served on Meriwether-1 owned a permanent home of their own. Most tended to stay in the Transients - hotel-like facilities near the spaceport designed for the returning spacer to spend the intervening time between voyages in relative comfort and at a modest rate. Others still had family here and made a point of saving their money by spending their ground-side time with them. Anspach's older sister owned a chateau in the Bolivian Andes where the captain and his crew were welcome and most of them usually made a point of checking in with Louise Anspach while Earth-bound. She liked most of them and was also Meriwether, Inc.'s second largest share holder next to her brother. It was due to her own investments that the company had thus far been kept solvent.

Jerry said he had a brother floating around somewhere, but as a working sociologist he was even more likely to be off-planet than not. A quick call to Joshua Isaacs' agency confirmed that to be the case and he spent the rest of his time deciding which reporters to dodge.

Sue wanted to visit her folks but knew the furor concerning the Lano would probably follow her to Hawaii so she decided to wait until the initial reaction faded so she could bring Eesai with her and show her more of Earth than the hotel, Government City, the parts of historic Sydney they were allowed to see from the official harbor tour, and the shopping malls.

By the end of the first week, the crowds of reporters had thinned out considerably as other news began to seem more interesting than the empty words of political speeches. Malana was still spending most of her waking hours trying to establish some official beginning to her negotiations. She stormed into the suite one afternoon raging about Vice President Kassanov.

"How did an incompetent fool like that ever rise to such a high office?" she demanded of Jerry who had been working in his small room.

"He was elected," came the well-worn reply as he sat up on the couch where he had been catching up on current events since his last stay on Earth.

"By whom? A pack of rabid dingoes?"

"Maybe," Jerry shrugged. "I have a cousin who fully believes that more people voted in the last election than were actually alive at the time. Of course the statistics don't agree, but he says that's just part of the proof."

"Jerry, that doesn't make any sense."

"Neither does my cousin. He's a touch paranoid, I'm afraid. It's proof, you see, because the government would never admit to fixing the election."

"I don't see at all."

"Well, I said it didn't make sense, but it did take your mind off your own problems, didn't it?" They both laughed. "Now what happened today?"

"I will never understand human politicians. What do you think we've been discussing all week? Mutual recognition between Terra and the Trelendir? No," she answered her own question before Jerry could make a guess. "The possibilities of trade agreements? Not quite. A learned comparison of our cultures and systems of government? Not a chance. Would you like to know what all these hush-hush negotiations have been about? I'll tell you. We've been debating over the order in which we will conduct the various points of negotiation. Absolutely incredible. I kept telling them that I didn't really care which order we talked about things so long as we covered everything by the time we finished and that dingo-brained idiot of a Veep thought I was engaged in some obscure political gamut, so I eventually had to pretend to play his stupid game of give and take.

"Well, today," she continued, "we finally got everything in the right order as he saw it and I figured we could finally get down to business. He asked me what shape the negotiation table ought to be. I told him I didn't care what shape it was and that for all it mattered we could talk while doing our morning exercises. And do you know what he replied?" She paused just long enough for Jerry to think that maybe he was expected to say something, then she continued, "He asked whether I thought we should exercise in or out of doors!"

Jerry laughed. "So what did you decide?"

"That I'd have been better off staying another year on Cereloi. They only wanted to kill me there. This place is liable to drive me insane. Jerry, I thought the people onboard Meriwether were a representative lot, but now I'm not so sure."

"Maybe we aren't particularly representative of humans," Jerry conceded. "People who crew an exploration ship do so expecting to see new things. Our encounter with Inillien was a surprise, admittedly, but not a very big one. Even before our first forays into space, human writers have been speculating about the nature of extra-terrestrial intelligences. For that matter the Aerospace Force Training Manual has an entire chapter concerning first contacts with alien people. After two hundred years we may have grown used to the fact that there wasn't a Greater Galactic Council waiting to greet us as soon as we left our system, but deep down we knew that someday we would find another intelligent species and those who explore have been looking forward to it for the most part."

"So those who stay at home are more comfortable with keeping the status quo?"

"Right. Hey, where'd you ever hear that phrase?"

"Kassanov uses it all the time," she replied. "For a while I thought he was using it to cast a security spell."

"Maybe he was," Jerry commented.

"Humans are incapable of magic. We established that long ago. Remember?"

"Humans are incapable of that form of magic you call thalirip," Jerry corrected her. "There are some humans, primitive cultures, mostly, who believe they are capable of magic. Even today there are those who claim to possess extra-sensory powers - the ability to see the future, communicate with the dead, move things using only the power of their mind, read another's mind, and so on."

"Anything is possible," Malana replied dubiously.

"Perhaps, but after several centuries of study one would think that we might have actually established some proof of such powers' existence if anyone did, in fact, have them."

"No proof?"

"None," he confirmed. "Not so much as a shred of scientific proof."

"Another difference between us," Malana noted. "As you know, we also employ what you call the scientific method. The concept of reproducible results is just as essential to the practice of magic as it is to your technology. If thalirip was not as reliable for us as it is, we probably would have gone the same technological route, although I doubt we would have held on to unprovable beliefs."

"Like you say, another difference. Actually many human religions rely on blind faith while Lano religious belief concerns one's actions."

"And one's place in the universe as a whole," Malana added. "Heh! Fool priests are going to go into fits when Inillien makes port and the stories of our encounter go public."

"May have already," Jerry noted.

"Not yet," Malana admitted. "Another few days. We were further out than you were."

"Inillien's a much faster ship now," Jerry pointed out, "but my point was that you don't necessarily have to believe in the Lano gods to be a proper La."

"It helps," she replied stiffly.

"Yes. It's nice to have a rationale, but beliefs are private. Actions are public and, from what you and Eesai have told me, what you do is more important than what you believe." Malana nodded. "Some human religions agree, but hardly all." He was about to go on, but just then the door to the suite emitted a soft chime and slid open to let Sue and Eesai in amid a chorus of giggles. "Sounds like they've been up to something," Jerry observed dryly before they came into sight.

"Oh there you are!" Sue exclaimed from the doorway. "Eesai, I found them. Wait 'til you hear!" she told Jerry and Malana.

"Sue," Jerry asked with mock severity, "have you been giving spacers a bad name again?"

"Oh pooh!" she responded gaily.

"She didn't," Eesai laughed, "but I did."

"We found a way to ditch the security guards," Sue explained.

"Nothing wrong with that," Jerry commented.

"On the contrary," Malana disagreed, "they're there for our protection. You only endanger yourself by going out without them."

"I doubt that," Jerry retorted, "and after months of being stuck onboard a ship it's only natural to want to stretch your legs and enjoy a bit of privacy."

"That's worth risking your life?" Malana asked. The two younger women stared at her skeptically. "Oh, all right. I can't stand being followed around constantly either. So what did you do?"

"Sue knows a hotel with a large ladies' room," Eesai responded.

"Convenient, no doubt," Malana commented.

"Very," Eesai nodded. "It has two doors, but our guards only waited for us outside the door we went in."

"And you slipped out the back," Jerry finished for her. She nodded again. "That trick isn't likely to work twice. So how did you spend your day off?"

"Drunk!" Eesai exclaimed happily. "Oh gods, it was wonderful. I haven't been on a bender like that since I graduated the academy."

"You seem sober enough now," Jerry noted.

"Lano seem to sober up faster than we do," Sue informed him. "I'm just glad I didn't try to keep up. This little girl here could drink any mere human under the table."

"Where did you find a bar that served methanol-laced drinks?"

"Where else?" Sue laughed, "Wrong-way's."

"Of course," Jerry laughed, "The only bar on Earth that means it when they ask, 'What's your poison?'"

"Better than that," Sue told him. "Wrong-way got that molecule fabricator he was talking about the last two times we were in. First bar south of the equator to do that, and only the seventh in the world. It took some serious programming, but he managed to produce methanol-based rum for Eesai. She had a dozen strawberry daiquiris."

"I'm impressed."

"Not bad," Eesai agreed, "but a little weak. Next time I think I'll just drink my rum on the rocks with a twist."

"Why? So I'll have to carry you back?" Sue asked. "After Wrong-way's we ducked into a theater and took in Casablanca. Too bad Eesai spent most of that time sleeping it off."

"I woke up in time for the end," Eesai said defensively.

"Sure," Sue agreed readily. "Second time around. After that we came right back. I wonder if the guards are still watching the ladies' room."

"Let's report ourselves missing!" Eesai suggested impishly.

"Now that would be going too far," Malana told them.

"In that case let's see what's on the news," Sue replied. "Maybe it's us!" She and Eesai started laughing again. Jerry and Malana exchanged a glance and then followed the girls out to the common room.

The screen lit up and an angry man's face stared out at them. The Reverend Thomas E. Stump had shaved and cleaned himself up in the week since he had first learned about the Lano, but the sleepless nights of planning still showed in the bags under his bloodshot eyes. That was all right, however. It naturally gave him the wild-eyed look his make-up artists worked for hours to achieve anyway.

"Yes, my children," he was wrapping up his harangue, "they might look like angels and they come from the heavens themselves, but forget not that other fallen angel and his cohorts in sin!" He paused, particularly proud of himself for that analogy. "For Lucifer himself, the Prince of Lies and perverter of innocence, also appears to be fair of face and manner. His tongue talks most sweetly as he guides you down that fiery path to damnation. These Lano, are they not the same? Have they not a fair countenance and speak sweetly of trade and alliance? But they are betrayed by their skin. An unearthly color, tinged by the fires of damnation itself! The time of apocalypse is upon us and Satan sends his minions to bring us a Hell on Earth! Now begins the final war!" He paused and then segued into the next hymn, a prayer for salvation, while a three-dimensional message scrolled across the bottom of the screen urging viewers to donate in order to save Earth from the spiritual and physical menace of the evil Lano.

"Terrific!" Malana sighed. "That's all I need."

"At least we haven't let the public know about your magic," Jerry told her. "Now that might have given

us trouble, at least among the superstitious."

"Don't worry about old Stumpy," Sue laughed. "It's just Reverend Stump. He's been on the screen for years. Nobody really pays any attention to him."

"I hope you're right."

Six

Lewis Clark Anspach caught himself smiling uncontrollably as he strolled through the corridors of the Department of Commerce. Who said you couldn't fight Confederation Hill? It might have taken years and nearly every penny in his name, but at last his and Meriwether, Inc.'s day had come.

He paused to open his briefcase for the third time and flip through the thick document within. Government documents were still printed out on synthetic "paper"; tough and nearly indestructible except when exposed to certain rare conditions in which case it degraded into an almost perfectly recyclable mass.

"Two percent!" he read, awestruck at the potential. Two percent off the top of any gross income from dealings with any Lano for the next twenty years, and that included deals made by government agencies. This was actually better than the exclusivity he had asked for. The entire Confederation would be working for him. Even if Meriwether-1 never flew again, he and his top investors would be fabulously rich. Even the crew of Meriwether could retire if they wished, but now the corporation could afford to hire salaried employees and not have to worry about paying off a percentage of the net. He pulled a small voice-corder out of the briefcase and made a note to schedule a share-holders meeting in the near future. Changes were going to be necessary. He reloaded the case and strolled on.

"Clark!" he heard a voice call him as he left the tall, granite-faced Commerce Building. His lawyer, Janice Wall, was waving to him from the side of her limousine. Janice at age fifty-two - a one-time Olympic silver medalist in the Women's Marathon - was still an impressive woman. She stood tall at six feet even, with shoulder-length, dark brown hair that was slightly longer than most women in her profession could get away with and still seem business-like. "Need a lift?"

"Thanks," Clark responded. "I'd better get this safely filed away and transmit a copy to my sister."

"All right," Janice nodded. "Hop in. Are you still using Barclay Bank?" She knew that he was, but it was a smooth way to inform the computerized driver of their destination as well as giving them something to talk about.

"When have I had the time to change? Besides, they have more extraterrestrial branches than anyone else."

"Hmm," Janice murmured as they closed the limo doors, "Yes. That would be a major consideration for an exploration concern. You may transmit to your sister from here if you like." She indicated the com unit mounted in the cabinet before them.

"Thank you," he replied, reaching for the keypad. It lit up as he touched it. The car silently lifted several

feet above the pavement and smoothly moved out into the heavy city traffic.

"Something to drink?" she asked while he punched out his sister's number. "I'm afraid I don't have much. Not many occasions to entertain in the car. Beer, bourbon?"

"Any coffee left?" Clark asked, spotting a thermos bottle.

"Of course." She started pouring just as the call connected through.

The com screen lit up to show a portrait of Louise Anspach looking serenely into the pick-up lens. Contrary to terrestrial fashion, Louise had let her short hair develop patches of gray. Many people said that she and Clark looked alike, but he never noticed the resemblance. "Good morning," she said, "or afternoon or evening. Whatever. I'm not able to answer right now, but if you care to leave a message..." she left it hanging. Everyone knew what to do with an answering machine. Why belabor the obvious? Instead a short menu appeared to be superimposed over her image;

- PRESS1 TO LEAVE A VOICE MESSAGE
- 2 TO LEAVE A FAX
- 3 TO SEE IF I LEFT A MESSAGE FOR YOU

Clark reached into his briefcase and pulled out a coin-sized disk of metal and plastic and inserted it in the slot reserved for such use. An extra set of keys were suddenly illuminated on his own display and he pressed first the number two key and then the newly lit key that was marked "Data Send." A few seconds later the extra keypad went dark and the disk was pushed out of the slot and into a small tray.

The message "Fax Received" appeared on the screen and then the first menu. Clark didn't expect there would be a message waiting for him, but he checked anyway. He was wrong.

"Clark!" the image of his sister said enthusiastically, "I had to go out this afternoon. Hope all went well at the Commerce Department. When can you join us here? Soon, I hope. Several members of the crew have popped in already and Erich is staying till the end of the month. Oh! Do tell Jerry and Susan that I expect to see them here soon and to please bring our two new friends. See you later!"

With no other messages waiting, Clark blanked the screen and accepted the coffee from Janice.

"Your sister's a busy lady," Janice observed. "I almost never find her at home."

"She spends a lot of time working in her garden," Clark explained, "and she prefers not to have a com hovering over her shoulder as she works, so instead she has one of the maids check the machine four or five times an hour and notify her if something important comes in. For that matter it's a bit early for her to be awake yet. Not quite dawn."

"That explains it. Here's your bank. Will you be long?"

"No," Anspach shrugged. "Just going to dump this into my deposit box, but there's no need for you to

wait. I'd planned on seeing how Jerry was doing."

"I'll wait," she told him. "I'd like to buy you dinner in celebration of your new treaty. We're all going to be rich!"

"You don't seem to do all that badly, already," he observed, stepping out of the vehicle as soon as it had settled back to the ground.

"One can always do better," she replied. While waiting, she picked up Reverend Stump's broadcast on the holo. "Oh dear," she muttered disgustedly. "I never thought of that. We might have a problem," she told Anspach a few minutes later when he returned.

"Stump? Does anyone really listen to him?" he asked when Janice had explained. "Last I heard, he was making headlines for the tabloids."

"He's a very dangerous man," Janice replied, "and a desperate one. That's a bad combination. He also preaches extreme fundamentalism which always appeals to the worst side of people. A friend of mine at the University was describing the other night about how pendulum swings between liberalism and conservatism work. He says that it's a cultural phenomenon. People get tired of intolerance and after some initial resistance become more receptive to new people and ideas. Then after a period of vast change, they yearn for an unattainable ideal called 'the good old days.' That usually involves oppressing groups of people who have nothing to gain from a step backward. Later the cycle starts all over again when the latest group of oppressed people finally fights back. We've been in a long stretch of liberalism and he thinks we're overdue for a swing back now. Stump may have been largely ignored up until now, but he might just be at the crest of a conservative wave. We'll have to keep an eye on the situation. If you're planning to visit Louise, you'd better do it soon, because if someone does take Stump seriously for a change, we may have to move fast."

"If you say so," Clark agreed uncertainly.

"I say so," Janice replied firmly. "Keep in touch wherever you are and don't be surprised if I have to wake you up at ungodly hours."

"You're taking this very seriously."

"I am. My grandfather went through this when he was in his late teens and early twenties and chronicled that repressive period in his diary. I've been tempted to publish that diary several times, but somehow never got around to it. Did you ever hear about the colonization riots of the mid Twenty-first Century? I didn't think so. It's not a part of history they like to teach in schools.

"Colonization of extrasolar planets was very new and the Terran Confederation hadn't quite congealed yet. The old United States, had a couple of colony worlds being cautiously filled with straight-laced, crew-cut types all of whom had passed psych tests with high marks for loyalty and stability. The European Commonwealth and China had done likewise with one world each, but that was it. Problem was that the people best suited to planet busting are those who have nothing to lose, only they couldn't afford a one-way ticket to Niffleheim. Unlike during the colonization periods of North America and Australia, the idea of debtors' prison was considered cruel and inhuman at least by the nations with colonies and indentured servants were as illegal as slaves.

"That wasn't a bad thing, but having to pay one's own way really cut down on the number of early colonists."

"It also accounts for the rate of failure among the early colonies."

"Yes it does. The early colonies were little more than military bases with a small civilian population, hardly a self-supporting condition. But then the Catholic Church bought a ship of their own and established the colony of Redemption."

"I've heard about that," Anspach told her. "That was the first time colonists were subsidized, so that anyone with a useful skill could settle off Earth."

"And quite a few without useful skills too," Janice replied. "The only requirement that was strictly applied was that a colonist must be Roman Catholic. The Church owned the planet outright and set an equitable tax rate that they still call a tithe and the experiment seemed to work. Naturally other groups wanted to follow suit, but without the Church's financial assets were unable to."

"That should have been the end of it," Clark commented.

"Should have been, yes, but the desire to colonize was stronger than logic and when an Alabama evangelist named Leach went on the holo and demanded that his followers had the God-given right to be transported to a pristine colony world of their own, his following grew from thousands to millions overnight.

"There's a major weakness in representative governments," she continued in a seeming change of subject. "Elected officials tend to do whatever it takes to be reelected, regardless of the eventual consequences. As the demand for subsidized colonization grew so too did the fury of the debates in the old U.S. Congress. Then the first of the riots took place in Providence, Rhode Island. A large group of Leach's fundamentalist followers stormed and ransacked a Catholic Church."

"I never heard that," Anspach muttered.

"I said they don't teach this in school," she reminded him. Anyway that first riot sparked off others in Boston, New York, and then all across the world. Northern Ireland went up in flames for the first time in the two decades since Great Britain had ceded it back to Ireland and there were calls in the German Bundestag to declare war on Italy. Those were the most notable disturbances, but they were mirrored all over the world. Riots were not merely against the Catholics either. Any time a government seemed to be headed toward granting funds to one group of people, that group became everyone's favorite target. The world was on the edge of a destructive form of anarchy, saved only by the collapse of the old United Nations."

"Saved? I would have thought that would have been the final stroke."

"No. The U.N. was under-powered; unable to unify the world as was needed at that time. When it fell apart, however, it left a void that was filled by a treaty - a mutual assistance pact - between the U.S. and Russian Commonwealth. The treaty was a major step toward unification and out of fear of being left behind, three-quarters of the nations of Earth countersigned the agreement within the year. Two years later the Covenant of Confederation was formally adopted and ratified giving birth to the Terran Confederation. The colonies were granted full member status equal to any nation on Earth and gradually the individual nations began to merge until we reached the point where we are today."

"Why isn't this version of history taught?" Clark asked.

"I think because we would prefer to believe that the Confederation was an inevitable stage of political development born out of trust and understanding, when in fact, it was really born out of fear and desperation."

"Okay. I'm just a trade school boy. You'd know more about this than I would, but how did the establishment of the Confederation bring an end to the colonization riots?"

"Two ways. First, the Confederation started intentionally opening up new worlds and transporting colonists under the same terms as the Catholic Church; you get the ride, but the ticket price comes out of your taxes with more interest than one can comfortably conceive of, and second, it sponsored research into cheaper means of transportation. The early Matsuya-Tron, or rather simply the Matsuya, drives were hideously inefficient and expensive to run, until Mathias Tron amplified the Matsuya effect with those odd gyroscopic magnets. I never did understand how they work, but they increased drive efficiency to the point where most colonists really could pay their own way without mortgaging their first-born. Well, enough lecture. Just remember that the colonization riots weren't really all that long ago and that the impact from meeting the Lano is likely to be as profound as that from the first interstellar travel."

"What a fascinating bit of knowledge to digest along with dinner," Anspach muttered sourly as the limo pulled up to the hotel where Malana and company were staying.

"Misery loves company," Janice told him almost cheerfully, "so let's go up and see if your friends have considered some of this yet."

Seven

Louise Anspach's estate, nestled snugly on a wide mountain terrace overlooking La Paz, Bolivia uncomfortably over two miles above sea level, was literally a breath-taking sight. The Altiplano still enjoyed the distinction of having the highest elevation of any populated region on a human world. Even the Lano had to take their time and adjust to the altitude.

Below the chateau were scores of small farm terraces carved into the mountain side. Local legend had it that they had been built by the Incas long before Pizarro was a gleam in the milkman's eye. The truth, however, was that they had been constructed during the latter half of the Twentieth Century in an attempt to produce crops for export.

"What sort of crops?" Malana asked interestedly as Louise gave her and Eesai the grand tour.

"Potatoes mostly," Louise replied. "Tuber crops. There's not a whole lot more that grows up here naturally. I had the first dozen terraces converted into flower gardens, but everything I planted had to be specially bred and in many cases gene-spliced for the altitude and soil conditions. Even coffee won't grow up here without artificial assistance. Too cold in the winter, even if we are so near the equator."

They paused to look out and down on the district capitol city not too distant on a straight line but a good twenty miles as the roads ran, not that the roads saw very much use. Louise kept an antique Land Rover for traveling around her estate, but for going any real distance there were always the hovercars that floated on their own Matsuya-Tron fields. Still there were those conservatives among her friends who

preferred ground vehicles. It gave them a true feel of the distance, they said, so she kept her ten mile-long driveway in reasonable repair.

"Eesai," Malana asked, "ready for tea?"

"Hmm!" Eesai replied, mildly startled. "Oh, sorry. I was trying to follow the course of the road to town. It's an interesting shape."

"Always the navigator," Malana laughed kindly.

"Building the road was some project," Louise replied. "There wasn't anyone living up this way when I bought the mountain and all that passed for roads were a few old Incan foot paths. Even though they had a fairly complex civilization, the Incas didn't use the wheel for transportation. That's what comes from building most of your cities in the mountains, I guess. They did build roads, many of which are still useable today, but they were built with the pedestrian and his pack animals in mind. Going up or down a hillside you'll often find long flights of stairs instead of winding ramps. When you aren't using a wheel, the road doesn't have to be all that smooth."

"A civilization without the wheel?" Eesai marveled. "That is amazing."

"We've had our share," Malana told her, dropping into lecture mode. "There was the Lithianda island culture of the Great Ocean. Their primary mode of transport was the outrigger canoe. Louise, you have a lovely home here."

"Thank you, Malana. I originally wanted a view of Lake Titicaca, but that place is so expensive and has gotten too touristy anyway, so I think I did all right. I'm so glad you were finally able to visit, even if it is under these circumstances."

Malana's negotiations had proceeded smoothly for another week until Thomas Stump's anti-Lano sermons began to take hold on the minds of otherwise reasonable people. To make matters worse, spokesmen of the world's other major religions refused to comment on the status of the extraterrestrials which only seemed to give Stump's accusations an air of validity. The news media, sensing headlines that would make sales, started printing or broadcasting articles questioning the Lano's motives. Were they just trying to make a mutually beneficial contact or something more sinister? Naturally the implication was that they intended something unspecified but sinister so that gullible viewers would be lured into watching the next show featuring them. Representatives in the Confederation Forum began receiving letters and com messages from their constituents on both sides of the question, but the polls showed a decidedly unfavorable atmosphere with a majority of Terrans being undecided. Talks between Malana and the Terran delegates halted abruptly with assurances that they would resume in a day or two, but after a week this began to appear unlikely. Their security guards seemed to become more wary and act more like jailors than guardians. When Sue and Eesai tried to go shopping one day, it was suggested firmly that this would be unwise. When every excuse to get out received the same "advice", they ended up sitting around the hotel room while Jerry brought in whatever comforts their guests required and Sue used the lull as an excuse to visit family dragging Eesai along with her. Sue's family welcomed Eesai warmly, but the omnipresent guards made the occasion less than comfortable so they soon returned to Sydney.

A week and a half later, with no resumption of talks in sight, Malana had come down with a bad case of cabin fever and so, ignoring the guards' most strenuous protestations, they hired a private jet, left the guards behind, and took up Louise's standing invitation to come visit.

As Louise drove her Land Rover toward the Chateau's carriage house, there was a bright red and black

hoverjet settling lightly on the landing pad on the next terrace up the mountain, so instead of parking, she turned the vehicle around and drove further up-slope.

The landing pad had originally been installed when she hoped she could get a permit to have Meriwether-1 parked on the estate like some of the larger concerns did, but after the pavement had set, she learned that such permits came only with a certain amount of taxes paid, which showed, in theory, that proper maintenance could be afforded. To date, Meriwether Explorations had not yet reached that tax bracket, so instead she had one of the largest private parking lots in the Southern Hemisphere.

Louise and the Lano drove up just in time to see Janice Wall step confidently down to the pavement, the inevitable briefcase in hand.

"Janice," Louise called out, "What a delightful surprise. Why didn't you call first?"

"Wasn't sure when I could get here if at all," Janice replied as she climbed into the ancient vehicle. "I was chasing down the Secretary of Commerce and it turned out he was on a fishing vacation in Minnesota. From there it was just a short hop down here, which I thought would be better than doing everything by com and fax. Clark's still here, isn't he?"

"Of course," Louise nodded. "No luggage?" She didn't ask about business, having learned long ago that Janice wouldn't give any substantive answers until both Louise and Clark were together.

"On the jet. I'll come back for it if it turns out I can stay. Ladies," she nodded to Malana and Eesai as Louise started back to the house, "nice to see you again. Been enjoying your stay?"

"Very much," Eesai replied. "Does your visit have anything to do with the Trelendir?"

"It does, indeed," Janice agreed, "But I'll go into that when we're all together."

"Janice dear," Malana observed, "You aren't looking well. Is there a problem?"

"Problems? Many," she replied. "Solutions? A few, I think."

"I meant biophysical problems with you personally."

"Nothing a week of sleep won't cure," Janice replied. "Never could sleep on planes and I've been on the move for three days now. Good thing I've never gone to space, I'd probably die from lack of sleep."

"Oh, is that all? Here, let me help." Malana reached back and placed her tiny hands gently on Janice's temples for a few seconds. "There," she said, removing her hands, "feel better?"

"I feel great! Fully rested. What did you do?"

"Removed the fatigue toxins from your system, mostly."

"Mostly?"

"Metamorphosed some of them into basic nutrients in your bloodstream. I've never done that with a human before so I hope it didn't give you too much of a jolt. Achmed and I compared human and Lano physiology. We have similar needs for simple sugars and what not."

"You can do that?" Janice asked. "How?" In their effort to play down the magic aspect of Lano technology, even Janice had never been told about it.

"A simple matter," Malana shrugged it off.

"But it's like magic!"

"It is magic," Eesai replied, "Although I still like our word for it better. Thalirip is a scientific discipline. Magic smacks of superstition."

"This is marvelous," Janice told them. "We ought to be able to use this wonderful ability to our advantage. Can you do it too?" she asked Eesai.

"Only simple things. Malana is a thalua, a wizard, while my training was primarily concerned with celestial navigation. I can only cast a narrow range of low-level spells, but Malana as a generalist can do just about anything."

"Hardly," Malana scoffed. "Being a generalist wizard is much like holding a multidisciplinary PhD. You have more than one field of expertise, but nobody can know everything."

"But magic," Janice murmured. "Yes, I think we can turn this to our advantage yet."

Louise insisted on serving brunch before any talk of business could start and Clark further insisted that every present shareholder of Meriwether, Inc. at least have the opportunity to be present before they could get down to business. Erich and Jerry had gone fishing on Lake Titicaca so it was late afternoon before they could hear what Janice had to say.

"This is going to sound like a good news-bad news joke," she began, "but I suppose that cannot be helped. The Department of Commerce has placed a ban on all trade with the Lano until formal treaties can be drawn up. That doesn't affect us immediately, since it would have been nine months before the next scheduled rendezvous anyway, but it does mean that no other concern can search out a Lano world as well."

"Given the volume of space, it isn't likely they'd find us," Eesai commented. Sue nodded her agreement.

"Probably not," Janice continued, "but these temporary bans have a habit of becoming permanent if left unchallenged, so I've been out challenging them. On the plus side, I got Commerce to increase Meriwether's cut to five percent." Clark and Jerry let out long, low whistles. "That's still nothing if the ban isn't lifted, and our twenty year clock starts ticking at the rendezvous," she reminded them, "so I made sure that a document was published in the Confederate Register stating that the ban would automatically lift with the formal signing of a treaty. As far as I know, that's as good as I can do for now."

"Sounds like you've done as much as we've a right to expect," Clark admitted, "but I doubt you came this far out of your way just to give us a progress report."

"I could say that I enjoy the view and the thin mountain air," the lawyer replied. She'd spent the afternoon by the swimming pool. "But I just got back from vacation shortly before you landed on Luna. No, it occurred to me that we're long overdue to work on any number of plans."

"You mean," Louise asked, "like working out how to invest the money when it comes in?"

"That was on my mind, but first we need to make sure that it comes in at all. Have you been watching the screen lately?"

"Probably not as much as you'd like us to," Clark replied. "With over a thousand channels, there's still not enough variety. I'd swear over half of them are featuring that idiot, Stump."

"That's my point. He's gaining followers and, with them, billions of dollars in donations to his cause and with that he's paying off all his bills to get the Inland Revenue off his back and, more to the point, he's hiring lobbyists and pollsters."

"So he's hiring lobbyists and pollsters," Jerry shrugged carelessly. "So what?"

"So politicians like to keep their jobs," Janice snapped at him. "It might sound silly, but the high pay and long, often paid-for vacations appeal to some, especially considering speaker's fees and a list of perks too long to go into just now. And those are just the legal ways to get rich. Kick-backs, for example, are well-hidden, but they happen all the time. Trust me.

"Now," she continued, "keeping in mind the concept of job security, who do you think a politician is going to listen to when it comes time to vote?"

"This is just a wild guess," Jerry replied, smirking, "but the people who put them in office to begin with?"

"Both right and wrong," she immediately shot back. "They listen to what they think their constituents are telling them to do. It's a fine distinction, but an important one. How do they learn what the voters want? Well, there are always letters, by mail, telegram, or fax, and their secretaries sort through them and assemble rough analyses as to how the literate people are thinking. There are petitions. Almost anyone can sign a petition and they're easy to fill. Just stand around a market or a shopping mall and enough random people will float by to sign up. Once again the secretaries and other aides go through these. But the thing to remember is that many people tend to go along with whomever they spoke to last and your elected officials are not exceptions."

"Now throw in Stump's lobbyists and pollsters. They come along, talking very fast and very loud and have all sorts of confusing statistics to baffle and mystify the greatest genius, let alone some poor slob who got his job by being handsome and following his handlers' orders. It is their job not only to convince the politician that they represent the majority opinion, but to be the ones to do so last. The fact that lobbyists usually represent only a small portion of the population can be overlooked for the moment. The fact that a poll can be slanted to give you almost any result you want, however, cannot.

"Anyone care to guess what attitude Stump's paid pollsters are going to discover among the populace of Earth?"

"That Lano are the spawn of Satan, the step-children of Lucifer, and first cousins, twice removed, from Beelzebub?" Malana replied dryly. "I have been keeping in touch, although where I come from anyone who can't speak five seconds without invoking divine power gets a long course of corrective therapy followed by a guaranteed public-service job."

"Picking up garbage," Eesai added.

"Good idea," Janice replied just as dryly. "I'll be sure to mention it around the Hill. In the meantime, however, we still need to deal with Reverend Stump."

"How much does it cost to hire a hitman these days?" Jerry asked, laughing. Sue and Erich laughed as well.

"I considered that," Janice told them completely seriously, "but assassination can backfire on you. There's always the danger it could be traced back to us or he could be seen as a martyr, killed to stop a just cause. No. we'll have to fight him on his own ground - the screen."

"You're serious?" Jerry asked.

"Very," she replied. "I have ears on Confederate Hill and even as we sit here, everyone up for reelection this year is trying to decide whether being pro-Lano will help or hinder his chances. Our job will be to convince them that being in favor of a treaty with the Trelendir is the only sure way to stay off the unemployment rolls next September.

Ten

The party at the Anspach estate spent most of the next day watching Thomas E. Stump ranting on the screen as he implored the "faithful" to write their Representatives to cast the "demons" back to Hell. He took time out to remind them of how such a sudden influx of aliens could put God-fearing, hard-working men and women out of work and threw in several bits of Scripture whenever he thought they might sound like they were proving his case.

"The truly amazing thing," Thomas Cervantes of the PR firm of Cervantes, Cardoza, Wenzel, and Cervantes had commented in Louise's conference room while Stump raved, "is that none of the other leading religious figures have come forward yet. Unusual to say the least." After several hours he finally said "I think we've seen enough of Stump for a while," and waved his finger across the off patch of the remote control in a gesture that caught Sue's and Eesai's eyes. The two glanced at each other in silent communication before turning back toward Cervantes. "Now's the time to make plans."

It wasn't so much a matter of making plans as having Tom Cervantes spell them out in great detail. Nor was anyone given the time to let the plans sink in before they were set into motion so that by the time the second sunrise dawned on the Anspach estate above La Paz, the two Lano and most of Meriwether, Inc. were off on a whirlwind tour of Earth's chat shows. With so many people to work with, Cervantes had sent them off in pairs; Sue and Eesai, Jerry and Malana, Erich and Ito Deshpande, Clark and Louise, Doc MacGregor and Serafyma, and so forth.

At Janice's suggestion, the wonder of Lano magic was stressed for its positive aspects

"This is Juan Guevara and we have a special show devoted to those magical elves from outermost space! Yes, you've seen them in the headlines. Now we'll see and speak to them up close and personal today on..." he paused before joining the audience as they chanted, "Guevara!"

Music came up and a director shouted, "Cut! Okay commercial break... yavah, yavah, yavah... and back to the show... and action!"

"We're back!" Guevara reassured his viewers. "First meet the queen of the elves herself, Malana Di Masai."

"The Lano don't have royalty anymore, Juan," Malana told him before he could move any further down his cue cards, "and even when we did none of my ancestors were in the line of succession."

"Ahem..." Juan cleared his throat. "Uh," he continued, wondering how he had lost control so quickly, "yes, but you are elves, aren't you?"

"That depends on what you call an elf," she replied. "From what I've seen of Terran literature, an elf is a mythological creature from out of your superstitious medieval period. We call ourselves Lano and I assure you that during our medieval era we had no superstitions about large people with pale skins and no magic." There was a smattering of applause that reminded Guevara that the audience tended to side with whoever had the snappiest comeback.

"So you do use magic," the host pressed.

"The Lano word for it," Jerry chimed in, "is thalirip."

"Doctor Jerome Isaacs," Juan informed the audience quickly.

"And," Jerry continued, "it is every bit as scientifically based as human technology."

"So is it or is it not magic?" Juan asked.

"We haven't really had the chance to study the phenomenon, but the ability is something that all Lano seem to be born with and humans are not."

"Our thalua associate the ability with a complex of hormones secreted by our endocrine system," Malana informed them.

"Sounds like we should have invited a doctor today," Juan laughed.

"Achmed's doing the Larson show today," Jerry let slip out.

"Terrific," Guevara muttered. "We'll have a demonstration of elfin magic in just a bit, but first let me introduce some of my other guests." The camera panned to the right to reveal Sue and Eesai and finally Clark and Louise. Juan quickly introduced them and asked a few questions as much off the mark as anything that had come out of his mouth so far. His other shows were tightly scripted with no surprises at least to him. It had been a long time since he had done a true interview and there was a certain rhythm to it that could only be kept up with practice. He made a mental note to fire whoever had failed to coach these people properly and plunged on. He had another fifty minutes, commercials included, to fill. Commercials, yes! "We'll be right back," he told the camera charmingly. The red light went off and he screamed, "Walter!"

There was a fifteen minute pause in the taping of the show while Juan and his director had words just outside the sound-proofed studio doors. Eventually the producer came down from his reserved booth

and broke them up. He told them something that caused both Juan Guevara and his director to reenter the studio in a subdued mood.

"We're back!" he said again when the red light returned. "Now, Madame Di Masai, you are the legate to the Terran confederation from your world?" It was an entirely different tack from his previous approach; one that reminded him of his days as a journalist.

"Not officially," Malana replied. It was a question she had fielded at every interview so far and she knew exactly how to answer it. "You see, at the time we contacted Meriwether-1, neither Treloi nor the Trelendir knew of Terra's existence. However, as a career diplomat I felt it was important to come directly to Earth to 'test the waters' as you would say. I am not empowered to sign treaties as yet, but I can make proposals for the Lano worlds, subject to their later approval."

"Wait, wait, wait," Juan tried to back-pedal as a sign from the director told him he had skipped ahead of the show's revised plan. "Meriwether? The Trelendir? Maybe we're getting ahead of ourselves. Captain Anspach, it was your ship that first discovered the Lano, was it not?"

Anspach admitted that it was and, as prompted, he and the other humans told about the now historic meeting between Meriwether-1 and Inillien light years beyond the most distant human colony world. When he was finished, Juan walked through the studio audience, letting various people ask questions until the next commercial break.

Then came the big dog and pony show as Malana had to put on a small but impressive display of magic. Cervantes had wanted her demonstrations to consist of fireworks and transformations, but fireworks were far too dangerous to use indoors and in spite of their jokes, transformations were impossible without large-scale mechanical assistance at least above the atomic level. Atomic level transformations, on the other hand were usually even more dangerous than fireworks if the released radiation wasn't contained. Furthermore, who could tell there had been a transformation without spectrographic analysis. In the end it was decided that Malana would perform a series of simple tricks of the sort she normally used to instruct and entertain children.

Her performance involved dancing lights and freely floating objects chosen at random by people in the studio. From a distance she bent metal and broke planks of wood and blocks of ice, all to the delight of the studio audience who clapped their hands when prompted by the applause sign. Everything seemed to be going along well until the second half of the show, when Guevara brought on a pair of stage magicians to explain how Malana's illusions were performed.

Malana sat back and listened politely and interestedly as Karl Dupont and Denise Marx demonstrated how they could duplicate each of Malana's feats and then in a break with the ancient tradition went on to explain how the tricks were done. They even went on to explain how a magician can use words to make a seemingly random choice end up the way they had planned anyway. That supposedly being the explanation for why Malana had let audience members pick her objects for her. The audience enjoyed Karl and Marx's demonstration as well.

"That's very good," Malana commended the illusionists when they were done and Juan predatorially asked for her reaction. "I am constantly being impressed by human ingenuity, but would you mind doing the trick with the floating ball again?"

"Which one?" Karl asked. He and his partner had "levitated" several colored balls.

"It doesn't matter," she replied. "Any or all. Your choice."

He shrugged and with conscious exaggeration pulled on the seemingly invisible string that caused a bright red foam ball to lift several inches from the surface of a table and bob around theatrically. Suddenly the string glowed bright red for a second, becoming visible to anyone and then disappeared. The ball of foam abruptly dropped back down to the table top, bounced twice and then rolled off the back edge to where the camera was unable to follow its course.

A titter ran through the audience as "Karl and Marx" stared at the space where the ball had been. Malana suggested that they try again and this time they discovered that all the connecting strings had been cut.

"Eesai," Malana requested, "would you be so kind as to bring me one of those balls?"

"Of course," the astronavigator replied calmly. Up until now Malana had been the only La to practice magic in public. Eesai's advanced skills were minimal, being confined to what the Navy had taught her so that she could hold the various positions she had to date. What she did now, however, was really only slightly harder than a Lano child's game.

Eesai stretched out her arm and pointed at Karl and Marx's table. Immediately a blue foam ball lifted off the table and started floating toward her.

"Oh," Malana added almost absently, "let the thalua, I mean magicians, inspect it first."

The ball changed course and floated until it was between the two magicians. Karl angrily grabbed the ball and ran his hands all over the surface. Finding no tell-tale strings, he threw the ball violently out into the audience, but Eesai "caught" it and then floated it to Malana.

"Thank you," she told the younger La. "Satisfied?" she asked Karl and Marx.

"Maybe a bit less skeptical," Denise Marx replied, causing another ball to materialize from inside her sleeve. "Can you do the same with this?"

The new ball instantly flew out of her hand and into the audience, following almost the same path as the one Eesai had manipulated and then swerved sharply and flew to Malana. The audience had been raptly silent until now as the director had been too distracted to have the applause sign lit up, but as Malana caught this third ball, they burst into applause without benefit of illuminated instructions.

"Marvelous," Juan enthused. Then an edge entered his voice as he informed the audience, "We'll be right back with our final guest of the day!"

Guevara had been holding out on his other guests, for when they "came back" from the commercial a curtain was drawn back to reveal a large holovision screen, and on the screen was an all-too familiar face.

"Reverend Thomas E. Stump," Guevara introduced the man even as he asked his first question, "now you have a somewhat different opinion of our guests from the stars."

A mad gleam flashed across Stump's eyes. It was a look he had practiced well over the years; perfect for the Sunday morning fire-and-brimstone sermon or any other time he was preaching on a subject where wild enthusiasm seemed appropriate. For a moment he stared out through the screen with his uncanny ability to lock eyes with viewers he could not even see. Then he began to speak.

"Sin!" he shouted, his image leaning dramatically out of the screen. "Evil corruption! Spawn of Satan! Witches by their own admission. They should not be suffered to live!" Personally, Stump didn't give a damn one way or the other about the Lano and his accusations sounded silly to his own ears, but his crusade was the first real success he had achieved in years, so if his congregation wanted lunacy, he'd give it to them deluxe. "Evil are they who..."

"Reverend Stump," Guevara called out, breaking Stump off exactly where he had hoped to be, "surely even you don't believe..."

"Thou hypocrite," Stump quoted, "'first cast out the beam out of thine own eye!' Are you blind, man? On your very stage, these inhuman fiends have proudly practiced their vile sorcery for the amusement of the masses, thereby seducing them into the bosom of the Devil. Hast thou not been commanded to suffer not a witch to live?"

Only commandment I've had lately is to keep my ratings up, Guevara thought silently.

"Your own buffoons," Stump continued, pointing at Karl and Marx, "have conceded..."

"Here now!" Karl protested, rising out of his seat. Denise grabbed him and forced him to sit back down. He turned on her, but immediately backed down when he saw the worried look on her face. "But..." he whispered.

"Sh! All we need is to have that loony target us next," she replied softly. She needn't have worried; Stump never noticed the interruption. Instead he had continued to rant, regardless of what anyone else tried to say.

"Reverend Stump!" Guevara finally shouted at the top of his lungs, "you were invited here to share your views and debate them with these others, but if you will not give anyone else a chance to speak, I will have you cut off!"

The audience boomed at the prospect and Guevara raised his eyebrows in surprise. The people in his audiences, he knew, were some of the most pliable in the system, but even he wouldn't have expected them to turn so quickly. Stump, however, was aware of the audience reaction and had settled back to quietly beam his approval.

"That's better," Juan continued. He, too, was a master of his art and those two simple words were enough to make it seem as though Stump respected Guevara's control of the situation. "Now, so far I have only heard shouted accusations, sir. The Lano have been politely letting you have your say, but before I ask for their reaction, do you have any hard proof of your accusations?"

Stump raised his right hand to display a black leather-bound copy of the Bible. "My own faith in the true word of God is all the proof I need." Stump proclaimed proudly. The audience applauded. Off camera, Guevara blanched and swallowed hard before turning toward Malana and Eesai. Malana appeared serenely unconcerned, but Eesai was struggling heroically not to totally break down into a fit of the giggles. She was surrounded by Sue and Jerry who were worriedly trying to calm her down, but their concern only made the situation seem all the funnier to her.

"Almost half a millennium ago," Guevara began gravely, "there were the witch trials of Salem during which dozens of people were tried and twenty-one died as a result. Although this behavior is now largely considered barbaric, it and other forms of intolerance have persisted in many forms into the present day.

There were the McCarthy hearings of the Twentieth Century and the Demian Trials on Thor just twenty years ago, the race riots of the 1960's and the religious riots of last century." As he spoke, the monitors showed key scenes of the events he described. Eesai suddenly stopped finding the situation amusing and stared at her human friends as though seeing them for the first time. "Keeping this in mind," Guevara continued, "what do you have to say in response to Reverend Stump's accusations?"

Malana looked at Guevara in the same way one might view a pond choked with algae. "Well," she began, "I might say that you have a rather round-about way of asking a question. I might say that the events of Terran history are in the past and have only a superficial bearing on this case. I might even say that the good reverend has a right to his opinions regardless of how mistaken they might be, but instead..." She noted without pausing that the audience had once more come around to her side in spite of the fact that her reply was as long winded and round about as Guevara's questions. She normally preferred to cut straight to the heart of the matter but two weeks in HV studios had taught her the meaning of good timing. With only a few seconds left to go she fully intended to have the last word. Contrary to the old Terra expression, that would leave a more lasting impression on people than their first sight of her. "I'll merely reply that we're people, just like you. Sure we can do some things you may have trouble understanding, but then we have difficulty understanding your technology." She paused now just long enough to throw everyone off-guard and used a line she had seen in a dozen late-night movies that had been broadcast since her arrival. "We come in peace, Earthlings."

The audience loved it and applauded so loudly that only the holovision audience at home could hear Juan say, "Teenage transsexual rape gangs, tomorrow on Guevara!"

Eleven

Malana opened her eyes as the first rays of the Terran dawn crept through her window. Floating several inches over her bed, she sat up before allowing herself to gently drop until she was seated on its edge. Earth's gravity was just a bit heavy compared to that of Treloi and even after a month she was still having trouble adjusting. Using her abilities to float while she slept seemed to help a little.

"I must be getting old," she sighed, reaching over to the hotel night table to get her calender. "I wonder how Eesai is getting on. Probably quite well. She's younger and stronger than I am. Where am I today?" She glanced at her Terran chronometer - a gift from Vice President Kassarov from before negotiations had been put on hold - and then at the appointment calender. "Cleveland?" Oh yes. She was scheduled to throw out the first ball in the season opener between the Indians and the Blues. She activated the holo screen with a casual flip of her wrist. It hadn't taken long to work out a simple spell that would work with the electronic switches of Earth, but she only used it when alone since even Eesai jumped a bit when something seemed to turn itself on. Most Lano were incapable of activating a switch if they were more than an inch or two away.

She used the small coffee maker that came with the hotel room and watched the early morning news as she got dressed, hoping to pick up something about this sports event she was supposed to attend. Reverend Stump hadn't made a headline in days, although he continued to preach on the dangers of the evil Lano on his own People Who Share Network. At one point he had tried to claim that Trelendir was actually an anagram for evil in a transliterated form of an ancient tongue called Aramaic, but Malana suspected he had made that up off the top of his head. Certainly he hadn't repeated that laughable claim.

She was just taking her first sip of coffee and watching an interesting news article about a new high-efficiency starship drive that would reduce travel time to only one-tenth its current length when Jerry knocked on the door that adjoined their rooms.

She called out, "Come in, Jerry," but did not look up until she had written herself a note to get in touch with the scientists working on the improved drive. The principals did not seem too far off from the jury rigged drive she, Lani, and Erich had installed in Inillien and the possibilities of thalirip/technology hybrids fascinated her. "I was about to order breakfast."

"Too late," Jerry replied. She looked up to see that he had brought in a large silver tray. Setting it down, he removed several lids to reveal various earthly foods that had proven out as both safe and nutritious for Lano. As they ate, the news program on the screen droned on. They largely ignored it until Malana's and Eesai's faces suddenly appeared to stare out of the screen. Their expressions seemed to convey the hope of friendship and alliance.

The broadcast engineers made the images rotate until they could be seen in profile. Then they backed up until they were against the right edge of the display field as a holograph of the Pope, smiling with beatific benevolence scrolled into sight from the left. The scene froze and the announcer's voice began.

"In a surprise press conference earlier this morning Pope Leo XIV repudiated the claims of Thomas E. Stump that the Lano are of demonic origin." The three-dimensional display faded and resolved into a holotape recording of the Pope standing behind a dark wooden podium.

"I have considered this problem long and hard," Pope Leo told the gentlemen of the Press in carefully measured tones, "and with God's guidance I have determined that no matter what else, the Lano are every bit as much God's children as are we." There was a slight jump in the image indicative of a hastily edited tape and the Pope continued, "I mean that while I have no way of knowing their motives or intentions, the Lano are just people like us; no more and nothing less."

"The Pontiff," the anchorman filled in smoothly, "in response to other questions went on to say, however, that they might be good or evil like any other people, and that it was too soon to determine what sort of people these strangers from the stars might be.

"Of other interest, Tokyo stock indices trembled this morning in response to the renewed volcanic activity in Indonesia and the claims of prominent geologists that it presages the release of tectonic energy half a world away in..." The anchorman's voice was abruptly muted as Malana manipulated the remote control.

"How soon can we fly to Ramo?" she asked Jerry.

"Where? Oh, you mean Rome," he replied. "We could probably be there tonight, but what about our schedule? We have the game this afternoon and tomorrow we're supposed to be in Phoenix."

"How long does it take to throw a baseball?" she countered, "and this is more important than speaking to a bunch of Rotarians."

"And you figure that if we come calling, the Pope will just drop everything and welcome us with open arms? Do you have any idea of how long it takes to get a papal audience?"

"Let's find out," she suggested. "Give Tom Cervantes a shout and see what he can do. Says he likes a challenge, maybe it's about time we gave him one."

"If he pulls this one off," Jerry muttered, activating the nearest com-pad, "I'll put a word in for him with the Pope for sainthood, 'cause this will be a right miracle if I ever heard one."

A chime sounded and the holoscreen went blank. Then a sleepy voice asked, "Now what?"

"Tom? Jerry Isaacs here. Malana's got a favor to ask you."

"At 1:15 in the morning?" Cervantes complained. "God, I just got to sleep."

"This is important," Malana told him and explained what she wanted.

"All right," Cervantes sighed. "I'll see what I can do."

Several hours later, while Carlos Martinez was knocking his ninth game-winning grand-slam out of Municipal Stadium - the fourth structure of that name - Malana and Jerry were just taking off from Cleveland Hopkins Intercontinental on a chartered flight to Rome.

Small wavelets lapped quietly on the black volcanic sands of the beach in a small secluded cove. The tropical sun had just passed its zenith and begun its downward journey. The bright yellow rays of light bounded off the waves and landed lightly on the smooth sand, where a pair of brightly colored towels had been laid out near a tall coconut palm. Lying on those blankets and soaking up those afternoon rays were Susan Ho and Eesai Di Sonea.

"I just love this place," Eesai told Sue, stretching out her body in preparation to sitting up.

"I used to come here a lot when I was just a girl," Sue replied. "It was my own special place away from everywhere else. Every time I come home, I'm afraid someone else will have discovered it and turned it into a resort, but so far it's still all mine."

"No surprise if you can only get here in that tiny boat of yours." She finished sitting up and regarded the small craft that had brought them to Sue's private getaway. It was a small fiberglass shell with wooden fittings just barely large enough for two people and a picnic. Amazingly, the boat also carried a pair of oars and a short mast and boom with a canvas sail stretched between them. On landing, Sue had unstepped the mast and together they had pulled the boat above the high tide mark. That tiny craft, Sue had explained, was the only way on or off this beach.

"You don't like my peapod?" Sue asked. "I've been sailing her for years. Just right for doing a little fishing for dinner and if the wind falls off, I can always row home."

"To be perfectly honest," Eesai confided, "I was nearly scared to death that we were going to capsize all the way here."

"So? That's part of the fun. You can always roll it back upright."

"Sue, I can't swim," Eesai confessed. "If you hadn't given me that floating thing..."

"The life preserver?"

"Good name for it. Yes, the life preserver. I could never have brought myself to get in that collection of leaks you call a sailboat."

"I wondered why you were so assiduous about bailing. You mean Lano don't swim? Are you too dense to float or something?"

"No. Lots of Lano swim. I don't. Never had the opportunity until I enlisted in the Space Navy. I grew up on a glarno - that's a sort of meat and wool-bearing animal - ranch on the edge of the Mondir Desert. Until I was sixteen I never saw more than a glass-full of water at a time."

"Time to change that then," Sue said brightly, jumping to her feet. She tugged on Eesai's hand and said, "Come on!"

"Where?"

"Where else? Into the water. Time for your first swimming lesson."

"I couldn't!" Eesai blanched and tried to pull away. Sue had too firm a grip.

"Don't be such a baby," Sue chided her. "We won't go so far out that the water's over your head."

"Promise?"

"Cross my heart and hope to die." Sue drew an "X" over her heart.

"What?"

"I promise," Sue translated and led her friend down to the water. Sue nearly forgot their relative differences in size and Eesai was valiantly struggling to keep her feet on the sandy bottom when the water was only waist-deep on her friend. "This is far enough," she decided and started coaching Eesai in the basics of floating on her back. "All you have to do is relax," she instructed, "and remember that you'll float as long as you don't panic. This is a nice sheltered cove so there's no surf and no undertow to worry about. The water's almost as calm as a swimming pool and more buoyant." Eesai nervously held herself stiffly but as she became accustomed to the sensation of floating on water, she began to relax.

"It's almost like getting used to free-fall, isn't it?" she commented when she began to enjoy the activity.

"Almost," Sue agreed, "but you have a lot more control of your motion in the water. Let's try a simple back stroke." She demonstrated and after several attempts Eesai managed to swim passably. "You look tired," Sue observed sometime later. "I think that should be enough for now." Eesai agreed and they returned to their sun-bathing.

Before lying down, Sue turned on the small holosound radio she'd brought and after fiddling with the tuning came up with a classical music station and they relaxed to the strains of Sergeant Pepper. This idyllic moment lasted all of a minute before the small wrist comset Sue wore emitted a digital burp.

"Damn!" she muttered. "I knew I shouldn't have brought this thing with us."

"What's the matter?" Eesai asked sleepily.

"Phone call," Sue muttered, activating the unit. "Hello?"

"Ahoy, Sue!" Clark Anspach's voice sounded clearly. "What happened? Why's the screen so dark? I get you out of bed?"

"No, skipper," Sue replied, trying not to sound aggravated, "Eesai and I went sailing and we're miles from the nearest comscreen. What's up?"

"Jerry just called me. He and Malana are in Rome."

"What? I thought they were supposed to be in Cleveland. They get on the wrong plane or something?"

"No. Malana took it in her head to go have a pow wow with the Pope. I wouldn't be surprised if she decided to drop in on Jerusalem next, followed by Mecca, Lhasa, and San Francisco. In the mean time we need you and Eesai to fill in for her."

"But, skipper, we were supposed to have this week off!"

"Sorry, Sue, "but the people expect to see a La and Malana and Eesai are the only two we have. Can you be in Phoenix by tomorrow evening?"

Twelve

Malvina Smythe, President of Terra and the Confederate Colonies, titular head of every known human world, ran her dark brown fingers through silver-gray hair and seriously considered dropping out of the race for a second six-year term. After forty years as a gladiator in the Confederation's political arena she had come to believe that in spite of the fact that the it seemed to constantly change, there was truly nothing new under the sun. Until now.

She had based her career on a careful study of events in the past. Similar occurrences produced similar reactions among the populace, to which politicians reacted with gratifying predictability. Ever since the first word of the Lano had reached her, President Smythe had been looking for a precedent to base her own actions on. So far all she had come up with was the 1938 broadcast of War of the Worlds and the Native American reaction to Columbus, Cortez, Pizzaro and their colleagues. The first didn't seem to apply, at least nobody seemed to be in panic mode and the Lano hadn't started shooting people with mysterious death rays as yet. Similarly, she tabled consideration of the conquistadores. Columbus' early expeditions, however, might provide some parallels depending on the motives of the Lano.

It was a rough analogy at best, however. Columbus came looking for gold and traded beads and other trinkets, backed by the same religious convictions that inspired the Inquisition. Not much later he established colonies that exploited the natives, demanding gold from them. Malana Di Masai had, so far, merely asked to talk. The Lano, she said, would have no interest in establishing settlements on human worlds, although a joint colony was not out of the question if equitable agreement could be achieved.

Smythe paused to consider the possibilities. A joint colony. Now just how would that work? If only Terran colonies were autonomous. It wasn't the first time she had wished for that. Malvina Smythe smiled. Good thing that none of her opponents even suspected she was a closet anarchist. Governments were like dragons - persistent and durable beasts that preferred to dominate everything within their reach - and both were much harder to kill if they knew they were under attack. Smythe had labored hard to keep the dragon from realizing that she was eating at its belly, but she had a long list of victories under her belt in her private battle for personal rights. She needed more time - another term at least - to complete her own private agenda. Why couldn't the Lano have stayed undiscovered for another year? This was an election year, dammit! She just didn't need the uncertainty.

Once more she reviewed her notes regarding a possible Columbian parallel. She sifted through a stack of papers and then picked the whole thing up and dropped it into the "waste paper basket" - a stylishly finished cube of metal and synthetic ceramic - by her desk. The lid of the basket closed itself and there was a soft rumble for a second as the material was quickly analyzed and sent off through a series of chutes for recycling. All that data was on file in her personal computer anyway. She just preferred working with hard copy when she could.

"Madame President?" the voice of her personal secretary called from out of thin air. Speakerless sound systems were the latest thing, inducing vibrations in the air through manipulations of micro-Matsuya-Tron fields, but the intercom on the President's had been maladjusted to make it sound as though the speaker was directly behind her. She'd asked to have it fixed, but evidently this bug was endemic to the new technology and thousands of requests had preceded hers.

"Yes, Theodore?"

"Representative Boch on line one, ma'am"

"Thank you, Theodore," she replied. Now why had John Boch called this time? He'd been calling once or twice a day practically since the Lano had landed and was one of the most ardent pro-Lano men on the Council, although he thought he was keeping his feelings hidden.

"Yes, John?" Malvina asked tiredly.

"Just thought you'd like to know that the Pope's making a revised policy statement, Mal."

"Channel 666?" she asked, failing at an attempt at a smile.

"Ha ha," he replied dryly. "Actually the message is closer to the opposite. Madame Di Masai broke all the rules and paid him a social call. Tune in the Vatican Channel. I'll hold on."

Malvina shrugged and fiddled with a few controls on her desk that caused a large holoscreen to drop down out of the ceiling and activate on the channel of her choice.

"...have determined that the Lano are a basically good people," Pope Leo was saying, "and our secular leaders should be actively encouraged to complete treaty negotiations with the Trelendir." He continued on to cite various bits of Biblical verse that seemed to prophesy the coming of the Lano and their basic goodness and added a parable or two before repeating the basic message that he started with. Malvina finally deactivated the screen as the commentators tried to find subtle hidden meanings in an essentially simple and forthright speech.

"So?" John Boch asked. "What do you think?"

"About what, John?"

There was a pause while Boch tried to digest that. "The Pope's speech," he prompted her.

"It was a very courageous stance to take given the rabid ferocity with which Stump and his followers are attacking the Lano," President Smythe replied.

"Mal, don't you think it's time you took a courageous stance of your own, or do you think you can mugwump your way to reelection?"

"I resent that, John," she replied indignantly, "Especially coming from an old friend."

"It's because we are friends that I'm putting it this way, Mal. You've got to take a stand soon or you'll seem weak in the eyes of the voters."

"I know, John. I know."

Thomas E. Stump sat back with a frosted pitcher of margueritas and looked out from his balcony to watch the sun set serenely over Mobile Bay. Across the bay he could see the City of Mobile where his new corporate headquarters were being built. Picking up the pitcher, he refilled the glass in his hand and drank half of the icy liquid down before settling back once more into the chair.

Alcoholic drink was a forbidden sin for a member of the People Who Share Ministry, but then so was the honey-blond stretched out on the lounge beside him, wearing nothing but a brightly colored bikini bottom. Stump's wife would never understand, but she was still in Birmingham recording yet another of her miserable pseudo-Biblical production numbers or was it a plea to help the poor starving children on Bellerophon Beta, none of whom would ever see so much as a cent?

Life was good, he mused taking another sip of his drink while looking lovingly along the body of Miss Tandy. He smiled to himself and closed his eyes to fully feel the last light of day on his skin.

An electronic chirp interrupted the idyllic moment and a holographic projector - one of the new screenless models - replaced the sunset and Mobile Bay with a view of Silas Pachenco, one of Stump's silent partners. Pachenco was what some might politely call well-fed but would honestly call elephantine. His thin, dark gray hair completely failed to cover the upper half of his head and did no credit for the sides and back but at least had the dubious virtue of matching the mustache that adorned his upper lip. In all, the change of view could not be considered an improvement. Miss Tandy looked up and waved playfully at the image. Pachenco ignored her and she pouted.

"Stump!" Pachenco's voice grated. "With everything we have at stake, you're getting drunk?"

"Drunk?" Stump laughed. "Hardly. But I deserve a little time to relax every once in a while."

"Not now!" Pachenco rasped. "We need to speak." The blond may have been a professional bimbo, but

she was quick enough on the up-take to realize that was her cue to exit. She got up and without bothering to cover blew each man a kiss before leaving the balcony area. "Lovely girl," Pachenco commented after she had left. Stump smiled smugly until Pachenco continued, "Get rid of her."

"What?"

"Which word did you have trouble with?" Pachenco snapped back. "The situation is too treacherous for you to be indulging in such vices."

"Treacherous!" Stump scoffed, waving the notion away.

"Did you know you were being watched this afternoon?"

"I haven't left the building."

"So? Allow me to show you what can be seen from where I sit." The image on the screen was instantly replaced by one of Stump staring outward from his balcony. He jumped slightly and so did the image. "Yes," Pachenco's voice assured him. "It is live. If I wanted to I could expand the image to count the pores in your face."

"Where?" Stump choked out the question.

"Where am I? Across the bay in Mobile. About fifteen kilometers away. Isn't it amazing what state-of-the-art imaging is capable of? I got this toy," the image changed back to Pachenco who reached out to one side and brought a small black box with a round patch of fine gold wire mesh on the front side and a small color vidscreen on the back, "from the P.I. who was using it to record you and the girl. He won't be needing it any longer," Pachenco added, "but I cannot continue to be your guardian angel, nor can I afford to keep enough men watching to protect your good name."

"I'll be more careful," Stump replied, badly shaken.

"You'll live like a monk!" Pachenco replied more heatedly than he had been so far. "Look here, preacherman. You owe your success to our financial backing. Don't you ever forget that!"

"How could I?" Stump muttered sourly.

"You seem to have done a good job of forgetting lately. Now you are going to listen to me and do absolutely everything I tell you to, because unless you already have the wings of an angel you'll go the same way as the man with the camera." Stump shuddered, but said nothing. "First you will send the girl away."

"Where?"

"It doesn't matter. Just get rid of her!" Pachenco stormed.

"I feel I owe her something more than a boot in the ass."

"All right. Send her to me. I'll find a position for her," Pachenco replied with a smug smile.

I just bet you will, Stump thought sourly, but kept that thought to himself. "What else?" he asked defeatedly.

"You need to refute the Pope's statement in favor of the Lano."

"The Pope? Nobody takes him seriously anymore," Stump laughed.

"This may not be the Middle Ages," Pachenco agreed, "but his opinion still carries a good deal of weight among the masses and in the Catholic regions of human space. Worse, his influence has been growing since this morning's speech."

"What speech?" Stump asked.

Pachenco muttered something his Sicilian grandmother used to say. He didn't really know what it meant, but he found that cursing softly in Italian usually put the fear of God into any underling such mutterings might be directed at. Stump's expression was akin to that of a hamster who has just realized that its great escape from the tread-wheel has landed it on top of the household cat.

"The speech encouraging world leaders to negotiate with the Lano," Pachenco said one word at a time. "Have you been so besotted you could not even take the time to watch the news, Stump?"

"Oh, that speech!" Stump replied uneasily. "Well I never expected to influence the government for long anyway. The whole point was to make enough money to pay off the ministry's debts and put us all on easy street for life."

"Wrong!" Pachenco stormed. "That may have been your motive, but your pathetic little church was never anything more than a tax shelter for me. Now we have a grip on the Confederate Council and that is worth more than all the contributions you will ever get. We are not going to meekly give up that sort of power."

"I don't see how we can help it," Stump shrugged nervously.

"Ah, but I do," Pachenco replied calmly. "Now here is what you are going to do..."

Thirteen

"Hmm," Jerry mused over a letter he had just opened. "Here's an interesting offer." Negotiations were set to resume in a week and the "Lano Support Team" had returned to Bolivia to assess their new position. Reading the mail was near the top of Janice's high priority list, although most of it promised a chance at a luxury vacation in the low-gravity spas of Luna if they would purchase a magazine subscription.

"What have you got?" Tom Cervantes asked.

"The BBC would like Malana to consult on a series concerning Lano culture. History, legends, religion. That sort of thing."

"I'd like that," Malana smiled, "but I'm not sure when I'll find the time. We only have a few months left to conclude the initial negotiations before we make rendezvous with whomever the Trelendir sends out as an

envoy."

"Being consultant may only mean doing a few interviews from which they base their shows," Tom pointed out.

"Maybe I can consult too," Eesai volunteered. "I'll be available during the days while Malana is in conference."

"Aren't you working as her aide?" Janice asked.

"Officially, yes, but it's the easiest assignment I ever had."

"My notes," Malana explained, holding up a sheet of paper on which words appeared magically, "tend to take themselves."

"Nice trick," Janice commented. "I don't suppose you could teach it to me."

"Sorry, although we could probably make a device that did that for you."

"No, thanks," Janice replied. "I've got several transcribers already." Then she returned to the BBC proposal, "You know you really should give them some of your time, Malana."

"That's right," Tom agreed. "According to the latest polls, you are one of the ten most admired women in the system."

"Yeah," Sue commented, "but according to that same poll, Eesai and I are tied for third sexiest woman in the system. Ridiculous!"

"I'll say," Eesai agreed with a wink. "I'm much sexier than she is."

"Watch it, short stuff!" Sue gave her a mock-growl. Then both of them dissolved in laughter.

"I must admit," Clark Anspach changed the subject, "that all this publicity has been excellent for Meriwether, Inc. We managed to unload several useless claims simply because we were the first to contact the Lano. Just today we made good on our old loans and renegotiated the rest at prime. We now have more than enough to pay for the needed maintenance on Meriwether-1 and refuel a dozen times. The only problem is that the delay in getting the money put us way back in the queue for port services. At the present rate we won't be able to lift for six months and I really wanted to be at the rendezvous."

"You will be," Malana assured him. "The presence of Meriwether as my personal transport will be a condition of any agreement I make. I did buy a round trip ticket after all, and I always get my money's worth." Laughs all around.

The sound of a commset alarm went off and Louise Anspach activated the living room's com screen. Johannes Boch's face soon appeared before them. He looked tired. His hair showed signs of only being hastily arranged by smoothing his hands across it and his eyes had a wild look to them.

"John," Janice asked, "what's wrong? You look awful."

"Just woke up," the councilman replied. "An aide called me to hear Stump's latest tirade. What do you think?"

"About Stump or his speech or sermon or whatever? We haven't heard it."

"You'd better. I have a recording I'll play for you. Hold on." There was a brief pause while Boch stepped away from his screen. There was snow and static for a moment which resolved into an all-too-clear image of the Reverend Thomas E. Stump. He smiled benevolently out at his congregation and then began to speak.

As was his usual bent he started off with an anecdote about a fictitious friend of his. Like so many of his sermons, the anecdote had little to nothing to do with the message he wished to impart, but it gave him a place to start. Next he started quoting passages from the Bible with varying degrees of accuracy. This too was part of his standard formula, for it allowed him to pass smoothly from the irrelevant starting tale to what he really had to say.

"Spawn of Satan or loathsome witches, it matters not," Stump finally got down to the shouting bit fifteen minutes after beginning. "Our duty is to destroy evil utterly wherever it is found! I personally detest physical violence, but when peaceful measures fail, the godly must do what is necessary regardless of our personal inclinations.

"Already the vile Lano have corrupted certain religious and political leaders." He nodded with a tight smile on his face. He didn't need to name names. His faithful flock had heard them often enough. He also didn't have to tell them what he wanted, although there were other reasons why he drew the line where he did. Instead he spoke at length about the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, the encounters between the prophets of God and the followers of Baal. He told his viewers of the basic rightness of the Spanish Inquisition and waxed eloquently about the good old days of the Salem witch trials, concluding with, "We must not suffer this evil to live! Now is the time to purge all traces of this foul corruption from the Earth and all the Confederation! Go, my faithful! This is our holy crusade! Go and do what you must!" His choir then started singing a psalm-like arrangement extolling the virtues of destroying evil and pretty much summed up the entire sermon in under three minutes.

The song was interrupted halfway through and Boch reappeared. "Sorry about taking so long," he said immediately. "I was out of the room getting some coffee. So now what do you think."

"I think he's gone over the edge," Achmed replied, "And as a professional psychologist I try not to use phrases like that loosely."

"He was obviously raving," Jerry agreed. "I imagine he'll be picked up anytime now and that'll be the last we ever hear of him."

"Don't you wish," John Boch replied sarcastically. "My sources tell me he has a security personnel set-up around his headquarters that nothing short of an army is likely to get through."

"Are any of his followers acting on his instructions?" Janice asked.

"It's been less than an hour, but there are already protestors lined up around St. Patrick's in New York. Too soon to tell if it will escalate. How well defended are you all there?"

Janice glanced over at Clark and Louise. Clark shrugged, but Louise answered, "The estate is very defensible, but I don't have much besides a few hunting weapons for my guests, mostly bows and arrows."

"You have a permit for hunting on your lands?" Boch asked, surprised.

"Came with the estate," Louise replied, "but it's more of a responsibility than a privilege. The introduction of various nonindigenous species have upset the ecological balance of the region. Hunting on the estate is restricted to ecological maintenance. Not particularly exciting, I'm afraid. The fishing is much better."

"You ought to hire some security then," Boch returned to the subject. "Either that or scatter to the winds. Stump's declared a crusade and there are just enough fanatics and simpletons among his followers to take him literally. Since the crusade is against the Lano, I imagine that there will be attacks against anyone seen as a friend to the Lano."

"But you don't know that these will be violent attacks," Malana pointed out. "A few thousand people shouting unkind slogans against us won't be more than a minor nuisance."

"They will if they start throwing rocks," Boch countered. "Look. Just be ready if violence does break out." The others nodded grimly and Boch signed off.

"Don't you just love living in interesting times?" Jerry chuckled.

Fourteen

Boch's fears did not materialize at once and protest demonstrations remained peaceful at first, but as summer progressed in the northern hemisphere tempers rose along with temperature. Stump's power base had always been in North America, but he began to gain followers and allied churches in Europe, Africa and Australia.

Malana and Eesai continued to give press conferences and appear on the talk shows as their schedules between bouts of negotiations permitted as did the members of Meriwether, Inc.

Between two equally persuasive forces, the voting constituency of Terra appeared to be evenly divided on the Lano question. Then toward the end of August the first of a series of riots broke out.

It was a sweltering late summer afternoon in New York City outside St. Pat's on the site of the first protests. Archbishop Peter Ramsey made the mistake of meeting the protestors and telling them to disburse. Jeers and catcalls soon turned to stones and the unfortunate man was rushed to the hospital with a concussion.

The news services picked up the story and the next day Stump's crusaders found themselves pitted against mobs of outraged Catholics. Within a week there were similar incidents in every major city where anti-Lano demonstrations were held. Churches and synagogues were burned along with the homes of those politicians who had clearly stated their position on the Lano question whether pro or con. Most cities found themselves strangled by martial law and dusk-to-dawn curfews.

Politicians found that choosing sides became even more dangerous than usual. Death threats against councilmen became commonplace and few dared to live without a large staff of bodyguards. As violence increased their constituents demanded a resolution to the problem.

Warren Perez, one of three representatives from the California District, was one of the leading proponents for a trade agreement with the Lano. He spoke eloquently on the inevitability of sharing space with the Lano Trelendir and of the mutual benefits that a close association could bring. His constituency included a high percentage of People Who Share members, but he was so dedicated to his own ideals that he refused to bow to their political pressure.

However, that which will not bend eventually breaks. One evening in late September Senior Councillor Perez was just leaving his home in San Diego on his way to a fund-raising rally when a bright red, low-flying jet buzzed his home. A bomb was dropped and a moment later there was nothing left of the Perez estate save a wide, smoking crater that intruded on large parts of his neighbors' property. Divine Retribution, the reactionary wing of People Who Share, was proudly claiming credit for the destruction before the Municipal Fire Department managed to respond.

The next morning, a haggard-looking Reverend Stump appeared on world-wide holovision, praising the actions of "the faithful" without bothering to specify what actions he praised. While he spoke a bright red jet was seen over Vancouver just prior to a massive explosion across the bay destroying the headquarters of a vocal pro-Lano organization and killing hundreds of uninvolved victims. Divine Retribution once more claimed the credit.

Thomas Stump was arrested in a police raid backed up by the Confederate Guard that afternoon, but was released several hours later when he publicly disavowed any knowledge or support of Divine Retribution's activities. However, when he got home he sent a coded message of thanks to his lieutenant in charge of militant activity.

The next day saw bombings in Perth, Sydney, Rio de Janeiro, London, Paris, Rome, New York, and Los Angeles. Once more the credit was claimed by Divine Retribution who also, according to Stump's and Pachenco's plan, renounced all claims with the People Who Share Ministry.

Finally, that evening President Malvina Smythe jumped down off the fence she had been sitting and landed squarely on the side of the pro-Lano forces. Violence, she had said, could never be condoned, and in a moving speech placed the entire planet under martial law for the first time in history. Under her direct orders as Commander-in-Chief, the entirety of the Terra/Luna-based military went on alert and began searching out all members of Divine Retribution.

Five hours later, a bright red jet was shot out of the sky over La Paz by a recently assigned unit of Confederate Marines. Nobody claimed credit, but witnesses in the city claimed that the Anspach chateau above the city had been briefly enshrouded in a bright green sparkling aura.

Several days went by quietly until a full company of marines stationed themselves outside a seedy warehouse in Picayune, Mississippi. It was a four-story building surrounded by vacant lots and another warehouse of similar construction. Patches of shoddily laid bricks showed through on the ancient structure where the smooth facade of plaster had broken off.

Captain Milo Ohms studied the building through a scanner - a slightly antiquated device that used the highly versatile Matsuya-Tron field to detect the internal structure of the building. The holographic readout also showed him over two dozen man-sized objects - people, obviously - that had been in motion when his company first arrived but most of which had now come to rest in close proximity to various windows.

Newer equipment could have revealed their posture and whether or not they were armed, two important data, and he could only assume that they were crouched by the windows and heavily armed. It was a fair

assumption, but the people at the windows could conceivably be innocent workers who were curious about all the activity outside. At least that's the way a court would see it if Ohms ordered an all-out assault on the building without provocation.

He lifted a small, button-sized microphone to his lips and spoke in a conversational tone. He could have whispered, had he so desired. Everyone in the building would have heard him regardless.

"This is Captain Ohms of the Terran Marine Corps. I have a warrant to search this building for anyone connected to the outlaw organization Divine Retribution. You are ordered to comply with Confederate Statute 150-A and..."

A shot rang out from one of the upper windows of the Mississippi warehouse. In spite of the danger, Ohms was relieved. This made his job so much clearer.

"Take them," he spoke the order flatly to a lieutenant. Instead of relaying the order verbally, the lieutenant nodded to a nearby sergeant who, in turn tapped the shoulder of a technician seated at the console of the scanner.

The technician made a few adjustments and the air around the warehouse began to hum and the marines' view of the building became wildly distorted as though it were a distant object on a desert floor. The staccato of more shots rang out from the building and the marines replied with a heavy rain of steel-jacketed lead.

The hum grew louder and the distortion effect became greater, although it was clear that plaster and loose bricks were falling off the walls of the warehouse, even in those places that were not being hit by the marines' bullets. After a few minutes shooting from the building stopped and Captain Ohms gave another set of orders. All shooting ceased and the hum and distortion faded away.

"Six gees, sir," the technician reported as the effects of his device died away, informing his superior of just how high the Matsuya-Tron field had intensified gravity within the building.

"And it's still standing?" Ohms mused. "Must have been well built."

"There's some structural damage to the roof and top floor in the northwest quarter, sir, and I doubt that any of the ceilings are intact."

"Still, I'd have bet good money that it would have gone to dust before three gees."

"Normal gravity now, sir," the technician reported a moment later. Then Ohms ordered one platoon into the now silent building. It took several hours to account for all the terrorists inside. Several had died from gunshot and five had been crushed by the section of the roof that had fallen in. Another, it turned out later, died when his heart proved incapable of functioning under the increased gravity. Most, including the cell-leader, however, survived with superficial bruises. Interrogations took considerably longer.

"To date we have arrested every known leader of Divine Retribution," Malvina Smythe told the press

corps several days later, "and feel confident that the organization has been functionally wiped out. We had hoped to ascertain whether or not any connections to the People Who Share Ministry remained after the public split between the two groups but evidence is inconclusive so we would not feel justified in acting against the Reverend Stump or his people at this time. If further evidence one way or another should surface later on, you'll be informed.

"That concludes my prepared remarks this morning. Questions?" A storm of hands sprang up as every journalist in the room shouted for attention at once. President Smythe smiled tightly at the ritual. She was fairly certain that they all knew that she had already planned on whom she would call and in what order, but they all went through the customary dance for attention. An alien biologist, viewing these people for the first time, might have mistaken the reaction for a mating ritual. "Yes, Peter?"

"Peter Evans, Interworld News," he introduced himself unnecessarily. This was another long tradition mindlessly repeated. "Has there been a colonial reaction yet to the news concerning Divine Retribution?"

"Well," Malvina replied, choosing her words carefully, "there obviously hasn't been time to get a reaction to the recent arrests." Quite true since the nearest colony was a four-day round trip away and the mean travel time to the colony worlds in general was ten days to get there and back, stopping only to unload, refuel, and load up again. "However, according to the polls, most colonials were mystified by Reverend Stump's polemics against the Lano, so we expect that there will be a generally positive reaction to the demise of Divine Retribution. Yes?" Another flurry of hands accompanied by a thunder of voices. "The lady with the red hat." Her's was a new face in the crowd and Malvina almost always chose somebody new for the second question. The news services had caught on to this and usually sent someone new each week.

"Dianne Petrovski," the pert brunette introduced herself with an Eastern European accent that seemed to enhance her voice, "Die Zeiten."

The Times? Malvina translated to herself quickly. Obviously not the one in London. Then she remembered hearing about the news service that had recently started up the previous week in Bonn. They were trying a bold experiment and actually printing on paper for the first time in decades. Paper, they argued, was more readily recyclable than a news tape. Maybe they were right. Then Malvina realized she had missed the question. "I'm sorry," she apologized, "could you repeat that?"

"Of course," Dianne replied. "What is your response to the charges leveled by Steffano Battista," Smythe's leading opponent in the election for Confederate President, "that the government's persecution of People Who Share is a calculated attempt to undercut his own campaign?"

"Señor Battista's affiliations," Smythe replied following a deep breath, "with People Who Share are a matter of public record. His required financial disclosures show that seventy-five percent of his campaign funds have come from People Who Share and its members. Naturally he is going to protest when it turns out that there may be something shady about his backers. I will repeat just to be fair, however, that there is no clear connection between People Who Share and the activities of the reactionary splinter group Divine Retribution since Reverent Stump renounced his support."

"But," Dianne added questioningly, "there is no definitive evidence to the contrary?"

"Correct," Malvina replied smugly. "Next?" She fielded several more questions before finally calling for the final question.

"Artur Mikkelsen, Confederate Broadcasting. Madame President, you have recently been highly

pro-Lano. Have you spoken directly with Malana Di Masai yet, and, if so, why have we not heard of that yet?" Malvina was about to reply when a message flashed across a small flat screen built into the podium she was using. She scanned it quickly before speaking.

"No, Artur," Malvina replied with the same disarming smile that had been one of her greatest political tools. "I have not yet had that pleasure. However, I plan to remedy that in just a few minutes when she and I meet upstairs in my office." There was a satisfying gasp as she dropped this bombshell on the ladies and gentlemen of the press.

"Was this meeting set up secretly?" Artur stammered out hastily before President Smythe could leave the podium.

"No, Artur, there was no secret about it, but the meeting was set up just a few minutes ago. Thank you for coming," she concluded without bothering to explain. Her chief of staff would handle that while she was on her way to her office.

The hallway was a stately affair, floored with large marblized tiles. The walls were lined with portraits of various prominent figures from history. The original plan was to use this hall for the official portraits of the Confederacy's Presidents, but to date there had only been five of them. At this rate it would be another two centuries before there would be enough former presidents to make the hall look full. Instead there was the most improbable collection of paintings including Thomas Edison, George Washington, Ned Kelly, Leonardo da Vinci, Margaret Thatcher, Charles Lindburg, Mao Tse Tung, Mohandas and Indira Gandhi, Benjamin Franklin, Genghis Khan, Che Guevara, Amelia Earhart, W.E.B. DuBois, and a whole host of others who in some way did something positive to make people remember their names. Malvina paused for a moment and noted, not for the first time, the preponderance of folk heroes of the old United States. For that matter, why had none of the heroes of the formation of the Terran Confederation been honored here? Then she shrugged and moved on.

She passed her own portrait. It had only been hung there a year earlier, bumping one of Malcolm X that now hung in the Terran Portrait Gallery in Chicago. Too severe, she thought to herself as she marched past and on to that of her immediate predecessor, Forbes Booth. Old Forbes had held the office for four consecutive terms and eventually died in office the week before Malvina's inauguration. Hadn't that put a damper on the festivities! It was a celebration in black and white, each celebrant wearing the traditional mourning colors of his culture. The late-night talk show hosts had made tasteless jokes about it for weeks.

For all of Forbes' time in office, he never really accomplished much except to preserve the status quo. Well, Malvina considered, perhaps keeping that up for twenty-four years was an accomplishment all by itself.

She walked briskly past the next two paintings, believers in a strong central government, the pair of them. Malvina had little liking or respect for their accomplishments. She came, at last to the final portrait, that of Arnold T. Mendel, the gentle Austrian politician who had drafted the Articles of Confederation and led the world and her colonies on the path of productive peace. Malvina gave him her usual curt nod, which by now she thought of as a salute, and then walked through the heavy oaken door at the end of the hall and directly into the reception room to her office.

"Madame President," her secretary and aide, Theodore, greeted her. There was no need for security guards here. State-of-the-art Matsuya-Tron monitors could handle any problem that might come up and no form of weapon had ever passed security undetected at the front gate. "Malana Di Masai is waiting for you inside."

"Thank you," Malvina replied. "Please hold all calls until further notice."

"Of course."

Malvina took a deep breath and opened the office door. She walked in displaying all the confidence that she did not feel. The door closed silently behind her as she approached Malana Di Masai. Malana rose to greet her and in a gesture of historic significance, for all the lack of witnesses, the two women clasped hands.

The tall black woman who was President of the entire Terran Confederation looked deep into the eyes of the diminutive, amber-skinned envoy of the Lano race and said, "Malana Di Masai, whatever kept you so long?"

Part III

History With Chocolate Chips

One

Lewis Clark Anspach paused at the spaceport gate to look back at his sister. She rarely saw the Meriwether-1 off when they left for space, but today was an exception. She had become quite fond of Malana and Eesai and the Lord only knew when they might be back for another visit.

"Godspeed and safe home, Clark," she called out.

He gave her a tight smile and a wave and then turned away to face his ship. Meriwether-1 sat staunchly on the tarmac as though she knew just how momentous a mission she was about to embark on.

By the time they returned she would have a sister, the Meriwether-2, but at the moment that ship was little more than a glimmer in the construction crew chief's eye. The corporation finally had a sufficient line of credit to afford a custom-built ship and they were going at it with no expenses spared. Anspach hoped that when he returned, his biggest problem would be in finding a qualified crew for the second ship.

Of course, there was a high risk that the provisional agreements between President Smythe and Malana might not hold up when they learned of the Trelendir's reaction. For that matter the Lano ambassador, whoever they chose, if they chose anyone at all, might be coming with an entirely different agenda than expected. Malana tried to sound confident that at the very least the Trelendir would not abandon her and Eesai, but even she could not hide her nervousness over whether or not there would even be a Lano ship at the rendezvous.

Clark climbed the ramp to the Meriwether's main hatch and turned to take a last look at the earthly port. He took one final deep breath of genuine Terran air and then entered his ship.

Ito Deshpande was on duty just inside the hatch and he rose to greet his captain. Anspach, although an old military man, did not require salutes from his crew. So long as they performed their duties with the speed and efficiency he had come to expect of them, he didn't mind the informality. He preferred a comfortable ship to a tight one.

"All hands present and accounted for, skipper," Ito reported. "Madame Malana and Subcaptain Eesai are on board and stowing their gear too," he added.

"Thank you, Mr. Deshpande," Clark nodded. "Seal the hatch and prepare to lift."

"Aye, Skip!" Ito gave him a salute while wearing a big grin. Clark returned both the salute and the grin. By God! It felt good to lift with high morale for a change.

He started to walk away and then turned back to Ito. "Oh," he said as an afterthought, "let Malana and Eesai know they are welcome on the bridge for liftoff." Ito nodded and started closing the ship's hatch.

Clark was halfway to the bridge when he felt the abrupt but minor change in pressure that signified the final closing of the hatch. He changed his mind as to destination and headed instead to his cabin.

As he suspected, his two bags had been neatly stacked and strapped down to the floor of the cabin's small closet. It wouldn't take long to unpack; it never did and he would prefer to have the chore over and done with. It would complete his return to the ship.

He flicked on his intercom - it was a new system with a flat video screen to go along with the audio speaker - and spoke, "Captain to the bridge. Sue, are you up there?"

There was a pause, then the small screen lit up showing a completely different familiar face, "Eesai here, Skipper. What can I do for you?"

Clark's eyes opened wide and his jaw dropped comically in astonishment. Eesai fought not to giggle at the sight and was nearly successful. Eesai was a friend, but it bothered Clark that she would have been left manning the pilot's post. It wasn't so much that she was an alien - well, maybe it was - but she was a paying passenger, not crew.

"Where's Ms. Ho?" he asked at last.

"Sue's talking to the tower, Skipper," Eesai replied easily. That bothered him too. Only crew were supposed to call him "Skipper." "Something about the Navy ships we're getting as an escort. So I'm filling in on the intra-ship comm board until she gets free."

"Navy?" Clark asked. "You mean Aerospace Force?"

"Whatever," Eesai shrugged. There was another buzz indicative of someone else trying to talk to the bridge. "Got another call coming in, Skip, can you hold?" Clark said that he could and the screen went blank while Clark wondered what sort of escort he was getting. This was the first he'd heard of it. Then the screen lit up again and Eesai asked, "So what can I do for you, Captain Anspach?"

"Just wondering how long until lift-off and would I have time to unpack first."

"Take your time," Eesai replied. "From what I can hear from half of Sue's conversation we don't even have initial clearance yet."

"What? We had initial clearance yesterday."

He heard Sue in the background then Eesai replied, "Sorry, I'm still not completely acquainted with Terran bureaucratic jargon. Sue says we're on something called 'indefinite hold' until the escort ships have been programmed, whatever that means."

"A difference in style," Anspach explained. "Exploratory ships like to keep their navigational programs open-ended because we never know when we're going to decide to change course and look somewhere else. Basically, we just point the ship and go using our detection instruments to keep us out of trouble, but the Aerospace Force prefers to use a closed course program. It's more accurate, has all the known hazards programmed in and needs fewer course corrections en route, but if you have to change course the navigational computers have to be completely reprogrammed."

"Trelorian ships use the first method," Eesai commented. "Why would anyone want to handicap their own versatility?"

"Navigators in the military tend to be between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two - little more than kids, really, and they don't have the required experience to run an open-ended program safely. By the time they do have it, they've served their hitch and entered the private sector."

"Odd." There was another intercom buzz at Eesai's end. "Anything else, Skipper?"

"No," he replied. "I'll be on the bridge in a few minutes."

"Right-o!" Eesai signed off.

Clark turned to the task of emptying his luggage, making a mental note to talk to Eesai about her use of the term "Skipper" some time when they were alone.

Half an hour later Anspach entered the bridge. Chen Li McGrath was busily talking at his communications board, leaving Clark to wonder where he had been when Eesai was manning the intercom. Probably the tower was giving him too much trouble and Sue had stepped in to give him the needed support.

Sue and Eesai were pouring over navigational charts together. Strictly speaking that information was not supposed to be available to any La until after a treaty had been signed, but what the politicians didn't know wouldn't hurt them and Clark trusted Sue's judgement on whether Eesai herself could be trusted. For that matter he himself trusted the Lano. He added this infraction to his mental list of things to discuss with Sue and Eesai as soon as they could reconcile their deep space schedules.

"Morning, Skipper!" Sue called out cheerily as he crossed the floor to his chair. "We've been given clearance to resume counting down. Finally," she added. "Just coming up on T minus fifteen minutes." She checked the clock on her board and then announced the news ship-wide at the correct time.

"Good," Clark replied. "We shouldn't have been kept waiting at all."

"Maybe the military fly boys are afraid we'll try to lose them," Jerry suggested from the entrance to the

bridge as he and Malana walked in.

"I don't know why they think we need them. We could have carried the Terran Legate and his staff comfortably enough in Meriwether."

"Not respectable enough, Clark," Jerry noted. "What self-respecting ambassador would be so cheap as to offer to split a cab ride with another? Now, really! Malana's already hired us, so..."

"Still, three fully armed battleships? Isn't President Smythe afraid of sending the Trelendir the wrong message - 'Hi! Wanna fight?'"

"Not to worry, Captain," Malana told him soothingly. "The gesture won't be misinterpreted."

"If you say so," Clark replied uncertainly.

"Damn!" Chen Li swore softly.

"Problems, Mr. McGrath?" Anspach asked.

"It's this course the Aerospace Force expects us to follow to the rendezvous. It's a low efficiency course and will eat up twenty-four point five percent more fuel. I hate that kind of waste."

"So do I," Clark replied. "Tell whoever's in charge over there that we'll either use our plotted course or we'll expect them to pick up the tab for refueling when we get back."

"Can we do that?" Chen Li asked.

"Sure can," Anspach snapped. "It's a free confederation. We can say anything we like and if they disagree just tell them 'Chapter Seven, Article Twenty-three, paragraph four stroke A one two.'"

"What's that mean?" Chen Li asked.

"Just say it," Anspach said smugly. The comm officer did so and after a few minutes whoever he had been arguing with agreed and sent them a hard copy of the agreement.

"I don't get it," McGrath admitted.

"The regulation is part of the A.F. charter and regards the carrying of foreign dignitaries by a commercial liner. When the Aerospace Force insists on plotting the course they have to pay the bills."

"I've never heard that one before," Jerry laughed.

"I don't think it's ever come up before. It probably wouldn't have now if Malana hadn't insisted on riding Meriwether. Whoever's in charge must have a real chip on his shoulder to be willing to agree to pay for the trip."

"Admiral Maas. He's commanding the three escort ships," Chen Li reported.

"Maas? What a choice!" Anspach exclaimed "Oh well, at least this time his ego is working my way."

"Is there something wrong with this Admiral Maas, Clark?" Malana asked.

Clark was silent for a moment as his eyes saw only that last time he stood before the then Commodore Maas' desk. The desk, an antique walnut example of Twentieth Century contemporary, was about half again as large as it really needed to be and the chairs set in front of it for visitors had each had one inch carefully removed from their legs so that anyone sitting in them would feel insignificant against the massive symbol of authority looming ever so slightly above them.

Clark relived the incident as he answered Malana's question.

"No, thank you, sir," a younger Clark Anspach answered. "I'd prefer to stand." Even then Clark had tried to make a habit of not making the same mistake twice.

"I insist, Anspach," Maas told him firmly. "Sit!"

"Yes, sir," Clark replied resignedly. He sat, however, at attention as though a steel rod had been installed in the place of his spine, attempting to glean any possible advantage over his superior's psychological warfare.

"You know, of course, why I called you in here, captain," Maas began stiffly. Clark nodded. "That incident on New Delphi. Dirty business on every side."

"The colonists there are a superstitious lot, sir," Clark replied. "There was no way to know that the arrival of my ship would spark off mass hysteria." The situation had been a surprise all around. New Delphi had been founded by a group of mystics, pseudoscientists, and self-proclaimed psychics. They had rapidly become the Confederation's center for the paranormal and although they had more than their fair share of spoon-benders and mind-readers, the world really became known for its oracles.

Every New Year predictions concerning the coming year were published from New Delphi and in spite of the fact that less than one percent of these forecasts ever proved true, there were people on nearly every world who swore by them. However, nowhere were the prophets of New Delphi more believed in than on New Delphi itself.

One prophecy became self-fulfilling when one of the leading oracles mumbled out a string of syllables that were interpreted to mean that the arrival of a spaceship with jet black landing fins - such as all Aerospace Force ships had - and the emblem of a bird of prey on its hull would signal the destruction of the colony. A few days later Captain Lewis Clark Anspach of the frigate Peregrine touched down at Port Apollo.

The colonists, convinced that the end of their world was near, naturally saw Anspach's ship as the harbinger of their destruction. The riots began that same night and were fueled over the following weeks by the continued reports of casualties and devastation. Eventually a mob of nearly one thousand panic-crazed men and women broke through the spaceport security barriers and approached the Peregrine in the hopes that the destruction of the omen would cancel the prophecy.

Clark had ordered the ship sealed, which kept the rioters out, but when a pair of the port's tractors were

used to try to tip the ship over, he hastily ordered an emergency lift-off. Twenty-nine people were killed instantly by the backblast and another four dozen or so were trampled in the terrified rout. Over the next few days still more died of the injuries they sustained that night. Eventually the Marines had landed and placed what little was left of the colony under martial law.

A Board of Inquiry later ruled that Anspach had been justified in his actions and even the President had rightfully held him blameless in the entire incident, but Maas had never liked Captain Anspach and had been deeply embarrassed by the fact that Anspach had been under his command.

"Don't count on your next promotion," Maas had growled. "Don't count on your next twenty or thirty promotions. If I had my way, you'd have been busted clear down to civilian!" As it was, the Peregrine had already shipped out under another captain. Maas stopped talking and tried unsuccessfully to stare the young captain down. "Oh, get out of my face!" he grunted at last. A hint was enough from that direction; Clark left the office. Six months later, with no further assignments in sight, he finally realized that he had become a permanent fixture in the officers' pool and resigned his commission.

"I don't understand," Malana confessed. "Why didn't he just have you transferred to some other command?"

"Maas doesn't work that way. Keeping me under his thumb was his way of getting revenge. If I'd have been transferred, I probably would have eventually been promoted in spite of the black mark on my record."

"But if it wasn't your fault, why was the incident a black mark in the first place?"

"Some think bad luck is contagious," Clark shrugged. "They wouldn't have wanted to catch it from me. Others don't believe in luck at all and figure that I must have done something to put myself in that situation. Either way the end result is the same; only hard work, patience, and a good record will erase the memories. Well, all that is history now. Ancient history. For all I know, Maas doesn't even remember me."

"I wouldn't count on that, skipper," Chen Li told him. "He's calling on channel two-two-five."

"Put him on," Clark sighed.

"Anspach!" a rough voice barked at them a moment later. Maas hadn't changed for the better over the years. His once black hair was now a dirty gray and all but nonexistent on top. Clark found himself wondering when the admiral had started sporting a dark gray eye patch over his left eye, but it did nothing for the man. His space-black dress uniform was badly wrinkled and the brass trim looked like he must have fired his aide a week or more ago, except for a single multi-colored ribbon that was pinned above his left breast pocket. That one ribbon seemed just a bit brighter than the rest of the cluster and was a combination of colors Clark didn't recognize leading him to suspect that it was for commanding an ambassadorial fleet to a rendezvous with an alien culture or some such. "How dare you hold me up? You'll pay for your own fuel or you can stay at home!"

"You know the regs as well as I do," Clark replied coldly. "You either let me plot my own course or you pick up the tab."

"Not an owl's fart," Maas replied with one of his favorite abbreviated expressions. "There's no regulation that says you have to be allowed to lift."

"We have clearance," Clark replied calmly.

"That can change, yankel. Permanently. We can carry the old elf as well as you can."

"Admiral!" Malana replied coldly, stepping in front of the screen pick-up. "The 'old elf' will ride on Meriwether. That is not an option you have. As a matter of fact, the only option you have is whether or not you'll be shipping out with us. Call me when you want your final clearance to lift." She made a chopping gesture with her hand and Chen Li immediately broke off the channel. "Sorry, Clark. I didn't mean to start commanding your people."

Clark, like everyone else on the bridge except Sue, was laughing too hard to comment, but he managed to convey his approval with a wave of his hand.

"This really isn't very funny," Sue commented. "That man can make a lot of trouble for us." Anspach suddenly stopped laughing and nodded.

"Not really," Malana told them. While everyone had been laughing, she had calmly closed her eyes in concentration for a few minutes. "Because if he does, I'll leave his ships' drives inactive."

"You can do that?" Clark asked.

"I just did. Your drive activators are very easy to jam. Just a matter of setting up a certain resonance between the poles. I'll admit that I've never tried it before, but we'll be hearing from him in another few minutes."

"When did you learn so much about our ships' engines?"

"In my spare time ever since we met in the rendezvous system. The possibilities of technology/thalirip hybrids interests me. The job we did on Inillien, I'm sure, is just the first of many such applications."

"We never did get around to analyzing thalirip while we were on Earth. However," Jerry commented. "I still think it's a matter of psionics rather than magic."

"What's the difference?" Clark asked. "There's never been any scientific proof of psionic abilities among humans, has there? Maybe the Lano's magic is psionic in nature. That doesn't make it any less magical to me."

"There are a few historical cases of possible psychic ability that may have been genuine," Jerry allowed, "and I've met any number of people who truly believe they can predict the future and control the roll of a die without ever having direct contact, but I'll admit that I've never seen perfectly reproducible results except for what Malana and other Lano can do," he added.

"Well, we cannot foretell the future any more than you can, although even among us, there are those to claim they can," Malana informed them, "and those fools who believe them."

"We've been put back on hold," Chen Li reported suddenly. The countdown indicators on the bridge had stopped at T minus five minutes and twenty-three seconds.

"And we'll hear from the admiral again soon," Sue predicted. Nods all around. Finally, ten minutes later, Admiral Maas' face graced Meriwether's holoscreen once more.

"All right, we'll reimburse you for your fuel costs," Maas growled, refusing to mention the matter of his engines.

"You sure?" Anspach asked lightly. "You could just let us go our own way, or you could use our course. It would save the Force a bit of money."

"We're doing this my way!" the admiral insisted.

"Fine. When do you plan to lift?"

"Uh... we're having a minor problem on the Vigilant. They need a little more time to stow the ambassador's luggage."

"Right," Clark agreed, practicing his poker-face. "Let me know as soon as his bags are stored. All right?"

"You just be ready to lift when we are," Maas growled.

"And when will that be?" Malana asked, smirking. Maas turned slightly to stare at her with no little distaste. "Just give me the word," she continued, "and I'll give you the clearance."

Maas glanced nervously to his left and then locked eyes with Malana again. "Consider it given," he choked out the barely audible words.

Malana smiled tightly and replied, "Ready when you are, Admiral."

Somebody said something from just off screen and Maas' eyes widened a bit. "Reset countdown to ten minutes and resume on the mark," He ordered, sounding just a bit defeated. A few seconds later a tone sounded and the screen went blank.

"You've got a real mean streak, Malana," Clark told her. "I don't think I've ever met a diplomat with such a," he paused to search for the right words, concluding with, "sense of humor?"

"Taste for practical jokes," she corrected him. "You should have seen me when I was Eesai's age; I was the terror of Fenelir University. I think that's what drove me to become a generalist. Every time I learned a new thalu I looked for a fun way to use it."

"Still, when I think of diplomats, I imagine a group of sober-faced men and women in conservative clothing, carefully considering every move and word."

"You don't know many diplomats, do you?" Malana countered. Clark shrugged.

"Lift-off in T minus five minutes and counting," Chen Li announced.

"New course locked in," Sue reported.

"For what that's worth," Eesai added.

"A problem, First Sub-captain Di Sonea?" Anspach asked with mock formality.

"First Sub-captain Eesai, Skipper," she corrected him. "Lano custom is to use our personal names rather than surnames when using the abbreviated form of address, and yes there is a problem, but only with the admiral's thinking. This new course is an anachronist's nightmare. It uses gravity slings for no particular reason except to get to the rendezvous by a round-about route."

"Maybe he's worried about inadvertently telling the Lano where Earth is before the treaty is signed."

"In which case he's too late; I already know."

"I suspected as much," Clark shrugged, glancing at Sue.

"You don't sound particularly worried," Sue noted nervously.

"T minus four minutes and counting," Chen Li announced.

"I'm not. We'd have found each other eventually. Bumping into a stranded ship literally in the middle of nowhere was probably the least likely condition for contact. If we were that close, one or another of our exploratory teams would have run across a colony or two before long."

"I know where Treloi is," Sue volunteered. Malana raised one finely formed eyebrow toward Eesai.

"It seemed only fair," she explained.

"Hmm," Anspach hummed thoughtfully. "Let's keep these little revelations to ourselves for now."

"I concur," Malana agreed. "It would only upset the negotiations if it was widely known that particular gronjit had been unshackled prematurely."

"T minus three minutes and counting."

"Engine status?" Clark asked.

Sue repeated the request over the intercom and then relayed Erich's reply, "Warmed and ready. Erich wants to know what's taking so long."

"Tell him a story," Clark suggested. Then to Malana, "Gronjit?"

"An expression I picked up on Cereloi," she explained. "A gronjit is a large furry animal they use there as a beast of burden. They're fairly easy to train as long as you keep them chained up until they become docile. After that they're as gentle as one of your kittens, but if you let them loose too soon they go on a destructive rampage, and they can flatten fair-sized buildings."

"T minus two minutes and counting."

"Final diagnostic in progress," Sue reported.

"The last two minutes are always the worst," Jerry commented, breaking the nervous silence. "You just want to say the heck with it and launch already."

"Normally, I'd want to," Clark agreed, "but Maas wants to lift in formation."

"Stupid thing to do," Eesai muttered. "It'd be far safer to lift one at a time and form up in space."

"It's the military mind set," Clark explained. "It's all that marching in units, I think. I used to be that way, but a decade as a civilian rubbed off some of my rough edges."

"One minute and counting," Chen Li announced.

"Comm., nav., life support, engines," Sue listed off her read-outs. "All systems check out green."

"Activate drive exciter," Clark commanded. Sue flipped the appropriate switches and a low hum began to fill the ship, gradually increasing in volume and frequency. All over the ship people strapped themselves into their seats and prepared for the launch. At the end of the minute, just as Chen Li's countdown reached zero, Anspach spoke again, "Engage engines."

"Engines engaged," Eesai announced.

Eesai? Anspach wondered, and then decided that his ears were playing tricks on him. The high-pitched hum, wavered and then strengthened as the drive exciters were coupled to the fuel flow.

The lights dimmed slightly as ninety percent of all available power was applied toward getting Meriwether-1 out of Earth's gravity well while most of the rest adjusted the focus of the Matsuya-Tron field to keep the internal gravity effect at one gee.

"Negative contact," Sue reported. That was short for "Negative contact with the launch pad surface." In other words, the small private exploration ship was flying for the first time in months. "One thousand feet and climbing," she continued shortly thereafter.

All talk for the next twenty minutes was confined to the business of flying the starship. Chen was constantly talking to his counterparts on the three military ships, often explaining that while Meriwether's engines had been completely overhauled, the ship was still unable to keep up with the monopole-drive ships she was flying with. There were a few grumbles over that from Admiral Maas, but suggestions once more from Captain Anspach that Meriwether be allowed to chart her own course and meet them at the rendezvous were rejected out of hand.

"I don't understand," Sue admitted. "If he actually lets you have your way, we'll have to pay for our fuel. Why do you keep giving him the chance?"

"I know Maas. As long as he thinks I actually want something, he'll deny it. He's got to call all the shots. Besides, we're already being chartered by Malana, so I don't really care about the fuel costs. I just don't like Maas trying to order me around as though I was still under his command. I'm a civilian captain now and answerable only to my fellow shareholders. It's about time he remembered that."

"We're well and away from Terra/Luna system," Sue informed him. "Deep space routine?"

"Not until we've completed the maneuver around Jupiter. Keeping this tight a formation in a gravity sling is a trick. Let's all keep to our stations until then."

"But Jupe is over an hour away."

"Got a dinner date?" Jerry asked, grinning.

"Haven't had a chance to unpack yet," Sue admitted. "I came right to the bridge when I boarded."

Clark thought about that, remembering his own feelings about settling in and said, "All right, call Mr. Deshpande to the bridge, but be back here in forty-five minutes."

"Ito's working with Erich in engineering," she replied. "With the engines driving us at maximum acceleration, he's needed there more than here." Eventually, only John Kelly, the first assistant engineer, had failed to warm to the elf-like strangers and he had been paid off while they were on Earth so that everyone on the exploration ship was decidedly pro-Lano. Kelly's decision to leave, however, had come too soon before departure to replace him, so Clark had decided to fly one engineer short. Ito was a general hand, but Schwartzwald had noticed his aptitude in engineering and quickly snapped him up for the duration of the mission. "Why not let Eesai take the helm." Sue suggested.

"Eesai?"

"Eesai's as good a pilot as I am and I've been showing her the controls ever since we left Rendezvous System."

"No offense, subcaptain, but you're not a member of my crew," Anspach told Eesai.

"I understand," Eesai replied without any display of disappointment.

"Oh come on, Skipper!" Sue complained. "You have a duplicate set of controls in case you don't think she can handle it, but I assure you..."

"Don't assure me, Ms. Ho," Clark sighed. "Just go unpack your bags. First Subcaptain Eesai, welcome to the crew, however temporarily."

"Thanks, Skipper!" Eesai exclaimed.

So much for that discussion, Clark thought wryly to himself remembering his note to correct her terms of address. On the other hand, it's not a bad idea to have two top-notch pilots. I wonder if she's available for the long term.

Two

The trip to Rendezvous System, as it had become known, was smooth and uneventful. Most on board Meriwether-1 were looking forward to the rendezvous and meeting the Lano again. The upcoming rendezvous continued to be the number one topic of conversation all the way out and there were numerous bets on their friends from the Inillien being present.

Rendezvous System remained as curiously empty as it had been on Meriwether's previous visit as the

four Confederate ships cruised towards the agreed upon rendezvous site.

"Bloody worthless system," remarked Admiral Maas sourly over the ship-to-ship frequency. "Whatever possessed you to come here in the first place?"

"From three parsecs away, who can tell what any system might contain?" Anspach countered.

"Hmmp!" Maas grunted. "So where are these friends of yours? Weren't they supposed to be here already?"

"Who can say? Clocks have to be reset each time we make port. We could be as much as a week early so we really ought to give them at least two weeks before we start wondering whether or not we've been stood up. At the very least I expect someone will come to pick up Madame Malana. I understand she's very highly respected in the Trelendir."

"And if no one shows up?" Maas asked.

Clark shrugged and they broke contact.

"What will you do, Skipper?" Eesai asked from the pilot's chair. Since that one brief shift filling in for Sue, Eesai had become a regular fixture on the bridge.

"I suppose I'll complete my charter by taking you two home," he replied. "It's not like we really don't know how to find Treloi. I'm just not going to admit that to the admiral unless I have to. By the way, I've been meaning to commend you on the job you're doing as co-pilot and navigator. Really excellent."

"Why thank you, Clark," she replied warmly. "I try my best. In many ways it's easier on Meriwether than any Treloian ship I've flown. The physical switches give one a real feeling of solidity. I'm not sure I'll want to go back to the old way, casting a thalu every time I want to do something.

"Meriwether handles easier than Inillien too," she continued. "For one thing, she's a smaller ship and more responsive, but her drive is also easier to operate. Just point her in the right direction and go. On a Treloian ship you have to carefully balance the impellers and the starsails, and that's a matter of constant surveillance."

"More like sailing a yacht?" Clark asked.

"Yes, very much so, or so I've been told," Eesai replied. "Actually I'd never sailed any water vessel until Sue took me out in her peapod. The point is that conditions are subject to change and you have to be prepared to adapt quickly. Still, there's a sort grace and artistry to sailing a skyship." She sounded wistful as she trailed off.

"There," Jerry said at last. "Unless you can think of any more words, this baby is ready to print out."

"Jerry," Malana replied, "I'm sure there are a few thousand obscure Lani words that aren't in here just as

there are at least as many Terrañol ones we left out, but for a first attempt I think this one's as complete as can be reasonably expected."

"Well, we did cover the entirety of 'Webster's Twenty-ninth Collegiate'. If anyone decides to use a ten-dollar word that isn't included, he'll just have to say it twice."

"Ten-dollar?"

"Fancy," Jerry explained. "A dollar used to be a unit of currency."

"Was ten of them a lot of money?"

"For only one word?" Jerry grinned. "I'm surprised we didn't think of putting this together before."

"I thought you constructed a Lani-Terrañol lexicon when we first met."

"Very small compared to this one. After it turned out you could speak Terrañol like a native I never finished the project and worked on that monograph instead. This one should allow smooth and easy computerized translation of any human/Lano conferences." He tapped a few keys on the odd-shaped hand-keyblock strapped to his left hand and the computer excreted several plastic blocks, memory modules. "Someone's going to want hard copy too, I think," he remarked to himself and tapped a few more buttons before unstrapping the keyblock. "Ten copies ought to be enough," he said, deactivating his terminal.

"Where are they?" Malana asked, looking around Jerry's small office. Her eye caught the sensory portrait of Lani while he answered.

"My print-out slot is sufficient for a few sheets at a time, but the main printer will collate and bind copies in book form. It's slow, but they'll probably be ready in an hour or so."

Malana picked up the glass-like block, accidentally pressing the mechanical activation stud Lani had installed. She would never have done it intentionally, that would have been a gross invasion of privacy, but normally such switches used the same thalu that a light did so there would have been no danger. Instantly, she experienced the full emotional impact of Jerry's and Lani's farewell kiss. From Jerry's side of the recording came initial confusion that rapidly evolved into pleasure and then genuine attraction. Because Malana was a woman, she was more in tune with Lani's impressions and from that part of the recording she could feel her body being pressed against Jerry and then feel his arms about her as he responded to the kiss. There was a wide vein of pure passion in the sensory recording, but she could feel the true love the two had exchanged as well. It was a combination she hadn't felt in years herself; not since her mate had died. Finally, the recording came to an end and she quickly replaced the block on Jerry's desk.

"Sorry," she gasped. "I didn't mean to intrude."

"That's all right," Jerry replied, unable to completely hide his embarrassment.

"What are you going to do about that?" she asked, abruptly serious.

"There are certain important aspects of a marriage," Jerry replied softly, "that we could never, ah, consummate."

"So I understand," she replied dryly. "From what I could tell, however, Lani doesn't consider those aspects, as you call them, all that important." Jerry nodded his head in agreement. Only a completely insensitive lout could experience that emotional recording and fail to know that.

"Suggestions?" he asked.

"Several very long talks with her," the elderly La replied. "Also decide for yourself just how you feel in the matter."

"I learned early on that a Lano mating is not considered permanent until the first child is born," he said almost clinically.

"Or at least conceived," Malana added. "There's no chance of an interspecies child."

"Not even with gene-splicing," Jerry agreed. "Would that affect her long-term feelings, do you think?"

"It might. I don't really know Lani very well. Until the impellers went sour, I'd never even met her. But if it makes you feel better, adoption has long been considered a legally valid alternative."

"It has? I never heard that."

"You probably didn't ask the right questions," she replied. "We don't usually mention that option. First of all, it isn't necessary very often and second, when it is, it's a sign of true love and deep commitment that the couple uses it rather than breaking up, so the necessity is ignored out of respect. We can be a very romantic people." She paused while looking appraisingly at Jerry.

"What?" he asked.

"Nothing really," she replied, half a smile gracing her golden amber face. "I was just thinking that if I were only thirty years younger, I'd give Lani a run for her money. You're quite a kisser, you know."

"Jerry, Malana," Clark's voice filled the room even as his face filled the small intercom screen, "Come on up to the bridge, please. We've got company."

"On our way!" Jerry replied, already half-way out the door.

"I have some very odd readings, Skipper," Sue reported as she monitored the long-range scanners.

"How so?" Clark asked, leaning forward in his chair. The main view screens so far only showed the three terran battleships against the usual starry background.

"I pick up a group of three ships coming in roughly from galactic west, and roughly is the word! Two of the ships are coming in at a constant speed."

"Looks like standard cruising speed for Treloian Naval vessels, Skipper," Eesai added.

"You'd know best," Sue commented. "Anyway the third ship seems to be coming in fits and starts. It spurts ahead of the other two and waits for them to catch up and pass before shooting ahead again."

"Inillien!" Eesai exclaimed. "It's got to be. That odd hybrid drive we cobbled up is several times faster than anything else we have and there's no way to hold it down to Standard Cruise."

"Permission to hail?" Chen requested.

"Do it," Anspach agreed, but before Chen could react, the Lano radio officer beat them to the punch.

"Ahoy, the Meriwether!" came the hail. "This is Inillien."

"This is Meriwether!" Chen Li replied, enthusiasm showing through. "Welcome back, Inillien. What kept you so long? We've inflated the balloons and the champagne's on ice. What is your ETA?"

"Champagne?" Lilla Di Lasai asked. "Never mind. Commodore Alano sends his warmest greetings and we'll be there in... Well actually, we're here." As she said that, Inillien had just come to rest relative to the Terran ships. However, she was alone. "The others will be along in an hour or so," Lilla added. "How soon will you be ready to establish an intership bridge?"

Clark didn't have time to reply or even ask about his friend's promotion before Admiral Maas' face appeared in the holoscreen. "Anspach!" he thundered. "Who gave you permission to open communications with the aliens?"

"Didn't realize I needed any permission. If you'll remember, it was your, uh, suggestion that I no longer be one of your officers. Besides, I opened communications over a year ago when you were nowhere to be consulted."

"Clark?" Alano's voice came over the radio link. "Is there a problem there, old boy?"

"Who the hell is that?" Maas demanded, unable to see anyone but Clark on his screen.

"Admiral Virgil Valerot Maas," Clark began smoothly as though such an introduction was expected, "I present Commodore Alano Ki Matchi of the Treloian Navy. Congratulations on your promotion, by the way, Alano." Alano thanked him.

"Pretty bucket of bolts you got there, Commodore," Maas growled in the closest approximation to a social backpedal he could manage. "What the hell makes it fly?"

"Elfin magic, Admiral," Malana informed him as she entered the bridge with Jerry. "Commodore, it's good to hear your voice again and please allow me to add my congratulations to Clark's," she continued in Terrañol, "I'm glad the Trelendir chose to honor this rendezvous. How soon may I begin to brief their chosen ambassador?"

"Whenever you like, Madame Ambassador," Alano replied, "although I don't recall noticing you ever talking to yourself."

"They chose me?" she asked. "Without my being present to accept? How unprecedented."

"There have been a number of history-making events over the past year, Malana. That was perhaps the

least remarkable of the lot. I have your personal secretary on board and a government-appointed staff as well to update you so you need not rely on Eesai's penmanship."

"Actually, Eesai Di Sonea's service has been more than adequate, Alano," she replied. "I plan to put an official commendation on her record."

"Of course," Alano replied. "When can we hook up our ships, Clark?"

"Wait a damned minute!" Maas growled, having overheard the conversation. "There will be no physical contact until I say so."

"Correction, Admiral," Malana replied before Clark could. "I am still chartering Meriwether-1, so in effect I say when we establish the intership link. You and your ships may, of course, stand off if you desire. Although Ambassador Gupta and I have already agreed that, pending approval of the Trelendir's ambassador, Meriwether-1 would be the site of our conference. It is the closest thing to neutral ground we have."

"Have it your way," the admiral conceded with poor grace. "I will have the ambassador conveyed to Meriwether when you decide to begin, but the Confederation's ships will continue to stand off."

"Your choice," she shrugged.

"Damned right it is," Mass grumbled before his communications officer could cut the connection.

"Sound's like a rather disagreeable man," Alano noted. "I can only conclude that politics is not the driving power to success it is on Treloi."

"Actually," Clark informed his friend, "Admiral Maas is quite capable of diplomacy as I'm sure you'll have a chance to see for yourself, but he and I have never gotten along and I seem to have been winning all the arguments lately."

"I see," Alano laughed. "At least I think I do."

"If you brought along the same link-up we had last time, you may begin as soon as you're ready," Clark answered at last.

"Right!" Alano gave an order in Lani and then spoke to Clark again, "Actually, we brought along something even better."

Three

Instead of the narrow, flexible, free-fall tunnel they had used during their first contact, Meriwether and Inillien were now connected by a rigid pipe equipped with magically generated gravity and fully large enough for most humans to walk through without bending over.

When the other two Lano ships arrived, however, they stayed off at the same distance the Aerospace Force ships did. After some jockeying around, the five armed ships were arranged evenly around the

Meriwether and Inillien in a partial two kilometer-wide sphere. Neither fleet commander nor their captains would admit it, but all ships' weapons were kept aimed at the other side's ships, just in case.

"So what have I been missing?" Malana asked Alano, opening her first briefing session. They were sitting with her secretary and staff in the day room of her suite on Inillien. Malana had decided to maintain her cabin aboard the Meriwether as a day office, although most of her belongings had been moved back to her suite on Inillien. Accordingly, the Terran ambassador hired a cabin on Meriwether too, but he and his staff planned to shuttle back to the Vigilant at the end of each treaty session.

"What have you missed?" Alano began. "How about the last three governments? The Trelendir Council collapsed three times before things settled out."

"Three times?"

"Yes, madame," her secretary, Helani Bi Lano, replied. "I'm afraid that the initial reaction to the news of the humans was a bit confused."

"Part of the problem," Alano amplified, "was that the Presiding General decided to let the news leak out, so he could find out how people felt about the concept of an alien civilization."

"That idiot!" Eesai exclaimed.

"It is not proper to speak ill of the dead, Captain," he admonished her.

"Subcaptain," she corrected him automatically. Such corrections had become second nature while on Earth.

"Well," Alano replied, "It's not official until the ceremony, but the fact is that with my promotion, someone is going to have to captain Inillien and you're the obvious choice. If you like we can make it official at dinner this evening." Eesai, stunned beyond words, could only nod mutely.

"Wait a minute, Grallo is dead?" Malana asked visibly shaken. "How?"

"Tragic," Helani replied. "When his people neither confirmed nor denied the rumors, the news services took it as proof positive that we were under siege by some superior beings. Naturally the people panicked. Hysteria broke out all across Treloi. One particularly large mob forced their way past Capitol House Security and shouted for the Peegee to meet them on the residence steps. Grallo was never short on courage so he did just that, but his diplomatic skills... Well, you've been known to comment on them from time to time. I'm not sure exactly what he said but it didn't calm the mob down. They killed him on the spot, after which most of them were shot down by Security. Life got exciting for a while after that."

The Lano had a saying about exciting lives. "May the gods save us all from an exciting life!" Malana swore fervently. "Then what happened?"

"It's all a bit confusing, but the Council of Generals declared martial law and then admitted the existence of humans. The commodore here was the real hero of the day, though. The Council put him to work talking to just about anyone who would listen."

"Talking?" Malana asked.

"About the humans. He was on the news and all the talk shows for months telling how Inillien broke

down in the middle of nowhere. That's what they're calling this system now, by the way - Nowhere."

"I think I prefer the humans' name for it," Eesai commented.

"Whatever," Helani replied before continuing as though she hadn't been interrupted, "and how they were found by Meriwether."

"That hybrid drive you, Lani, and Erich installed is still driving the wizards crazy," Alano laughed. "You know, one of them actually told Lani that our instruments had to be faulty and so we gave him a ride in which we shattered the record for the Ganiloi Run. I doubt the yachtsmen will ever forgive us," he chuckled, then became very serious. "Anyway, after we broke that record he claimed that we had constructed an elaborate hoax and he could prove it. A week later he was killed in a laboratory accident when some oddball experiment of his blew up in his face. One of his assistants survived, but last I heard he still wasn't giving a coherent account of exactly what happened. In a way that pretty much summarizes the last year for the Trelendir."

"It blew up?" Malana asked dryly.

"Several times," Helani replied. "With Grallo out of the picture, the Falkonin Party made a bid for and won the Presiding Generalship."

"Lanili Di Falko?" Malana asked.

"The same," her secretary responded. "Of course she wasn't in for three weeks before the electorate had enough of her. She lost her first vote of confidence and was back out on the streets."

"Not for long," Alano added.

"No," Helani agreed. "Not for long. Her records were seized immediately by the Prosecutor General, who as you may remember was a member of the Conservationist Party."

"The Falkonins never did learn to get along with anyone else," Malana observed. "What did he find out?"

"That in a mere three weeks Lanili had already skimmed three million rachi in illegal funds into her own bank accounts and those of her friends. She's now serving three consecutive thirty-year sentences for the graft with most of her friends to keep her company."

"So what's the bad news?" Eesai asked.

"Excuse me?" Helani responded.

"Sorry. It's a Terran expression I picked up. What happened next?"

"Several leading members of the Treloian Party staged a coup and installed a committee of officers in the place of the Peegee."

"A junta," Eesai interpreted. When Helani looked puzzled she explained, "Another Terran term."

"Gods help us all!" Malana swore.

"They did," Helani replied without any touch of humor in her businesslike way. "The first thing the

Treloians did was to raise colonial taxes and lowered those for Treloian citizens."

"That can't have been a popular move, except on Treloi maybe."

"Not even there," Alano told her. "There's hardly a soul on the home world who doesn't have relatives in the colonies and nobody likes to see their kin getting a raw deal."

"Right," Helani agreed. "The only surprise was that the Treloian party managed to hold on for half a year. When things got tough for them, they tried reimposing martial law, but the word got out among their personal guards that the martial law conditions were to be made permanent."

"That's sick!" Eesai exclaimed disgustedly.

"Where in the worlds did they ever get such an idea?" Malana asked.

"Who knows?" Helani shrugged. "They didn't last long enough after that to tell anyone. Their own guards rounded them up, put them in a small spaceyacht, and shot them directly into the sun."

"That should finish them then," Malana concluded. "Did any Treloian Party members survive the purge?"

"Not politically, but either they were smart or honest in their personal dealings. None of the survivors were arrested, but once more we had to endure another race for the Generalate."

"Well, that's three falls of government. Who's in charge now?"

"A coalition of the Liberal and Conservationist Parties," Helani replied.

"You're kidding?"

"No, really! In fact you got off very lucky."

"How so?" Malana asked, puzzled at the apparent change of subject.

"As a leading figure among the Liberals you were nearly elected Presiding General until someone remembered the residency requirement. It's not the sort of thing that has ever come up before, but you hadn't been living within the borders of the Trelendir for a year prior to the election, so they had to come up with another candidate - your son Tauko Ki Masai."

"Really? So that's why I got the ambassadorial appointment."

"Actually, no," Alano told her. "You were appointed by Grallo within hours of our return to Treloi. Each of his successors ratified the decision as a matter of course. You are probably the only thing they ever agreed on."

"Commodore?" Alano heard the voice over the intercom.

"Yes, Meco?" he replied.

"You asked me to remind you of your appointment with Admiral Maas. Your shuttle is ready."

"Thank you," Alano replied. "Excuse me, Malana, ladies. The Admiral wants to establish some basic

military protocol with me. I'll be back in time for dinner."

"Jerry?" Lani's hesitant voice called out as she entered his office. There was no one in sight, but the door to his bedroom was slightly ajar, so she slipped in, closing the outer door quietly behind her. There were some soft noises coming from the next room and she was about to call out again when she spotted the sensory portrait she had given Jerry. Lani was neither so simple nor so devious to think that she could trap Jerry into marriage by giving him the traditional engagement present without his realizing its significance, but he was the first man she had ever wanted to mate. Too bad they were physically incompatible for conventional sex as each species thought of it, but there were other ways.

"Jerry?" she called out again as she neared the bedroom door. There was still no response and as she moved deeper into his suite she realized that the noises indicated that he was in the shower. That gave her a fun idea so she quickly pulled off her tight-fitting uniform and entered the bathroom. Meriwether's shower stalls, unlike those on Lano ships, used real water and were far more refreshing than the magical devices space-going Lano used. Impishly, she opened the shower stall and said in her sexiest voice, "Surprise!"

"Yah!" Jerry replied, nearly jumping out of his own skin. Before he could say anything else, however, she joined him in the stall and wrapped her smooth amber arms around him and clamped her mouth over his, letting the hot water enveloped them both. Several minutes later, they finally broke the embrace and Jerry stammered, "It's, uh, nice to see you again."

"See me? Is that all?" she giggled.

"Mmm," he replied. "That too." They kissed again, for a long time. Later, after they had dressed again, Jerry told her, "Malana explained about that holograph you gave me."

"She did?" Lani asked nervously. "I won't hold you to the implied promise if you don't want."

"I'm more concerned about what your family thinks," he replied, enjoying the conflicting emotions that flashed across her face. It was not until that moment that he realized that he wanted to marry Lani, even with all the inherent problems he could imagine and God only know the ones he could not.

"Really?" suddenly she was all happy enthusiasm. "Well, Dad died a few years ago and he might have objected, but Mom gave up all hope for me being conventional simply years ago, you know? So she says that so long as your family approves, she won't block the way. Have you spoken to your family?"

"Neither of my parents are alive," Jerry told her. "I have a sister in Jerusalem and a brother who lives on Terra Nova. Ruth wants to meet you and I haven't spoken directly to Mike in three years - conflicting schedules - but I don't need approval from either of them." Lani nodded. Among the Lano only the opinion of one's parents counted.

"Good!" she exclaimed, wrapping herself around him for yet another extended embrace.

"So," Jerry continued when he was able to speak again, "do we have a human or a Lano ceremony?"

"Ceremony?" Lani asked. "What ceremony?"

"Don't Lano have a marriage ceremony to mark the joining of two people?"

"We have as large a party as we can afford," she replied, "when the first child is born," she paused hesitantly and then added, "or adopted."

"Yes," Jerry assured her, stroking her hair gently, "Malana told me about that too. A couple isn't considered permanent until they have a child."

"Oh. Well, I started looking around the various agencies on Treloi. There are thousands of orphans four years old and up, but there's an average wait of ten years if you want an infant."

"It's that way in the Confederation too," Jerry replied. "I can wait or else we can adopt an older child, whichever you prefer."

"We won't have to do either," she told him happily. "My sister is expecting her third and so long as we agree to giving her completely open visitation rights, she will allow us to adopt the baby for the purpose of making our mating legally permanent. Actually, as a spacer, I don't have a permanent home and I live with her and her family when I'm on Treloi. We can't very well take a child all around the Trelendir or the Confederation with us, so I figure it will probably be best to be co-parents with her and her mate, but I didn't want to commit you to that until we had spoken."

"I didn't realize that would satisfy the requirement," Jerry admitted, "but are you sure you want to just jump in like that now? No second thoughts?"

"Absolutely not! Besides we still have a half a year before the child is due. What about you? Are you sure I'm not pushing you too fast?"

"Not at all, although the rational part of me has to admit that we don't really know each other all that well yet. Six months, or whatever half a Treloian year is, ought to be long enough. One thing, though; I'd like to have a Terran ceremony. It won't feel right to me if we don't."

Lani thought about that a moment, imagining all sorts of primitive rites that she might have to endure. Lano culture was fairly homogeneous, but she remember dimly some fairly horrifying tales from her required history courses back at the University. "What sort of ceremony?" she asked shyly.

Four

"Sure didn't take long to settle into a routine, did it?" Sue asked Eesai a couple weeks later. Indeed it had not. Everyday Malana and her staff strolled across the intership bridge to Meriwether while Ambassador Gupta and his staff shuttled across from the Vigilant. They were then closeted for hours on end, with breaks only for lunch and dinner. Finally, when they were done both groups returned to their own ships and went to sleep.

"I suppose that's a good sign," Eesai commented easily. "So long as nothing of note is happening we can

relax." Another routine that had been quickly resumed was the intership cocktail hour, held on both ships in various locations. As the brand new captain of Inillien, Eesai had made a practice of keeping an open cabin at that hour, although after the first few sessions, most people found other locations, such as the ships' wardrooms, to relax in, leaving Eesai with her close friends. The usual crowd had turned out to be Sue, Jerry, Lani, Alano, and Clark, along with occasional visits from others. This afternoon Erich and Lilla had also shown up.

"I'm worried about Malana," Jerry announced. "From what little I've seen of her, I doubt she's getting enough rest."

"Really?" Eesai asked. "I haven't seen her in days. I suppose I ought to have Wallo look at her."

"If she'll let him near her," Alano commented. "You know how stubborn she can be. She nearly worked herself to exhaustion when we were becalmed here last year."

"Maybe," Jerry allowed, "but Doc Wallo's an old friend of hers. If anyone can talk to her, he can."

"Really?" Alano asked. "I never knew she and Wallo were acquainted. How odd," he added, not realizing that his class prejudices were showing again. Wallo had been a foundling, a child of the lowest status. When had he the opportunity to meet a lady of Malana's status? His attitudes were common among the Lano elite, but Malana didn't share them.

"They met back in the University," Jerry explained, "or so she told me. I got the impression that they had been very close."

"Malana and Wallo? Not a very likely match, is it?" the commodore laughed. Eesai said nothing to that, but took a long, covert look at this man she thought she loved.

"Oh, I don't know," Lani disagreed. "I imagine they must have complemented each other well at the time. Even now I'd say they have much in common, especially in the way they think and in what they value."

"If you say so." Alano shrugged, unconvinced.

"Malana!" Eesai exclaimed a moment later as the elderly La appeared in the doorway. If anything the ambassador looked even worse than any of them remembered. Dark, almost comically exaggerated bags had formed under her eyes, and her entire posture had degraded from her usual proudly erect carriage to an evolved slouch.

"Hi, kids," she mumbled listlessly to the ensemble as she entered the room and aimed herself at an unoccupied chair. "I need a drink," she informed them. "Heavy on the caffeine." Jerry got up and mixed her a drink; Treloian methanol whiskey liberally poured into extra sweet black coffee set in a tall glass mug. Then, as a finishing touch, he floated a dollop of heavy cream on top.

While he was working, Eesai commented, "You look like you need more than just a drink. A few weeks in Rocillien Valley, perhaps."

"Perhaps. Thank you," she said, accepting the Lano variant of the classic Terran drink. "As it happens, I think Ambassador Gupta is in worse shape than I am. He suggested we take the rest of the night and all of tomorrow off."

"Probably taking pity on you," Alano told her. "Really, Malana, I must insist you let Wallo check you

out."

"I'm all right," Malana retorted. "Really."

"Fine!" Eesai snapped. "We'll just wait another few minutes until you collapse and then we'll call him ourselves."

Malana's eyes snapped fully open and she looked as though she had been slapped sharply. She bit back her first retort and thought about the image she was presenting. All eyes in the room had turned toward her, waiting for her reaction. These were friends, she knew, and there was great worry etched on their faces. She asked at last, "Do I really look that bad?"

"Worse," Jerry replied flatly.

"All right," she sighed. "I'll see Wallo. Don't mind admitting I've been feeling rather tired the last few days, but there is just so much to do."

"Keep it up at this rate, though, and you might not finish. I'm no expert on Lano physiology," Jerry told her, "not by a long shot, but based on what I've learned about humans, I would say that you've run yourself down, rather much like a battery. Your electrolytes are probably way out of balance and you can probably use a massive boost of whatever you use for vitamins."

"A battery, eh?" she asked. "Well, a recharge is probably very much in order."

"You need more than just a day off," Wallo told her sternly not too much later. "A week of doing nothing but reading in the sun would do you a world of good."

"How about a few sessions in the soma?" she asked.

"Not this time, girl," he retorted. "You've run yourself ragged and need more than just a mild shaking up. Hm, on second thought, maybe what you want is the soma." He started writing something down furiously on his clipboard.

"That was an abrupt change of mind, Wallo. Not like you at all."

"I forgot about the soma units on Meriwether. You may remember that Doctor MacGregor and I programmed one for Lano usage just in case you had problems while on Earth."

"No. This is the first I've heard of it."

"Really? Well, it's there in any case, so we might as well use it. I'm just writing down a few instructions for Achmed to program in."

Malana glanced at the pad. "Does he read Lani? Most on Meriwether can speak our language passably, but I don't recall any of them reading Lani ideograms. For that matter, as far as I know only Eesai and I among the Lano can read anything in Terrañol and that was a matter of simple survival on Earth. It kept us from crossing against the lights."

"Crossing...?" Wallo asked, confused. Malana waved the tangential question away and he returned to

the subject. "I suppose you're right. Let's both walk over to Achmed's sickbay and I'll just tell him what to do."

"He probably couldn't read your scrawl anyway," Malana replied, laying a fond hand on the doctor's shoulder.

"Didn't you know?" he laughed. "We doctors write in a universal code, legible only to pharmacists."

"You'll pardon me, I hope, if I insist you don't rely on Achmed's ability to decipher your code, however."

"We've been talking in circles for weeks, Radji," Malana told him, breaking one of the cardinal rules of diplomacy. "Why don't we skip ahead on our agenda and maybe we can get a feeling of accomplishment." They had been taking extended breaks more and more frequently, while little or no progress had been made. She hoped a change of tack might improve the situation.

"Madame Malana," the Confederation's ambassador replied carefully, "I am not certain that would be at all proper."

"Nonsense!" she replied, mentally tossing every book on protocol she had ever read or written straight out the airlock. "You insisted we talk about trade agreements from the outset. I agreed because such agreements will be the cornerstone of the relationship between the Terran Confederation and the Trelendir, but we've been ignoring some of the most basic matters."

"Such as?"

"The concept of diplomatic immunity."

"This is a problem? I understood that the Trelendir recognized ambassadorial status in the same way that the Terran Confederation does."

"Not quite, but as far as I can determine the only major difference regards the degree of immunity an ambassador and his staff enjoy within the Trelendir."

"Diplomatic immunity is an absolute necessity," Ambassador Gupta told her seriously. "How can civilized nations treat with each other if their chosen representatives cannot feel safe from prosecution for accidentally breaking unfamiliar local laws?"

"The law enforcement agencies of the Trelendir are amazingly understanding regarding unintentional infractions, but while you need not fear any reprisals for political dealings we will not tolerate any callous disregard of our civil laws. If you or any of your staff get caught jay-walking or ignoring our airways' speed and altitude laws you'll get written warnings the first few times. Continued disregard will bring the same penalties our own citizens are expected to pay. Commit major crime, something you can't claim ignorance of, such as robbing a bank or dealing in illegal drugs and we will prosecute to the full extent of the law.

"I studied the history of Terran diplomacy while I was on Earth, Radji," she continued, "and found numerous examples in which immunity was badly abused. I assure you that no La would dream of driving one of your vehicles in an intentionally reckless manner or even killing someone and then hiding behind diplomatic immunity to get off because we expect to be answerable for our actions, not only under your laws but under ours as well if we should ever return to the Trelendir."

"So you recognize no diplomatic immunity at all?"

"On the contrary, you and your staff will be perfectly safe so long as you are within our jurisdiction and should relations between the Confederation and the Trelendir ever break down, you will be allowed safe passage home regardless of how bad a break we might suffer."

"What sort of assurances can you give us of this?"

"Sir!" Malana replied stiffly. "Our very honor is dependant on the proper regard and care for guests, and that is how we view ambassadorial legations, as guests. You want it in writing? You'll have it even though it implies that you do not trust us even in this matter."

"Madame Malana, it is not that I personally do not believe everything you tell me about your people, but I also represent the supreme human government and human nations have always insisted in having such assurances in writing."

"Very well," Malana agreed. "That is not our way, but we'll give you that much."

"Fine. Now regarding your local laws..."

"Radji," Malana cut him off, "you and your people will respect the laws of the Trelendir or you can go back to your ships and go home right now. This point is not subject to negotiation."

"But this is unprecedented," Gupta complained.

"So maybe there is a new thing under the sun after all," Malana told him smugly. Gupta had a bad habit of falling back on quotes from various Terran religious texts. It felt good to allude to one as well, especially since he knew he had never quoted the original from Ecclesiastes at her. "Especially," she continued. "if you bother to try looking under a different sun."

"Put all that in writing," Gupta said after a long pause, "and we'll consider it in the meantime." Malana nodded, knowing she had just scored a minor victory. Whenever her Terran counterpart agreed to consider something, it meant he had decided to agree, but didn't want to seem too eager. "Now should we return to this trade agreement we have been working on?"

"Not quite yet," Malana replied. "We've been talking about a balance of trade, but it occurs to me that we still do not have any clear notion of the relative values of our respective currencies. Until we do that, any agreements regarding a balance of trade are rather meaningless."

"You make a good point," Radji allowed, "but I am hardly an expert of that sort of economic matter. It has been some time since we have had to deal with comparative exchange rates, for that matter, so we will need to make an extensive study before a rate can be set."

"The Trelendir is not the nation state the Terran Confederation is. Every world has its own currency so we have some fairly efficient mechanisms to establish the rate of exchange between various currencies."

"Perhaps we can use these mechanisms," Ambassador Gupta replied noncommittally. "Tell me about them."

"We call them banks."

"Are you having fun at my expense?" Radji asked suspiciously.

"I'm sorry," she apologized, "but the solution is so obvious. We'll just let the banks determine the exchange rates."

"But wouldn't Lano banks value Trelendir currency over Terran?"

"Possibly, but I suspect that Terran banks will give preference to Terran currency as well. It will even out after a while."

"You had to open this can of worms, didn't you?" Gupta replied. "We can't possibly set the value of trade agreements until the exchange rate stabilizes. We're at an impasse."

"We can agree to open trade in an unrestricted marketplace," she suggested not for the first time. "The government of the Trelendir does not interfere in private business matters, aside from the collection of taxes, of course."

"Agreement to unrestricted trade would be counter to my instructions concerning this matter," Gupta admitted. "The Confederation is very concerned about the potential economic impact of trade with the Trelendir. It is very important that we not be at the short end of a trade deficit. Naturally, your government would feel the same, which is why we want to guarantee balance."

"Ambassador," Malana replied, feeling very tired suddenly, "the Trelendir has never made a practice of regulating our merchants and they would hardly stand for it if we began now. Speaking for Treloi and the rest of our united worlds, I can promise that we will do our best to encourage balanced trade, but there is nothing we can do to enforce such an agreement."

"On the other hand," she continued, "neither of us has any proof that our respective merchants will find favorable markets in each other's territory. I notice that very few of the Lano on Inillien fully trust human technology. There's no magic involved, you see, and while I was on Earth I noticed that very few people believed in Lano magic and those who did, thought they could do it too if we could only teach them. For the record, I did try with one self-admitted psychic with no discernable results."

"Magic is generally considered to be mere superstition among well-educated humans," Radji told her, quickly adding, "No offense intended."

"None taken. Most Lano have the same attitude toward the possibility of a civilization without magic. No doubt they believe you do it without realizing it," she laughed.

"I have heard it said that what you call magic we call telepathy, telekinesis, extra-sensory perception, and the like."

"What's the difference?" she asked innocently. "By any other name those are still things that can be done by Lano thalua but not by any known human."

"I would think that there would be a differentiation between things done through physiological means and those through some form of mystical intervention."

"We've never made that distinction," Malana explained. "At one time we ascribed magic to divine intervention but these days we see it as a personal ability that can be trained in those most talented. We have even built machines that work on similar principals as we understand them. Tomorrow, who knows how we'll see Thalirip." She paused for a moment and took a sip of cocoa, before returning to work. "Now, how about this for a compromise on a trade agreement..."

Five

"It feels like we've been here forever!" Serafyma complained one afternoon at Eesai's daily cocktail hour.

"Just a little over two months, Sera," Clark replied. "Maybe you need a new hobby."

"Another one? So far this trip I've taken up embroidery and bead weaving."

"And have done very well at both," Jerry complemented her.

"For a klutz, you mean," she returned with a thin smile. "This is one mission I might as well have stayed home. Not much use for a chemist this time. Unlike Erich, I exhausted the avenues of comparison with my Lano counterpart last time."

"Really?" Sue asked. "I'd have thought there'd be all sorts of different principals to investigate."

"Not really. The periodic table is a universal constant. The Lano have discovered dozens of chemical groups we never heard of and vice versa and we were able to exchange notes including complete documentation on all of them. All that data is in the computer with bound hard copy in my cabin. I finished inputting it just before we returned to Sol System."

"You could pick out one or two fascinating new items and write them up for the journals," Jerry suggested.

"They aren't my discoveries," Serafyma pointed out, "although Talino and I have co-authored three papers on comparative chemistry to be simultaneously released on Treloi and Earth on our respective returns. How many more should I write?"

"Three is enough," Jerry replied. "Wait until somebody else tries to pick everything you say apart, then write more. You could try a text book in the mean time."

"Maybe," she considered the possibility, "but I really hate writing."

"You like the idea of royalties?" he countered. She fell silent.

"Well," Eesai commented to Serafyma, "I don't blame you for being bored. All I've had to do since assuming command of this blinding ship is make sure the watch was being set - a job that has been

handled excellently by First Subcaptain Meco. I'm beginning to have some grave doubts about my promotion. I thought I wanted to make captain, but the job just isn't as much of a challenge as I'd hoped."

"What would you have preferred?" Clark asked interestedly.

"I'm not sure, but something besides the usual milk runs. I envy you, Clark. You can take your ship anywhere you please. Explore new systems, sell exotic commodities. Every trip is different."

"Every trip is a financial risk, Eesai, and I imagine when Malana and Gupta finally agree on whatever treaty they're putting together that most of our trips will be fairly routine ones, dropping off commodities and then going to pick up more."

"But you won't cease your exploratory missions will you? Meriwether-2 is being built with that in mind, or so I thought."

"It is. Louise and I figure that she'll double as a monopole mining ship as well as a cargo transport. Malana assures me that monopoles are going to be in even higher demand in the Trelendir than the Confederation, especially until Lano thalua work out ways to detect them on their own."

"See, that's what I mean," Eesai replied. "You'll never know what's going to happen next. On Inillien - in the entire Treloian Navy for that matter - the only blinding uncertainty is in not knowing what part is going to break down next. And if you're lucky, the engineers catch the problems before they happen."

"The grass is always greener in the star system next door," Jerry laughed. "That's exactly the situation we'd like to be in. Has anyone heard anything about the negotiations?"

"Malana plays it close to her chest," Sue commented. "She rarely says anything about the treaty aside from how she thinks the talks went that day and that seems to alternate between outstanding and hopeless."

"She's been looking better lately," Eesai observed.

"That's because Achmed and Wallo have forbidden her to work more than eight hours each day, and Ambassador Gupta's insisted she obey." Serafyma replied. "She's actually getting enough sleep for a change whether she wants it or not!"

"Talking about me again?" Malana asked from the doorway. She walked in and helped herself to a drink.

"Uh huh!" Jerry replied. "We know you usually show up this time of day. Besides, you're the only one we know on these ships who's really doing anything. If it weren't for you, we'd have nothing left to do but engage in idle gossip."

"Heavens!" Malana replied pretending shock. "That means we'd have to talk about you and Lani behind your backs."

"But if you do that," Lani pointed out, "We won't invite you to the mating."

"Mating?" Malana asked. "That's not normally a public affair."

"I think she meant matrimonial," Jerry explained.

"I meant wedding," Lani disagreed. "We're going to be married in a Terran ceremony and confirm it later by Lano tradition."

"Sounds appropriate," Malana opined. "Have you set a date?"

"Sort of," Jerry informed her. "We figured that the day you sign the treaty would be a good time."

"Tomorrow then."

"So soon?" Eesai asked.

"We sign tomorrow morning. Frankly, the treaty is on pretty much the same terms I offered weeks ago, but that's not really all that unusual. We might have been here for another few months, but we got lucky this time."

A soft note filled the room and Eesai suggested, "Shall we adjourn to dinner? It appears we have all sorts of good news to announce."

They got up and started out the door, but Clark held Eesai back a moment. "There's something I'd like to talk to you about before we leave Rendezvous System," he told her.

Captain Anspach had worked hard into the night supervising the preparations for this morning's ceremony. The comfortable but bland conference room that Malana, Gupta, and their staffs had spent so much time in was given a fresh coat of paint and then bedecked with colored streamers of Terran blue and white and Trelendiri red and amber.

Eesai had sent over a pair of crewmen who constructed a special half-round-shaped table. The top of the table appeared to be made of a brownish pink granite, but instead of hauling over a heavy slab of stone, the Lano crewmen set up the heavy wooden legs and then seemed to spray the rocky top in place, using an odd, magical device. Clark asked Eesai if there was any significance to the shape, but she merely replied that she thought it would look nice in the room.

The room was finished with two hours to spare, giving the two captains just enough time to realize how much sleep they had missed.

At the appointed time, shuttles from the surrounding five ships arrived at the Meriwether and Inillien airlocks depending on their origin and for the first time the captains of the other ships had a chance to meet face-to-face. They were given fifteen minutes to greet each other formally in the conference room where human and Lano crewmen served refreshments before Admiral Maas made his grand entrance. This was also his first appearance in physical proximity to any La.

"I knew he'd show up today," Sue remarked quietly to Eesai.

"Is that the admiral?" Eesai whispered back.

"Yeah. Our brave leader from behind. Hasn't dared meet a La in person up until now. Any contact he's had has been by commset, but I would have bet the farm he'd be here to get in the photos and take the credit."

"I thought he was here along with all the captains to witness the treaty."

"Commodore Alano has been with us all along, even staying on Inillien while we've been linked. Did you know that Alano has repeatedly invited Admiral Mass over for a visit?"

"Yes, but I assumed that there was some human social rule that prevented a man of his rank from accepting until we had signed the treaty. Alano thought that way too."

"Don't tell Alano, but I think Maas is a xenophobe. Maybe that's a bit strong, but you know he's never shown much courtesy to Malana."

"The feeling between them is mutual," Eesai pointed out, "but you're right. He has shown all the signs of bigoted distrust. At least he's no Reverend Stump."

"Thank all the gods!" Sue swore in Lani, causing her friend to raise her eyebrows in surprise. "The part that really bothers me, however is that Maas is blocking Clark from the honor of witnessing the treaty."

"Don't worry," Eesai replied impishly. "Malana isn't going to stand for that."

She might have said more but at that moment Malana and Radji Gupta entered the room side by side with their personal staffs trailing behind. They strolled, almost casually to the treaty table when Malana paused for a moment and stroked her left hand across its satin finish.

"A problem, Madame Ambassador?" Radji asked.

"Hmm?" she replied absently. "No. I was just a bit surprised at the table top."

"It's very nice," the Terran ambassador replied. "Sort of like granite, but the quartz crystals are perfectly clear. I don't think I've ever seen anything quite like it."

"It's my birth stone," Malana replied quietly. She looked up at Eesai who was still standing across the room with Sue. As their eyes met, Eesai gave Malana an exaggerated wink even as Malana projected the words, Thank you, dear, telepathically. Eesai tried to project an acknowledgement back, but, in spite of some coaching, was still not up to it, so she merely nodded instead.

After the two ambassadors reached their seats, the admiral, commodore, and all the ships' captains who would act as witnesses approached the table. When all were in place they sat. The Ambassadorial staffs remained standing.

"Why isn't Captain Anspach witnessing this treaty?" Malana asked, noticing that Clark did not have a seat at the treaty table.

"Captain Anspach," Maas informed her in his rumbling voice, "is not a captain of a military ship. These others are."

"If it were not for Captain Anspach," Malana retorted angrily, "we would not be here this morning. I insist that he be a witness."

"No!" Maas replied flatly. "He gave up that right when he quit the service."

"Admiral," Malana replied coldly, "the agreement before us says that it is to be witnessed by you and Commodore Alano and those ships' captains present. If we are going to omit the captain of the ship on which we are sitting, there will be no treaty!"

"Fine," Maas replied, rising from his chair. "No treaty. We're leaving, men," he told his captains.

"You're not going anywhere!" Eesai snapped suddenly. She gestured at the conference room door and it suddenly slammed shut, seemingly of its own accord. Maas swung around to stare at the young female La.

"Very good, dear!" Malana commended her. "You've been practicing, but you're stepping on my lines. Admiral, you may leave if you like." The door swung open again. "Once you have left, Clark and his senior officers can witness for Terra."

"He will not sign this treaty!" Maas grated.

"Yes he will!" Ambassador Gupta snarled at the admiral, "and so will you. Now sit down, Admiral, and shut up! Admiral, I have listened to your council on what should and shouldn't be in this treaty ever since we arrived here in Rendezvous, but the time when I must listen to you has ended. I will not allow your personal animosities to prevent this treaty from being signed."

"I will not sign that paper if Anspach does," Maas said stubbornly.

"Then don't and be damned!" Gupta told the man, "But I hope you'll be able to explain to President Smythe why you didn't, because I guarantee you that she'll want to see you as soon as you return to Earth."

Maas' face turned bright red. He turned back toward the door and took three steps before stopping again. Then he quietly returned to the table.

"What the hell was that all about?" Sue whispered to Jerry against the buzz of conversation that had erupted in the small room.

"Damned if I know. Maybe he was just looking to count coup against Clark." Then the room became quiet again and Gupta signalled for the cameras to begin filming the event.

"This is the first agreement between two truly alien races," Gupta said seriously as he reached for the short stack of paper in front of him, "in the history of both our peoples. It is perhaps a bit less detailed than I might have preferred and a bit more detailed than our Lano friends might have liked, but it is a fine beginning." He began to sign the several documents before him as Malana spoke.

"A fine beginning, indeed," she agreed as he passed her the first document on the pile. "We have here a paper key that will unlock the futures of all our worlds. Let's see," she inspected the paper, "this establishes the conditions of exchange of embassies on Earth and Treloi and the right to establish embassies on other worlds of our two nations." She signed it and went on to the next. She and Radji took turns explaining for the assembled crowd and the cameras recording for posterity just what each

document entailed.

When all documents had been signed and passed around the table to be witnessed, Malana made a final statement, "There is a Terrañol phrase that I picked up while on Earth. 'Agree to disagree.'

"We have much in common, but there are some very important issues on which we have not yet come to terms. The most basic of these seems to be the use of human technology versus Lano thalirip and, of course, the differences in our systems of government, but with this treaty we have effectively shoved these differences aside by agreeing to disagree. Mutual tolerance will, in time, become mutual understanding and the close friendships that have already formed between individuals of our two races bode well for the future. The announced engagement last night between Jerome L. Isaacs and Lani Di Ressa, may even be an omen of our own future. Who knows, someday the Trelendir and the Terran Confederation might become one. Until then, our similarities will build friendship and that friendship will use our differences to strengthen the bond." Everyone nodded agreement even as she thought to herself, Whatever that means. It sounds pretty, though.

Six

"Well, Captain," Alano said to Eesai as Admiral Maas and his captains left the room, "I suppose you had better see to getting the Terran ambassador and his people moved on to Inillien. It appears they will be riding back to Treloi with us."

"I've already put Subcaptain Meco on it, but I won't be going with you, Commodore," Eesai replied taking a formal tack. She reached into her uniform pocket and pulled out a Terran paper envelope. She handed it to Alano who looked at her questioningly. "My resignation, sir," she explained.

"Resignation?" Alano's face fell. "I don't understand, Eesai. I knew Lani was leaving with Jerry, but you too?"

"Clark made me an offer, Alano," she told him softly. "You see, Meriwether, Inc. is building a new ship and he needs a top-notch navigator. That, plus I get to act as native guide next trip when we arrive on Treloi with a cargo of monopoles. Then, when Meriwether-2 is ready, he'll be staying on Earth as Fleet Commodore, Sue will Skipper the new ship and I'll be taking over as captain of the first one."

"But you'll have to buy a captain's shares, won't you?"

"Clark gave me a good deal, I think. Depending on the rate of exchange the banks give us, it's probably costing me my entire life savings to buy a navigator's berth, but if we haven't made enough for me to afford the captain's seat before the Two is ready, he's promised to stake me to it. Frankly, from what I understand of the deal he got on Earth, we'll all be rolling in Terran money, at least, until Lano Thalua learn to detect monopoles. By that time, we ought to have a thriving trade in luxury items going both ways, and there's always exploration."

"You've always wanted to be on an exploration ship, haven't you?" he noted.

"I didn't think you knew," she replied, slightly surprised.

"I've had my eyes on you since we met." Eesai gasped lightly. In Lani the phrase "got my eyes on you" was a mild declaration of affection if not love. It was the first time, he had given her any indication of how he felt. "Is there nothing I can offer to make you stay?" he asked.

For a brief moment, Eesai reconsidered her decision, but then remembered Alano's snobbish tendencies. Maybe in time he would grow out of them, but not today.

"I'm sorry, Alano," she replied at last. "This is something I really want to do."

"Well, keep in touch, won't you?"

"Of course," she answered, all the while thinking, *Have a nice life, dear one* .

"Good, because I'll expect to have you out to the estate next time you're on Treloi."

"Really?" In all the years they had known each other he had never allowed any of his crew to visit his family's lands socially.

"Yes," he smiled. "There are some things I'd like to share with you." And people I'd like you to meet, he added silently.

"All right." Maybe this wasn't goodbye after all.

"Makes me wonder why you bothered moving out in the first place," Jerry commented as several Lano crewmen brought the last of Malana's luggage into her Meriwether cabin. Lani was with him, snugly nestled into the crook of his arm. Now that Malana thought about it, the two of them hadn't been apart in weeks.

"A diplomatic nicety," the ambassador for the entire Trelendir replied, smiling. "We could only agree on Meriwether as neutral territory if neither of us was in residence. I was surprised that Radji didn't object to my staying on Inillien until I learned that he had wanted the Vigilant docked with us as well, but the admiral wouldn't allow it."

"Is that why you aren't riding on Vigilant or one of the other Aerospace Force ships? After all, Ambassador Gupta is on Inillien even though Quester is headed for Treloi as well."

"Another agreement. He rides to Treloi on a Treloian ship and I head toward Earth on a Terran ship, but the choice of ship is mine. Besides, my friends are here and I doubt they know how to mix a decent drink on the Vigilant." They all laughed at that.

"Guess my folks will have to wait a little longer to meet Jerry," Lani sighed, looking into his eyes. "I really thought we would be going to Treloi next."

"That's pretty much what I said when we left Cereloi," Malana laughed. "Life, my dear, is full of surprises. And this isn't over by a long shot. That treaty is just the first step. I imagine I'll be negotiating

various pacts until my retirement. As things stand my only alternative at the moment is return to Treloi and stand for Presiding General and that's no job for a self-respecting La."

"So you'd rather spend your life among the humans?" Jerry asked, smiling."

"Why not? It's new and different. I didn't go into diplomacy until I was middle-aged. I was bored with university life and the dry researches of a thalua."

"So you entered the diplomatic service?" Lani asked.

"Not right away. First I joined a circus troop and did magic tricks for the children for a couple of years."

"No!" Lani laughed.

"Really!" Malana insisted. "Then one day I ran into an old friend who had gone into politics rather than some useful trade and he talked me into working as an arbitrator in a faction fight over the first draft of a bill he wanted to push past the Peegee. Found I liked that sort of work and several members of that first committee liked my style. A few years later I'd gained quite a reputation as a problem solver and was scooting all over the Trelendir. It's the sense of beginning something new that appeals to me. Nothing like changes every twenty years or so to keep you young."

"Maybe," Lani muttered quietly.

"If Earth doesn't age you before your time," Jerry laughed.

"All hands prepare to cast off from Inillien," Eesai's voice announced over the intercom. There was a click and a soft gong, then Eesai's voice sounded less impersonal, "Madame Malana, Captain Ho requests the pleasure of your company on the bridge."

On my way, the wizard projected the thought back.

"Acknowledged," Eesai replied and clicked off as they approached the cabin door.

"Captain Ho?" Malana asked a moment later closing the door behind her.

"Acting captain actually," Jerry replied. "Clark is giving Sue command experience so she'll be ready to captain Meriwether - 2 when she's been built. This will also give Eesai some more practical experience with ship's instruments and controls before she takes command as well. Like you say, nothing like changes to keep you young."

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